Terra Incognita

by TimeCloneMike

Summary

The Barrier was destroyed. That was the easy part. In this brave new world of humans and monsters, Frisk has accepted the responsibilities of Ambassador. The fate of an entire civilization is hanging in the balance, so for them not much has changed. For the people of Ebott's Wake, on the other hand, a lot of what they think they know about the world is going to fly out the window. Especially if they think they can safely underestimate or ignore this child that speaks for the monsters. That particular learning curve is going to be exceptionally sharp.
'If you leave here, your adventure will really be over. Your friends will follow you out of the Underground.'

Frisk took a deep breath, staring at the light beyond the mouth of the cave.

“hey Frisk.”

“Hey Sans.”

“guess this is it then, huh? there's a whole world up there.”

“Yeah. There is.”

The sounds of footsteps could be heard echoing in the chamber where the Barrier had once held dominion. Frisk turned around to see Toriel and Asgore, Undyne and Alphys, and Papyrus behind Sans. Frisk smiled.

“Is everyone ready?”

A mix of nods and enthusiastic vocal responses (mostly from Undyne and Papyrus) was the reply, and Frisk turned back to towards the sunlight.

“Then I'm ready too. This adventure is over. Time to move on to the next.”

Frisk marched forward, holding their hand up to shield their eyes as the light became brighter....

“Oh my...” Toriel gasped.

“Isn't it beautiful, everyone?” The king's deep voice rumbled, but it was easy enough to hear the awe in his comment as well. Frisk looked away from the landscape to check on everyone; it looked like everyone was completely occupied drinking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the Surface.

“Wow... it's e-even better than on TV. WAY better! Better than I ever imagined!”

“Frisk, you LIVE with this?! The sunlight is so nice... and the air is so fresh! I really feel alive!”

“HEY SANS... WHAT'S THAT GIANT BALL?”

“we call that 'the sun', my friend.”

“THAT'S THE SUN?! WOWIE! I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M FINALLY MEETING THE SUN!!”

Frisk snickered, but didn't speak, not wanting to ruin the moment.

“I could stand here and watch this for hours.”

“Yes, it is beautiful, is it not? But we should really think about what comes next.”

“Oh, right.”

Frisk tried to suppress their laughter at the sound of awkward recognition in Asgore's voice.
Actually, being out in the sun and the fresh air again, it seemed to be making them light headed. Everything seemed funny.

“Everyone... this is the beginning of a bright new future. An era of peace between humans and monsters. Frisk... I have something to ask of you.”

The light headed feeling vanished in an instant, and Frisk turned towards Asgore.

“Will you act as our ambassador to the humans?”

Frisk stopped breathing for a second, their mind racing furiously. There was a definite possibility that the first response most humans would have when seeing eight foot boss monsters would involve freaking out, and that went double for skeletons, no matter how cuddly they were or how goofy they acted or how awful their puns were. So they needed a human to act as a go between, that was obvious. But would other humans listen to a child?

Would any human listen to this child?

...actually, maybe they would.

In the last two or three days, a lot had changed. In fact, almost everything was different now. Old rules no longer applied in this new world, a world filled with monsters and magic and...

...and friends.

Frisk nodded. “I’ll do it. I will be the ambassador. I will ambassadorize all of the things.”


Papyrus immediately sprinted down the mountain trail, and Frisk flinched. “Oh boy, here we go....”

Sans chuckled. “welp. somebody’s got to keep him from getting into trouble. see you guys.”

Sans turned around and walked back into the cave, and Frisk let their breath out in a giggle.

“Man, do I have to do EVERYTHING?! Papyrus, wait!!!”

Undyne sprinted down the mountain after the skeleton, followed closely by a lizard in a lab coat.

“Hey, Undyne!! Wait up!!”

In a matter of moments, only the royalty and Frisk were left, and the human child mentally adjusted their expectations of what being ambassador would involve.

“Whoops.”

There was an awkward pause as the queen and the human pondered the depth of the king’s understatement.

“Uh, should I do something?”

The queen made an exasperated noise in her throat, which the king somehow understood instantly.

“Well, gotta go!”
As the king descended the mountain path, Toriel turned to watch him, and Frisk felt hope rise in their chest as they did.

“It seems that everyone is quite eager to set off.”

“Yeah... well. There's a lot to do.”

Toriel looked at Frisk, and the child turned to look up at the boss monster in turn.

“Frisk... you came from this world, right...? So you must have a place to return to, do you not? What will you do now?”

'What do you have to go back to that is worth this!?'

'You're always sorry! You say you're sorry but this shit keeps happening!'

Toriel blinked as Frisk looked down at the ground and their breathing hitched. “...Frisk?”

'By the way... Frisk... take care of Mom and Dad for me, okay?'

Frisk gritted their teeth and forced their breathing back to normal. Looking up at Toriel again, they hoped that the stinging in their eyes hadn't turned into actual tears yet.

“I... I want to stay with you, please...”

“What?”

The look on the queen's face, and her response, stopped Frisk's heart for a moment, but she continued before the child could think to backpedal.

“Frisk... you really are a funny child. If you had said that earlier, none of this would have happened. It is a good thing that you took so long to change your mind. Hee hee hee.”

Frisk smiled and laughed along with the queen, even if it was a little hollow... and watery.

“Well... I suppose... if you really do not have any other place to go... I will do my best to take care of you, for as long as you need. All right?”

“...thank you. I... I promise I'll make you proud. I'll...” Frisk sniffed and smiled. “I'll make everyone proud.”

Toriel smiled and held out her paw, and Frisk grasped it.

“Now, come along. Everyone is waiting for us!”

The boss monster and the child walked down the mountain path

* QUITTING...*
“Uh. Yeah. Just got dizzy for a second. Also looking at every part of the world except the part right in front of me, that didn't help.”

Frisk shook their head, smiled, and raised their free hand to point at the buildings in the distance.

“Those tall buildings there? That's the downtown part of Ebott's Wake. The town I came from. And that other mountain over there, that's Lone Point. There's a town at the base of it too, also called Lone Point. And it's on the coast, so there's that. Some day soon, you guys all need to see the ocean. I know we have a lot to do first, but, you know. It should go on the list.”

“Very well. What else can you tell us about this place? Ebott's Wake, you called it? Is it named for the mountain, or was the mountain named for the town?”

“Well... let me think for a minute... okay, I remember now. A long time ago, there was this guy called 'Handy Manny' Kelly....”
Introductions Are In Disorder

“Hey, nice costume!”

“thanks, you too.”

The area on the outskirts of the human city was short on buildings but long on plant life, and even the structures were oddly chosen; roofs with no walls and tables underneath, small plastic structures that could only hold maybe one human at a time, and what looked like a stage but with nothing overhead to provide lights or curtains. The sidewalks and light posts were somewhat familiar, at least, but architecture and landscaping were not the most pressing factors in Sans' survey of the lay of the land. That honor had to be bestowed upon the sheer number of humans. While he knew they didn't come in the wide variety of shapes and sizes that monsters did, they obviously had physical variations and it looked like every possible permutation was represented.

That did not explain the costumes, though.

Skeletons and dragons were obvious enough, plus ninjas, pirates, robots, and that was just from what he recognized from Alphys' collection of “human historical references” as she insisted on calling them. A lot of the other stuff he didn't recognize, and didn't expect to until and unless Frisk explained what was going on.

Whenever that happened.

“Hey, nice costume kid.”

“hmmm?” Sans looked up to see a human almost as tall as Papyrus looking at him. “sorry, kinda distracted, did you say something?”

“Yeah, just said your costume is really good.”

“ah, thanks pal.” Sans winked. “hey, if you think mine's good, you should see my brother's. we spent weeks working on it.”

“Sounds impressive...” the human frowned. “Wait, how did you do that winking thing?”

“sorry pal. trade secret.”

The human nodded, slowly.

“Fair enough. If people want to go all in after years without being able to celebrate Halloween, it's not my place to stop them.”

Sans shrugged. “that's whatever the heck it is you're talkin' about for ya.”

The human snorted. “right. Stay safe, kid.”

“right. You too.”

The human moved on, and Sans reached up to rub his jaw. The human had called him a kid several times, despite Sans not wearing stripes... well, obviously some things were going to be different, but what precisely made the human think that Sans was a kid? Was it the size? He wasn't that much bigger than Frisk was. Or maybe 'kid' meant something different in the local culture. Something else to ask Frisk when he saw them.
Wait, when did he learn what their name was again?

'eh, whatever. probably been telling me every time we met and it just never stuck till now.'

Turning his eye sockets back to the crowd, Sans tried once more to process what he was seeing. Most faces, especially among the shorter humans (well, those that he could see) were happy or excited, and that seemed to be the case with the taller ones too, although some of them looked worried or distracted, but trying to hide it or ignore it. Which could have been for any number of reasons... or maybe they all had a reason in common? Certainly couldn't rule that out. Not that many actual human history books made it down to the garbage dump in readable condition, and what was readable rarely gave the whole story, but what did make it down didn't paint the prettiest of pictures.

One of the tables underneath the stand-alone roofs was mostly unoccupied, except by a large human with an equally large beard; peering at a book through a pair of glasses. Sans maneuvered closer to the table to get a look at the text and graphics on the book's cover, only to see the book slowly lowered until it was lying flat on the table, and the human face behind it staring at him.

“...can I help you?”

“Sorry pal, didn't mean to bother you. just wondering what you were reading.”

“Oh. Just some stuff on the Bureau of Alcohol, Demolitions, Tobacco and Firearms. Well, back when they were just the ATF, anyway.”

“Cool.”

“Well, some of it is. The rest of it's kind of grisly. I'm glad they stepped up their game since Ruby Ridge and Waco.”

“Hey, correct me if i'm getting this wrong, but if you turn the letters of the agency into an acronym-”

“Yeah, it spells B-A-D in there.” The human nodded. “This book only covers stuff up to about the turn of the millennium but apparently they were in such a rush to expand their wheelhouse after Nine Eleven that they didn't think about that. Well, probably some people noticed and complained and got ignored. Not that I blame 'em that much. Everybody was playing fifty-two pickup after that.”

The human removed their glasses, cleaning the lenses by rubbing them on their shirt.

“I can definitely relate to that part right now.”

“...heh. me too. sorry, haven't introduced myself yet. i'm Sans. Sans the skeleton.”

“Sure. Why not.” The human put their glasses back on and held out their right hand, and Sans was obliged to respond in kind before he could sneak a whoopie cushion into or under his glove. “I'm Michael Van Garrett, the Vice President of the Library Board. That is an amazing costume, by the way.”

“So people keep telling me. but like i keep telling them, my brother's costume is even better.”

“Then this I must see. Is he around here somewhere?”

“Should be... matter of fact, there he is now.” Sans turned and pointed at a tall figure making his way through the crowd.

“SANS! HOW DID YOU GET HERE BEFORE... NEVER MIND, I JUST REMEMBERED
“hehehe. Michael Van Garrett, meet my brother, Papyrus. Papyrus, this is Michael Van Garrett.”

“Hey there.” The Librarian reached out his right hand, and Papyrus responded in kind, shaking the man’s arm with enthusiasm.

“NICE TO MEET YOU, MICHAEL VAN GARRETT!”

“Pleasure’s all mine. Gotta say, Sans wasn’t lying. That costume is really impressive.” The man’s eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at Papyrus’s arm and leg bones, exposed lower spine, and other key anatomical details. “Really... really impressive.”

“NYEH HEH HEH! WHY THANK YOU! WE PUT CONSIDERABLE EFFORT INTO THIS OUTFIT!”

“and he’s gotten considerable mileage out of it. He even wears it in the shower.”

“SANS! WE TALKED ABOUT YOUR TENDENCY TO OVERSHARE ALREADY!”

“oh, did we? I thought that issue was over and done with.”

“UGH. CLEARLY THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME.”

Sans looked at Van Garrett's face, then tried to look around as subtly as possible under the circumstances. Papyrus had a pretty projecting voice even when he was attempting to be quiet, which was not often, so attention was being drawn their way. Exactly what form that attention was going to take was impossible to tell; that was the problem with first contact, there was nothing else to draw on to predict what would happen next.

Sans felt a sensation that he couldn't immediately identify, but before he could examine it in detail, another human showed up; this one a bit taller than Van Garrett, so about level with Papyrus, but not nearly as... what was the right word? Stocky? Not as stocky as Van Garrett was. Also the new human was dressed all in blue, with a hat and what looked like assorted tools on a belt and a gun Sans' mind belatedly latched onto, along with his eye sockets. The human didn't seem to notice, as they placed what looked like a can of soda on the table next to the book, then used their free hand to open the soda they had been carrying in their other hand.

“Hey Mike, how you holding up?”

“Keeping busy.”

“Know what that's like.” The new human took a drink, and Sans tore his eye lights from the gun, parsing and studying more details... which the human noticed quickly.

“Hey, nice costumes you two.”

“thanks.”

“THANK YOU!”

“Steve, meet Sans and Papyrus, skeletons at large.” Van Garrett gestured before grabbing the can of soda and opening it.

“or small, as the case may be,” Sans quipped, and he could practically hear the eye lights rolling in Papyrus's eye sockets.
The human called Steve blinked, then slowly raised the can of soda to drink from it.

“...hey. Mike?”

“Still here.”

“This is going to sound really weird.”

“That's fine. I specialize in weird.”

“Oh. I was just thinking...”

Steve did not finish the statement, as the background noise of the crowd had begun to drop off considerably. Sans looked around again, and noticed that the crowd seemed to be parting before a very large, very high pair of curved horns. Some conversation picked up, but Sans had to strain to hear what people were saying:

“Wow. Talk about giving a hundred and ten percent.”

“Who is that supposed to be? Is that like from that Blizzard game they demoed at E3?”

“Ugh. Fucking furries.”

“Is that supposed to be a giant goat, or a lion, or what?”

“Man, Valve must've really gone over the top for Scream Fortress this year. Kinda makes me want to start playing again, if I can get that Heavy Costume.”

Within moments, Asgore had appeared next to the table, looking as nervous as Sans (and it was becoming increasingly obvious, Steve) felt. Without moving his head, Sans could see a lot of humans pulling out phones and taking pictures or possibly video recordings. It didn't take a skeleton with a degree in applied quantum field harmonics theory to deduce that the humans outside of his line of sight were doing the same thing.

“Um...” the king's deep voice rumbled awkwardly. “Howdy?”

“...howdy.” Steve replied, just as awkwardly.

“...it's, it's a lovely evening you're having here.”

“Yeah, there is that.” Steve nodded. “Hey, Mike. Can I ask you a question real quick?”

Van Garrett nodded without looking up. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Uhm. Just need to double check. Uh. The taller skeleton. Papyrus. Those arms and legs. Those are. Those are too skinny to be a costume, right? And the spine? Stuff?”

“Wait, you can see that too?” The human's facial expression changed and Sans (and probably other people, if they were looking in that direction) could literally see tension draining away, which was not the response he expected. “Oh, that's good. I thought the stress had finally gotten to me and I was hallucinating.”

A more relaxed Van Garrett picked up his book again, and Officer Steve turned to face the king, who's eyes suddenly widened in realization.

“Oh. I should probably say something. I am, uh... I am Asgore Dreemurr, King of the Monsters.”

“AND NOW WE HAVE FORMALLY MADE CONTACT! I KNEW MY FRIENDSHIP MAKING SKILLS WOULD PROVE INVALUABLE IN THIS ENDEAVOR! NYEH HEH HEH!” Papyrus reached out and grasped Steve's empty hand, shaking it up and down with vigor. “THE GREAT PAPYRUS IS PLEASED AND DELIGHTED TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE, HUMAN STEVE!”

“Oh, there's Officer Steve!” Sans picked up on a familiar voice in the crowd, and turned to see Frisk pulling Toriel along by one arm, pointing towards the human dressed in blue. “He's exactly who we need to talk to in order to get everything started.”

“How convenient for us all. Hello, Officer Steve!” The queen said as she and Frisk arrived close to the table. “I am Toriel, and I am most pleased to meet you this evening.”

“The pleasure's...” something happened to Officer Steve's face, like his smile had gone wrong, and no longer reached his eyes. “All mine.”

After a few seconds, the human's eyes rolled up past their lids, and he fell forward. There was a blur as Van Garrett's arms reached out, one to grab Officer Steve by the shirt to keep him from collapsing face first on the ground, the other to grab Steve's soda to keep it from spilling.

“Uhm.” Asgore blinked. “Is he going to be alright?”

Van Garrett nodded at the various cameras being pointed at the scene. “Not when those videos reach YouTube.”

“Well... so much for Plan A.” Frisk walked up closer to Officer Steve. “Uh... okay, let me think... Mr. Van Garrett, do you think you could wake Officer Steve up?”

“Well, there was something I haven't done since high school since that's assaulting an... officer... Frisk?” Something finally registered on Van Garrett's face and he stared at the human child. “Where have you... no, wait, stupid question. Everything's been pants on head insane these last few days.”

“You have no idea,” Frisk said with a nod.

There was a thump as the soda can was placed on the table and Van Garrett held out the smallest finger in one hand, and inserted the tip into his mouth for a moment before pulling it out. “If this comes back to bite me, can you please call Terry Snyder so she can post my bail? Thanks.”

The tip of Van Garrett's finger was stuck in Officer Steve's ear, wiggled back and forth, and in a matter of seconds the man had woken up again.

“Jesus Christ what the hell man?!” Steve cursed, getting up to his feet and shaking his head, grabbing at his disturbed ear with one hand.

“Oh, good. There you are.” Mike nodded towards Frisk. “Somebody wants to talk to you. Also maybe don't swear in front of children.”

“Wait, what do you mean children...” Officer Steve turned to look at Frisk, then Toriel, then Asgore, then back to the skeletons. “...oh.”

“Hello Officer Steve. You, uh. You probably don't remember me, but I remember when you came to our class to talk about traffic safety and things like that.”
“Yes... that is a thing that I do. And... well, you look familiar, but I can't place the name. Sorry.”

“That's alright. I'm... I'm Frisk. And these are my friends. You've already met Sans and Papyrus, and King Asgore Dreemurr of the Kingdom of Monsters. This is...” Frisk looked up at Toriel and Sans saw the slightest of nods, and Frisk continued. “This is Queen Toriel Dreemurr.”

Sans managed to contain his surprise, although the king was not nearly so stoic, his eyes going wide. How the heck had the kid managed to convince her to go by that name again??

“There are others you should meet somewhere around here. Undyne, former Captain of the Royal Guard, and Dr. Alphys, former Royal Scientist. No idea where though, but for the moment this will work. Uhm. Okay. Officer Steve, I would like to formally request your assistance, as an officer of the law, to act as an unbiased third party observer and possibly an escort to Bastion Circle, so that we can begin negotiation and arbitration with the Sages.”

All conversation stopped. Instantly. There were natural sounds of wind, insects, birds, and the hum of electric lights, distant noises that sounded like engines, and Sans imagined he could hear the fizzing noise of the carbonated bubbles popping in the soda cans on the table.

Eventually Officer Steve coughed. “Uh. Not sure if I have good news or bad news there Frisk, but... that's no longer possible. Bastion Circle is gone, and so are the Sages.”

“...wait, the Sages are gone as in missing, or gone as in...?”

“As in wiped out. The Bureau of Alcohol, Demolitions, Tobacco, and Firearms rolled into town about three days ago. And we've been cleaning up and picking up the pieces for about three days, too.”

“...oh. So that's... huh.” Frisk's expression shifted from confusion, the enlightenment, back to confusion, and then excitement. “Hey, this is going to be a lot easier than I thought!”

“Pardon me, but what, exactly, is easier?”

“Oh. Right. Officer Steve...” Frisk looked around at the various humans with phones out. “And, I guess everybody else, too. I am formally representing the Kingdom of Monsters as Ambassador, so that they can open diplomatic relations with humanity. I knew that the Sages had some serious convictions about monsters so I expected I would have to explain to them why the situation had changed and hope that I could convince them to hold off on another war.”

“Wait... another war.” Van Garrett had suddenly gotten up, and was standing next to Officer Steve.

“Yes. According to monster historical records there was a war between monsters and humans ages ago, which ended in monsters being trapped under Mt. Ebott. The Barrier that kept everyone trapped was only destroyed a short time ago. If the Sages are no longer an issue, then I suppose the next order of business is to formally open diplomatic relations with the closest governing authority. Which I guess would be, uh, the City Council? Or possibly the mayor? I don't know who has priority in cases like this.”

“I don't think anybody knows who has priority in cases like this,” Officer Steve retorted, shaking his head as assorted nervous laughter piped out of the crowd in fits and starts. “But I guess I could make some calls. See if somebody can throw together an emergency meeting tonight. Or at least agree to meet tomorrow, which is probably more likely to happen. After the last few days, everybody's been burning the candle at both ends.”

The police officer walked away, pulling out a phone and thumb typing in a number before raising the
device to his ear. Sans was distracted from keeping track of what the human was saying by Frisk's voice.

“So. I guess while Officer Steve is working on that, we have some free time.” The child looked around at the staring humans, then nodded. “Okay then. Does anyone have any ques-”

“Do you eat people?”

The question rang out and left an awkward silence behind. Frisk sighed.

“Wow. Rude.”

“Ahem.” Toriel held up a fur covered finger. “While it is only natural that speculation occur, with humans and monsters being isolated from each other for so long, I can safely say that is not the case. Monster metabolism is heavily based on magic, and so we require food to be-”

“Did you say magic??”

“Ah. Yes. Perhaps we should have led with that. Based on our understanding, humans are mostly made of water, correct? It is the same with monsters and magic. It is the basic medium for all the processes that-”

“What do you mean by magic-”

“Magic isn't real! That's bullshit!”

“You almost had me going there-”

“So can you change shape or size-”

“Are we talking like pick a card any card here or something like-”

“Excuse me.” Frisk held up their arms, looking at the crowd. “It is very hard for people to answer questions when you ask them all at once, and it defeats the point if you're just going to interrupt them before they're-”

“Come on man, magic?”

“No, seriously, look at the skeletons! You think there's enough room for muscles there? It's as good an explanation as-”

“Man, what the hell did they put in this beer? I'm seeing skeletons walking around.”

“We all are, Kyle.”

“Oh, good. I thought I was drunk-”

Sans saw Frisk's jaw set, and the child turned towards Toriel, making a motion with their hands and arms that Toriel must have understood from a prior plan, or else just was very good at intuiting the meaning that the child was trying to communicate. The queen held up a massive paw, and light began to coalesce, silencing parts of the crowd and causing other parts to cry out in alarm as an orange flame burst into existence. Frisk walked up, reached out even as several people in the crowd made noises of distress or warning, and grabbed the fireball, then turned back to the crowd.

“Rule One of magic: It is a function of the willpower and intentions of the monster producing it.” Frisk held the fireball above their head in one hand. “This feels about as hot as, well, I guess a cookie
right out of the oven. The flames are not burning my skin because they do not follow the rules of chemical combustion, and Queen Toriel does not want to harm me. No monsters want to harm anybody. The last time there was a war, it did not end well. Nobody is going to be happy if that starts again. The exact capabilities of magic, what it can and cannot do, what it can be used for, and so on, are all important questions that are still secondary to the issue of opening diplomatic relations with humanity. With me so far?"

The crowd was silent, which compared to the previous clamor of questions, was at least some sort of improvement. Frisk nodded.

“Thank you. If there are any further questions, I think we are ready to address them.”

The crowd seemed silent, and Sans looked around. One of the scenarios he had predicted when thinking about First Contact had been a panicked flight from the area, followed by either an organized or disorganized armed response. Another possibility had been a simple mob response, in which the humans swarmed and attacked out of reflex. That was why he had made it a point to get to the foot of the mountain before Papyrus did; he was the most capable of evading and escaping such a response and warning everyone else. Of course, if they did swarm up the mountain, there wasn't a whole lot anybody could do; maybe the cave would act as a choke point and monsters could wipe out any humans that tried to attack head on, but that just meant monsters were still trapped underground.

He had not expected this... controlled chaos. It would have made the hair on his neck stand up, if he had any hair.

“Okay, I think I have a question.”

Sans turned around to see the human called Van Garrett with one hand in the air. Automatically, Toriel pointed at him.

“Yes, what is your question?”

“Granted you might not be able to answer this one but, the, uh, the Sages organization, the Guardians, the cultists, whatever name we end up using in the future. Uh. They were pretty adamant about two things before they got, well, wiped out. The first was that monsters were sealed under Mt. Ebott. Which is apparently true. And the second is that monsters would wipe out humanity. I'm guessing they were either lying or wrong, but it couldn't hurt to be sure.”

“Ah. I think I understand. While there was, and still is, some resentment over being imprisoned for ages, there are no plans to start another war.” Sans was impressed; Toriel had such a good hold on her emotions that he doubted anybody but him could tell how angry she was, and how hard she was trying to fight the impulse to lay into the King. “I cannot make any assumptions about what these... Sages did or did not believe, but yes, if they were claiming that we were going to destroy everything and everyone here, they were incorrect.”

“Unless you count diabetes. There's a monster that wants to start an ice cream business up here.”

Frisk's remark, and their deadpan expression, set off some laughter in the crowd. Van Garrett smirked.

“Like we need help with that. And I guess that's good enough for me.” The man held out his hand to the King, who accepted after a moment. “Those people were a thorn in so many sides... frankly, if they thought you were the enemy, then personally I would want to be your friend on principle. Any enemy of the Sages is a friend of mine. Does't matter who or what they are or where they come
Sans heard some other humans make similar remarks, and it seemed like some of the tension had left the crowd. Not all. But some.

“Well, that wasn't as productive as I had hoped but I managed to get hold of why is the child's hand on fire.” Officer Steve had returned, and pointed at the fireball in Frisk's hand. Frisk switched hands and waved completely unharmed fingers at the human.

“Magic. Everything is fine. You said you got to talk to somebody?”

“...yeah.” Officer Steve shook his head and blinked a few times, and Sans wondered if the human wasn't about to collapse again. “Walter Metzinger. He's in charge of the city council. He can't make unilateral decisions or anything, but it's a step in the right direction. Uh. I knew nobody would believe me if I told the truth so I said that some people wanted to talk about investment in the town now that the Sages were gone and everything was more stable. He had a lot of four letter words in response to me adding to his to-do list when it can already reach halfway to the moon, but he'll make time for everybody tomorrow.”

“Our foot's in the door, then! Thank you, Officer Steve!”

“Any time, kiddo. So... far be it for a lowly traffic cop to pry into matters of international intrigue above his pay grade, but I hope you know what happens next. Because I don't even know what's going on right now.”

Sans watched Frisk reach into their pocket and pull something out, then hold it close to the fireball in their other hand. Whatever it was, he couldn't see; based on the angles involved he suspected nobody except Toriel, Asgore, and Papyrus could.

“Don't worry. I have it all figured out. With no Sages to worry about... we can skip right to Plan G.”
Sans tried very hard to keep his eye sockets focused on the road ahead despite the necessity of vigilance against potential threats, to say nothing of insatiable curiosity regarding a new place he had never seen before. In theory, every time he used a shortcut he was moving far faster than the vehicle he was presently in could possibly travel, so speed shouldn't have been an issue. Yet the sense of motion was unfamiliar.

If he had a stomach, he'd probably be getting sick.

"nice truck. not stock, is it? never seen anything like it in any magazine."

"Yeah, it's a custom job. Been working on it for a long time. Here we are."

The truck came to a stop, and Sans opened the door and climbed out. A few humans nearby stopped and stared, but so far nobody made any alarmed noises. Van Garrett moved towards a large brick building with decorative columns outside and a sign above the door that said "Librarby" and Sans almost laughed.

"Not a hundred percent sure what you need, so the sooner we get started the sooner we'll figure that out." Keys were brought out and the main doors opened, revealing a mostly dark room that was lit up bit by bit as Van Garrett started flipping light switches. "If you're looking for a specific subject, I can point you in that general direction."

"law or economics works."

"That would be Reference. A lot of those are not intended to be checked out though, but we might be able to meet in the middle at some point. We have a copier and scanner."

"cool." Sans walked towards the rows of shelves until he was sure that Van Garrett had lost line-of-sight.

A few seconds later, there were the sounds of voices from those shelves.

"he just said it was reference. not sure how the human librarbies are organized."

"I know. Just leave it to me."

Van Garrett frowned and moved away from the desk towards the reference section. That voice sounded like Frisk's and it was far too clear to be coming from a phone on speaker-"Hello Mr. Van Garrett. Fancy meeting you here at the place where you work."

The librarian stared at the human child that was pulling a book off of a shelf and looking through the index.

"...how did you-"

"I took a shortcut. Sans, do you know the metal content of the monster kingdom's currency?"

"probably but i couldn't tell you off the top of my skull. Tori and Asgore probably know."
“Alright. I'll ask them.” The child pulled out a cell phone that looked like it had been put together from components of several other phones, started pressing buttons... and frowned.

“Can't get a signal.”

“we're probably out of range of the Undernet now”

“But the last.”

Frisk abruptly stopped talking, closed the phone, and put it back in their pocket.

“I'm getting too far ahead of myself. Again. We'll need to talk to Alphys about that when we get back.” Frisk moved out of the Reference section with a book under each arm, placed them on a table, and walked over to a rack where newspapers were standing in upright metal trays.

“I'm guessing Toriel and Asgore would also know monster census data.”

“What data?”

“Do monsters not have that? Humans use a census to figure out how many people live in an area, what ages they are, what they do for.”

“oh, that, yeah, we got something like that. i just heard the word data and thought you were talking about something related to lab experiments. the King and Queen would know it, or at least who to ask if they don't have it memorized.”

Frisk nodded as they opened one newspaper and ran their finger across one page.

“Okay. We need to know that. That's going to impact all the negotiations. The space available, the food available, the time taken to move everybody, everything.”

“makes sense, but you guys sure aren't lacking in space up here. not sure why that's a problem.”

Frisk shook their head as they put the paper back in its slot. “It's not just a matter of space. It's a matter of housing. I mean, I know there's the aquatic monsters that need aquariums, but everybody's going to need a place up here to live eventually, if we're going to move everyone out of the Underground. Having said that, getting land is going to be expensive. It's the one thing they're not making anymore.”

“good point.”

Frisk looked up at Van Garrett. “I think that's everything we can use for the immediate future. Thank you for your help Mr. Van Garrett.”

“Uh. Anytime, I guess. You guys ready to head back to the park now?”

“I think so. We'll meet you there.”

“...what?”

The skeleton winked one eye socket at the man as he and the human child walked towards the closest set of shelves. “we're taking a shortcut.”

“Frisk said that earlier but what does that-”

Van Garrett stopped speaking as he rounded the corner and saw that the aisle between the shelves
was completely empty.

“...what the hell?”

A large finger covered in white fur pointed out towards the crowd. “Yes, you wearing the blue overalls, what is your question?”

“Uh, I was wondering what monsters do for food. Like, do you have farms underground? How would that work with no sun?”

Toriel nodded. “An excellent question. We do, in fact, have farms of a sort. In place of sunlight, we are able to grow plants using the energy from our geothermal power plant, called the CORE. It provides us with abundant electrical and magical energy, and was instrumental in putting an end to food shortages. I believe that Dr. Alphys could explain the process in more detail...”

Toriel trailed off, and the crowd started to laugh, as a red faced lizard in a white lab coat shook her head back and forth frantically while holding up her claws in a “stop” gesture.

“Or perhaps not. Does anyone have another question? Yes, you wearing the stylish red and black cape.”

A human child in a vampire costume lowered their hand and used their other hand to remove the soft plastic fangs so that they could speak more clearly.

“If you grow all your food does that mean monsters are vegetarians?”

“If by that you mean our diets are exclusively plant based, that is not the case. In addition to fruits and vegetables, we do raise various sources of animal protein, such as fish, snails, and certain poultry for their eggs. Ages ago several chickens found their way into the Underground and have been raised in that capacity ever since.”

“Did you say snails?” A random person in the crowd spoke up, and Toriel's brow furrowed slightly. Next to the stage, Frisk grinned.

“Some people really need to get their priorities straight. Like us,” the added, their grin vanishing. “Your Majesty, I don't suppose you know the census figures for the Underground off the top of your head?”

“Not exactly, no. I know that the most recent census wasn't long ago, but I would need to get the reports from my desk, or talk to the Royal Census Taker. Actually I may need to do that anyway to work out the process of getting everyone moved.” Asgore blinked. “And Frisk, you don't need to call me Your Majesty. Asgore is just fine.”

“...okay. I will remember that. I just did not want to assume. And right now honorifics and proper titles are going to be very important. Uhm... what about the metal content of these coins with your face on them?” Frisk held up a handful of coins, and Asgore looked confused.

“Gild? Hmmm... I am afraid not. I will need to speak to the Royal Treasurer as well.”

“You called it Gild? Does that mean that it's just... oh, you just said you didn't know the metal content. I should have been listening.”

“Oh, do not worry. I think I understand your confusion. The name Gild does not come from
embellishing with gold, Frisk, but for the original name for our money, the Gilder. Each coin is a
single Gilder, or Gild for short.”

“Ah, I understand now. Uh. Did Gilder mean anything?”

“Yes. Gilder means Coin.”

Frisk stared up at Asgore for a few seconds.

“So... each coin is literally called a Coin.”

“Yes. That is correct.”

“...I don't know what I expected.”

There was a snickering noise from behind Frisk, and the child turned to see Sans leaning against the
side of the stage.

“hey, made some calls and some trips and jogged my memory, and it turns out that each Gild is one
hundred percent gold, or at least as chemically pure as the mint could make it.”

“Really?” Frisk stared at the coins in their hand. “I thought gold was supposed to be a softer metal
than this.”

“Aha. I do remember this part.” Asgore raised a finger and pointed at the coins. “You may have
noticed the markings around the edge of the coin. These are used to carry a simple magical field to
integrate the coin's physical matter and make it more durable.”

“Oh.” Frisk grabbed one coin and rotated it in their hand, examining the edge. “I saw that there was
something there but I thought it was like what we do with quarters and dimes up here, leaving
grooves on the edge in order to make it so people can't scrape them for the metal to make more coins.
That was apparently a problem at some point.”

“Ah, that is also a function of the enchantment.” Asgore nodded. “Scraping the edge of the coin
would disrupt the field and make the coin less durable, and that plus the lack of a magical field from
the coin would make it suspect in the eyes of most merchants. It was a system introduced ages ago
by one of the previous Royal Treasurers, when the food supply was particularly low and people
were resorting to desperate measure to try to feed their families. Of course it didn't solve the famine,
but it kept the economy functional until the next harvest, and we decided to keep it.”

“Cool. Well, the magical anti-counterfeiting system is. Not the famine part.” Frisk stared at the coins
again. “Okay, the value of gold per troy ounce is one thousand two hundred twenty two dollars, or at
least it was in that newspaper, and a troy ounce is thirty one and one tenths grams, a single Gild is a
hundred percent gold so... hmm. I need some scales.”

“we could grab Undyne, or maybe Alphys since it looks like she'd love an excuse to come down off
of that stage.”

“I meant a balance scale for measuring weights, actually. I need to know how much this handful of
monster money is worth in United States Dollars.”

Sans stared, then nodded. “that was supposed to be a joke but okay.”

“Yeah, sorry. I'm trying to juggle a lot of information in my head so I have to keep my focus on that,
and not puns.”
"s'alright. oh, then maybe this will help. a Gild coin is about sixteen grams. there's a story behind how i know that off the top of my head, but it'll have to wait until we're all not so busy."

Frisk rolled their eyes. "Oh, let me guess. You have a part time job at the Royal Mint."

"nah, but good guess. here's a hint; it involves rubber bands."

"...guess I'll wait for the movie. Still..." Frisk looked down at their hand. "That is exactly what I..."

The young child's mouth opened wide, and then shut with a clicking of teeth.

"Wuh. Sorry about that. This is what I needed to know. What we need now is a phone book, only... not sure if who we need to call is still open this late." Frisk looked up at the stage. "Toriel's got things pretty well handled though. And Papyrus seems happy."

"yup. Undyne gave him a very important job; stand around and look cool."

Frisk and Sans both stared at Papyrus, who was grinning from ear to ear. Not that there were other options anyway, or that Papyrus even had ears, but it was still clear he was enjoying himself, and the events, and the attention of the various humans around the stage, who also seemed to be enjoying his occasional non-sequitur responses to questions.

"His whole life has been training for this moment. Or something like that..." Frisk yawned again, and on stage, Toriel paused in her explanation for a moment before continuing.

"getting tired, kid?"

Frisk shrugged. "It's a known side effect of walking from one end of a cavern to the other."

"guess there is that. good thing i got in all those naps while the getting was good."

Sans, Asgore, and Frisk all turned as Toriel's voice was raised slightly.

"I am sorry, truly, but it is getting late and it will take many, many days, perhaps weeks or longer, to answer all of your questions. We will of course do what we can to answer them later. We all thank you for your curiosity, and your patience."

Slowly the crowd started to disperse as the four monsters on the stage climbed down the steps, one lizard in particular almost falling from a severe case of stage-fright induced wobbly legs.

"Well. So far everything has gone better than anticipated." Toriel looked down at Frisk. "We should return to the Underground soon, so that Frisk can get to sleep, and that we can tell everyone the good news."

Frisk held up a hand even while their other hand covered a yawning mouth.

"Actually we don't have explicit good news yet. All we can really tell everyone is that first contact didn't turn into a fight. Which is important, but we won't be able to talk to anyone with decision making authority until tomorrow."

"no news is good news?" Sans shrugged. "couldn't hurt to let people know that we're chugging away at getting things ready, especially if it means everyone in the Underground can get things ready too. especially if it means i don't have to."

"SANS IF THERE WAS ONE TASK THAT WOULD MERIT YOU PUTTING A LITTLE BACKBONE INTO, THIS WOULD BE IT!"
The queen tried and failed to muffle a snicker behind her paws while Sans' eye sockets had a twinkle to them that had nothing to do with the glowing lights that were usually there. Frisk tried not to smile.

“Okay, yes, those are all important points. I think. It's late and I'm tired and its hard to brain good.”

“Brain good??” Asgore blinked while Alphys and Undyne began to snicker.

“Yeah, yeah, fine, get it out of your system. But Sans is right. We do need to let people know what's going on, if only so they don't worry about nobody coming back from the human village. But,” Frisk paused. “We also need to establish a foothold here. If somebody has a question or if the timetable for tomorrow is pushed forward or backward for whatever reason, then we need to be in a position for somebody to contact us. And the Undernet system does not reach all the way to the Surface.”

“Oh! I think I! Oh. Wait. Actually, I don't know if that... would work. B-but! That just means! If we can't use the human network. We extend the Undernet to here.”

“WOULDN'T THAT MAKE IT THE OVERNET?”

“P-probably? The name is secondary to the functionality of the network.”

“A communications network would help us move everybody out, once we confirmed that we had places for them to move.” Frisk scratched their head. “And we could also use it to keep people up to date on events up here. So that might be a good idea, but at the same time we might need your scientific expertise when we're talking with politicians here, in case they have questions about monster technology that might influence their decisions one way or another.”

Alphys laughed nervously. “I don't think that glorified cell phone repair counts as scientific expertise.”

Frisk stared at Alphys for a few seconds.

“All joking aside, we really do need you. Here, I'll try to prove it. Dr. Alphys, what are the key logistical bottlenecks in moving all the monsters out of the Underground?”

“Uh... w-well... I guess that would be keeping all the existing systems we have down there running long enough for people to move out, even while people were moving and there were fewer people left to keep them running and transport goods. There's also the physical choke points in the cavern structure between each region, to say nothing of the damaged walkways in Waterfall after-”

Alphys clapped her claws over her mouth, and Frisk waved a hand.

“Yeah, yeah, that needs to be fixed first. And the elevators between New Home and the Core and the Castle, they're bottlenecks too. And the door to the Ruins is open now so all the monsters still there can-”

Frisk stopped talking abruptly, and their face took on a pained expression. One hand came up to cover their eyes, and the child started to sniff.

“Frisk? Is something wrong?” Toriel got down on one knee next to the child, and placed one paw on the child's shoulder.

“Yeah. I just... it's been a long day, and it's catching up.” Frisk's hand came down, and the child's face, to all present except Sans, looked as impassive and detached as it had been earlier when trying to problem solve. “I have a suggestion. Asgore and Undyne go back to the Underground. Asgore lets everyone know what we've accomplished so far. Undyne organizes the Royal Guard, or the
former Royal Guard, so they can protect the entrance to the Underground just in case somebody tries something. And it might not even be hostile action, just curiosity, but it's for the best if humans don't go wandering around the Underground at random like I did. Especially considering one part of the Underground is literally the inside of a volcano... where was I going with this. Right. Alphys, you get whatever you need to set up temporary relays to the Undernet, if at all possible. We may need some other stuff later but this will get our foot in the door with real time updates. But before all that happens, we need a base of operations here. A place to stay and sleep and plan, close to where we need to be."

“Very well,” Toriel said, though her tone sounded doubtful. “Where would this place be?”

“I don't actually remember the name of the place.” Frisk grinned. “But I do know the person we need to be looking for.”

The door jingled as it opened, and the desk clerk looked up from his book with a start to see a small child walk into the hotel lobby.

“Hello Mr. Forsythe.”

“Uh. Hi.”

Frisk walked up to the desk, grabbed hold of the edge, pulled themselves up and rested on their forearms, with their vision much closer in level to the clerk's own eyes.

“I need to rent some rooms for myself and some friends. Uhm... at least four, if I'm doing the math right. How much would that cost for a single night?”

“Uhm.” The man blinked. “It's ninety five dollars a night for a single room, so three hundred and eighty. Although... I gotta be honest this is only the third time a child has come in here asking for a room and that usually has a very bad story behind it...”

Forsythe trailed off as Frisk shifted their weight to one arm and used the other to place a small pile of shiny metal objects on his desk that reflected a burnt reddish yellow under his reading lamp.

“Each of these coins is one hundred percent gold, and weighs a little over half of a troy ounce. If I did the math right that means each one is worth over six hundred US Dollars as of right now. We don't know how long we're going to be staying, so maybe make it several days. And because it's complicated trying to exchange gold for dollars, there's some extra to make up for the difference. Oh, if you want to melt it down to have it assayed or to just sell it as reclaimed metal, be sure to scratch out the symbols on the outside edge of the coin first.”

Forsythe stared at Frisk.

“...this is just getting weirder and weirder.”

“Yeah, well, welcome to my life.” Frisk turned back towards the door. “Bring it in, guys!”

The door opened, and a procession of figures walked in that immediately started to strain Quentin's understanding of the world, flexible and exotic as it was.

“Guys, this is Quentin Forsythe. Mr. Forsythe, I'd like to introduce you to King Asgore Dreemurr, Queen Toriel Dreemurr, Captain Undyne, Dr. Alphys, The Great Papyrus, and... Sans.”
Sans chuckled, and Frisk not-at-all subtly pushed the pile of coins towards Forsythe. “We'd like our room keys now, if possible. Unfortunately none of us have identification if you need it, but we can sign a register if that is important and Officer Steve can vouch for us.”

“...oh.” Forsythe's mind latched onto the familiarity of procedure and handed Frisk a pen with one hand while picking up the desk phone with another. Frisk began to sign their name, then hopped down from the desk and held the pen up to Toriel.

“Just sign your name on the next line. It's mostly a safety and legal precaution, but it might help us establish some sort of precedent in the future.”

“I see.” Toriel leaned down and carefully signed her name in careful penmanship, as opposed to Frisk's enthusiastic scrawl. Behind the desk, Forsythe had turned around in his chair and was talking into the phone in a tone just a little louder than a stage whisper.

“Officer Steve?”

“Speaking.”

“This is Quentin Forsythe at the Roll-On-Inn Travelers Hotel and I swear what I'm about to tell you is actually happening—”

“Has Frisk made it there yet?”

“What? Yeah, that's why I'm... I'm calling. There's, like... some people wearing, if I'm honest, very well designed fursuits and professional quality makeup—”

“Yeah, those aren't costumes or makeup Quentin.”

“...what.”

“Yes. What you see is what you get. Still trying to come to terms with it myself to be honest, but this is the world we live in now. Other than shock, any problems you need help with?”

“Uh...” Quentin turned in his chair back towards the desk where a tall skeleton was signing his name with a flourish, and the pile of gold coins caught his eye. The clerk turned until he was facing the back of the office again. “No. They're just signing the register like normal... Just needed to double check that I wasn't going completely crazy.”

“I don't mean to be rude, Quentin, but the whole town knows you're crazy. But yes. This is actually happening. Whatever it is.”

“...Steve, please don't take this the wrong way. But were the Guardians right about something for once?”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone line.

“Just once. And they couldn't even get that right. And it's occurred to me, and some other people too, that being polite and accommodating to these folks is, in and of itself, a way to spit in the eye of the Guardians now that they're gone.”

“...oh. Yeah. There's that. Huh. Hey, speaking of which, did the BADTF find, like, a UFO in the Bastion Circle Compound? Cause I was wondering. I remember when that guy showed up in town and tried to start a Space Brothers style saucer cult and they put him in the hospital which was both not cool and very suspicious.”
“Ugh. If they had a flying saucer, or a weather balloon, or whatever, I didn't hear of it. Hell, maybe it was classified instantly. Either way, that's like a whole other issue to deal with later.”

“Right, right. Thanks, Officer Steve.”

Forsythe turned around and hung up the phone, then stood up and started looking through the array of cubbyholes and hooks behind him for a few seconds before finally depositing four room keys on the desk.

“Here you go. Sorry about the wait, but if I'm honest this is the second weirdest thing that has ever happened to me in this job.”

Inside the room that Toriel had claimed for herself and Frisk, there was not a great deal of space; this was compounded by an unspoken understanding to try not to wake Frisk, who had spent ten minutes searching through a human phone directory and scribbling down both numbers and various words on what looked like a to-do list before passing out, pencil still in hand. Toriel had carried them over to the far bed, tucked them in, and the rest of the monsters had huddled together, speaking in low voices.

“I can get you guys back to the Underground, I think. Distance isn't as much of a problem as blind jumps, but I can get you back easy enough now that I've been here.”

“Thank you, Sans.” Asgore nodded. “I am still unsure what to tell everyone, but I can at least tell them the good news so far.”

Sans turned to Alphys. “What do you think you'll need for an Undernet Relay?”

Alphys blinked and then shook her head, blushing. “Sorry. My mind is a thousand miles away. What was that?”

“What do you need me to pick up from your lab to extend the Undernet to the surface, at least temporarily?”

“Uhm. Oh! Actually!” Alphys covered her mouth with her claws as she realized how loud she had been, but Frisk did not stir. “Actually, all I think I need is one more Bridge Junction on the Network Backbone. If you can set up that half, then bring the other one here, I can configure it and adjust it to run on human electricity and calibrate the wifi.”

“Consider it done. Alright. Undyne. Your Majesty. Let's get this party started.”

Asgore carefully stood up to keep his horns from scraping the ceiling, and also carefully navigated over to the hotel room door. Toriel watched him, Undyne, and Sans vanish in blue light as they crossed the threshold, then turned back to Alphys and Papyrus.

“If there is pressing business that we must consider tonight, let us do so now. If not, I think it would be wise for everyone to return to their rooms, so that Frisk is not awakened by our activity.”

“Oh. That is. A good idea.” Alphys gulped. “Except that I think Undyne still had our room k-k-key when she headed b-back to the Underground.”

“DOCTOR ALPHYS,” Papyrus tried to ask quietly, “ARE YOU FEELING OKAY? YOU HAVE BEEN SWEATING QUITE PROFUSELY SINCE WE CHECKED IN TO THIS HUMAN HOTEL.”
“I'm fine!”

“ALSO THE COLORATION OF YOUR SCALES HAS CHANGED-.”

“I'm fine!”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delay. Things happened, but I should be back on track for the future!
Full speed ahead!
Behind the bar, a man cleaned a glass mug with mechanical regularity, over and over, not seeing anything in front of him or even being aware of the state of cleanliness of the mug in his hands. The rest of the establishment, for all the noises coming from the computers in several booths, was similarly quiet. Just a few hours before, the noise had been deafening as patrons cheered and drank to the future, to each other, to the town itself.

That euphoria had given way to the quiet despair of those drinking to forget.

“What is 'teratophilia' and why is it trending on Twitter?”

“Huh??” The man looked up at one of the waitstaff, holding up her smartphone.

“Teratophilia. I mean I know what 'philia' means but what does 'terato' mean?”

“...uh... not sure. Might have to google it. Sorry. Brain's been stuck in first gear all day.”

“...right. Sorry about... I guess today kind of struck a few nerves.”

“...yeah. It's good that it happened, but there's no going back to the way things were... uh. Hey, Darcy. If you have somebody you want to meet, or plans, or something, you can take the rest of the night off if you want.”

The waitress stared at the bartender for a few seconds. “And leave you here alone to manage everything? That doesn't seem like the greatest plan.”

“...maybe not. But the offer stands anyway.”

“Thanks Eli, but I'll stick around till closing time at least. I get my celebrating in tomorrow.”

“Alright then.” Eli looked up as the door opened and a uniformed figure made his way towards the bar. “Oh. Another customer. Hey Steve.”

“Hey. I need a freaking drink.”

“Well, you came to the right place. What's your pick?”

“Anything as long as it's cold and in a bottle and can slow my brain down.”

“...okay. Hope you don't mind me saying so but your jimmies look positively rustled.”

Officer Steve held his head in his hands. “Oh, really. What was your first clue.”

“Well... body language, tone of voice, a couple other things. I could go on-”
“Hey, Officer Steve is on YouTube!”

Eli turned to Darcy, who was staring at her phone's screen with a grin on her face.

“Wait, what?”

“Oh God it's spreading...” the policeman mumbled, letting his head drop to the bar and covering it with his arms. Darcy turned her phone around and Eli saw a short, shaking video clip, obviously from a phone's camera app, showing Officer Steve shaking hands with a very realistic (if bizarre) looking skeleton and collapsing on his feet.

“...wow. Okay the camera is obviously amateur stuff because of the lighting and the angles and of course it's in patented Shaky-Cam, but that skeleton is really good. Not sure if it's animatronics or CGI or what and that alone means somebody really knew what they were doing. My hat is off to whoever came up with that.”

“You're not wearing a hat.”

Eli nodded at Darcy's observation. “That is true, but if I was wearing one I would take it off in respect-”

“It's not either of those things. It's real.”

Eli and Darcy stared at the police officer, and the bartender noticed that some other people nearby were also staring.

“So... not CGI?”

“Not CGI, or the other thing. It's real. He's real. I shook hands with a skeleton and I passed out and everybody in the world is going to know before tomorrow morning. Which is why I would like my fucking drink now.”

Eli blinked.

“How many did you have before you got here?”

Asgore stared out over the teeming masses of New Home, and he knew, many other monsters in the rest of the Underground. For the first time in a long time, his mouth was dry and it felt like most if not all of his body was shaking at the prospect of public speaking.

“Dear citizens... I have an important announcement. The rumors you may have heard are true. The Barrier has been destroyed.”

The applause didn't start all at once; the first reaction of the crowd was actually a stunned silence, which slowly turned into a murmur, and then grew into a tumult, before finally building up to a crescendo of excitement. Asgore let the cheering continue for almost half a minute, before raising his arms for silence, which also took nearly half a minute to finally happen.

“We have been to the Surface. We have made contact with the humans. There has been no violence. Only curiosity and confusion.” Asgore paused for effect, or perhaps to consider his words. “On the Surface, the sun has set on a world where monsters and humans were at war. Tomorrow, it will rise on a world where monsters and humans work together, and live in peace.”
Asgore paused again, while the response was not as loud as it had been before, it was certainly heartfelt.

“It is not right to ask any monster to wait any longer to see the surface. Yet, there is much work to be done. We must make sure that no one is left behind by accident. We must be certain that every part of the cavern has heard the news and can make preparations. There are countless matters on the surface that require our attention as well....”

The restaurant was surprisingly full for being so close to closing time, and surprisingly noisy as conversation filled the air. One patron stared at her phone's screen as a video played of a large creature covered in white fur and purple robes standing on a stage answering questions, while a small human child talked with another large creature with massive horns and a short skeleton with a fur lined bomber jacket.

“I heard they took one look at the Internet and were appalled.”

“I heard they took one look at the Internet and declared war on mankind.” The woman on the other side of the table replied. Both women looked up at the waiter that stopped by their table.

“Well I heard that they took one look at the Internet and went right back where they were hiding all this time.”

The woman with the cell phone looked down at it again.

“That would definitely be the smart play.”

“I think so too. Do you two want your check now, or would you like anything else?”

“I want a Royal Guard presence here around the clock. Arrange the shifts however you need to. It’s a long hike up the mountain just to get to this cave but we can’t rule out the possibility that some humans will try it. Even in the dark.” Undyne turned to 01 and 02. “Keep the swords out, but don’t wave them in the direction of humans if they do show up. Just demonstrate that you have the ability to defend yourself and the Underground. Don’t let them into the cave, even if they’re not violent they could probably get hurt stumbling around, especially with the elevator that goes straight from the castle to The CORE in Hotland.”

“Like, you got it boss.”

“Good. If you do get attacked, try to lock the humans down with green or cyan magic. We can’t really start negotiations with a body count so maybe we can pass it off as a misunderstanding. Something to check with Frisk when I can. They know the politics and the culture up here, so they’d-”

“ey Undyne. got the stuff.”

The Captain turned to see Sans with a bunch of loose papers, folders, and books under one arm.

“Oh. Good. Guess all we need to do is wait for Asgore to come back from New Home. Or go meet him, I guess.”

“that might be fun. the speech is inspiring. it almost makes me want to get up and do something.”
Sans winked one eye socket at his boss. “almost.”

“Do they eat babies? I heard they eat babies.”

The cashier turned to see two customers standing in line, staring at a video on one customer's phone.

“Well if they eat babies, how did they survive for this long without humans? That big goat lady said they were underground for a really long time. If she's telling the truth then they would have starved to death.”

“...oh. Right. It's like that Asari thing in Mass Effect.”

“Well, in reverse, but yeah.”

“And if she wasn't telling the truth then that means they were probably living among us for ages and nobody knew.”

“...I could believe that too, actually. Did I tell you what my boss did last Thursday?”

The cashier cleared her throat politely. “Can I help either of you?”

“The next few days are certain to be pure chaos, but I know that each one of you will be up to the task. We have waited so long for this day, and it has finally arrived! United together, with one goal, there is nothing we cannot accomplish!”

Some distance away, Undyne ran her hand across her face to get rid of the tears that had come from listening to Asgore's speech.

“Sans, if you tell anybody about this, I'm gonna kill you. And fire you. In that order.”

The skeleton just chuckled as the crowd cheered around them.

10:45 PM violins_never_solve_anything: OMG AMBER WAKE UP
10:45 PM violins_never_solve_anything: WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE
10:45 PM violins_never_solve_anything: UP
10:46 PM 50shadesofbeige: wtf
10:46 PM violins_never_solve_anything: O THAN KGOD
10:46 PM 50shadesofbeige: whats wrong are you okay
10:46 PM 50shadesofbeige: kate talk to me are you hurt
10:46 PM 50shadesofbeige: is yur famly ok
10:47 PM 50shadesofbeige: KATE YOU DO NOT GET TO WAKE ME UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NITE AND THEN GO SILENT TREATMENT I AM FREAKING OU
10:47 AM violins_never_solve Anything sent 50shadesofbeige a file: IMG_0023omgmonsters.jpg

10:47 PM 50shadesofbeige: wtf is this

10:47 PM 50shadesofbeige: also who even uses jpgs anymore its fuckig 2014

10:47 PM violins_never_solve Anything: JUST LOOK

10:47 PM 50shadesofbeige: alright lright

10:48 PM violins_never_solve Anything: AMBER U THERE

10:48 PM violins_never_solve Anything: AMBER SAY WORDS

10:49 PM 50shadesofbeige: I have two tests I can't afford to fuck up in the morning and you woke me up for a meme i've never heard of you are the fifth worst friend I have ever had and now I cam going back to sleep good nigh

10:50 PM violins_never_solve Anything: OH

10:50 PM violins_never_solve Anything: SRY DID NOT NO ABOT TESTS

10:50 PM violins_never_solve Anything: GN
First Thing We Do, Let's Hire All The Lawyers

I am too late.

Frisk walked down the corridor, head bowed as monsters once again told them the tale of Asriel and the first fallen human, the tragedy that had set everything in motion.

No matter how far back I go, I can't reach them.

The monsters didn't know about the plan. About the buttercups. The fallen child's attempt to free them, and how it had gone so wrong. And Dr. Alphys...

I can't stop this from happening. All I can do is pick up the pieces. That's all I ever do.

Alphys had no idea what she had done.

“You're going to be free.”

Frisk stared at the last Froggit as it hopped away, feeling very cold and almost sick to their stomach, before marching forward again. Once more, in the garish corridor before the throne room, filled with eye-smarting gold and orange light... a shadow stood in their way.

“So you finally made it. The end of your journey is at hand. In a few moments, you will meet the king. Together... you will determine the future of this world. That's then. Now... you will be judged.”

Even knowing what was coming, Frisk swallowed. This time around... some things had been different. And there was no telling what else might have changed as a result.

“You will be judged for your every action. You will be judged for every EXP you've earned.”

For a few moments, the corridor was silent, until Frisk realized Sans was waiting for them to speak. He had expected them to ask what EXP was... he didn't know that he'd already told them, once.

“...what does that mean?”

“What's EXP?”

“Yes.”

“...it's an acronym. It stands for Execution Points. A way of quantifying the pain you have inflicted on others. When you kill someone, your EXP increases. When you have enough EXP, your LOVE increases. LOVE, too, is an acronym. It stands for Level Of Violence. A way of measuring someone's capacity to hurt. The more you kill, the easier it becomes to distance yourself. The more you distance yourself, the less you will hurt. The more easily you can bring yourself to hurt others.”

Frisk nodded.

“I understand.”

The shadowy figure paused, and then stepped forward into the light, revealing an ivory white skull with lights glowing in the sockets; Sans' ever grinning face.

“but you never gained any LOVE. 'course, that doesn't mean that you're completely innocent or naive. just that you kept a certain tenderness in your heart. no matter the struggles or hardships you
faced... you strived to do the right thing. you refused to hurt anyone. even when you ran away, you did it with a smile. you never gained LOVE... but you gained love. does that make sense?”

Sans shrugged.

“eh. maybe not.”

The skeleton winked, and Frisk managed to smile.

“now... you're about to face the greatest challenge of your entire journey. your actions here... will determine the fate of the entire world. if you refuse to fight... Asgore will take your Soul, and destroy humanity. but if you kill Asgore and go home... monsters will remain trapped underground. what will you do?”

Frisk stared at the tiled floor of the corridor, their smile vanishing.

“...what would you do, Sans? What would you do, if it was you being judged, with the fate of the world hanging in the balance?”

The corridor was silent once again, and it might just have been a distortion in the reflection of the tiles, but Frisk thought they saw Sans stop smiling for a moment.

“...well, if i were you, i would have thrown in the towel by now. but you didn't get this far by giving up, did you? that's right. you have something called 'determination'. so as long as you hold on... as long as you do what is in your heart... I believe you can do the right thing. alright. we're all counting on you kid. good luck.”

'That's it.'

In a single moment, everything snapped into focus. There was no going back. No returning to the Surface, to the house of constant screaming, the house that had stopped being a home long ago. They were not welcome there, or anywhere else on the Surface. And there was no place for them in the Underground either. Except maybe in that last jar, for however long it took Asgore to prepare to destroy the Barrier. And then monsters would be free.

They had known the truth in their heart for a long time, but here was proof; everyone they cared about would be better off if Frisk was dead.

“Thank you, Sans. I know what I have to do now.”

“...wait a second.”

Frisk looked up from the floor of the corridor with a start. Sans hadn't said this before.

“that look on your face while i was talking... you've already heard my spiel, haven't you?”

Sans was winking, but Frisk felt their stomach turn to ice in the gaze from his remaining eye socket.

“i suspected something like this. you always act like you know what's going to happen. like you've seen it all before. so... i have a request for you.”

Sans looked at Frisk, and appeared to not notice the child's hands shaking.

“i kind of have a secret codeword that only i know. so i know if someone tells it to me.. they'll have to be a time traveller. crazy, right? anyway, here it is...”
Sans closed his eyes, and his jaw barely moved, but sounds still reached Frisk's ears... and the child slapped one hand over their mouth as they snorted in laughter. The skeleton opened one eye socket so he was winking again.

“i'm counting on you to come back here and tell me that. see you later.”

Sans stepped back into the shadows, and then, at some point, it was clear that he wasn't there anymore.

“...sorry, Sans.”

Frisk forced their legs to start moving again, walking on autopilot more than anything else until they reached the Throne Room. After a few moments lingering outside, Frisk pulled out their cell phone and navigated through the menus.

On the other end of the line, the phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Nobody picked up.

It was possible that Toriel's cell phone had once again been stolen by that small white dog that also stole Papyrus's bones. It was equally possible that Toriel had her phone, saw the number that was calling, and declined to pick up. And since the phones Toriel had access to were too old for texting, or voice mail, or even answering machines... that was that.

Frisk ended the call and navigated through the menus again, until they got to the Dimensional Box controls. There wasn't a lot of room left in either box, after accumulating so much of what had to have been personal effects dropped, lost, or abandoned by the previous fallen humans, but what was left got filled with what remained of their food supplies. They wouldn't be needing them for what was going to happen next, and this way they wouldn't get ruined or bloody. Maybe somebody else could use them.

*Always too late to stop it. Always the weight of everything on... I'm so fucking sick of this.*

Frisk winced as they closed the phone's menus and put it back in their pocket. Whether from stress over what happened before, fear of what was to come, the fallout of their experiences in the lab basement, or Sans being far more perceptive than he had ever let on before, their head was starting to ache. For a few moments, they stood outside the throne room, staring at one of those strange stars.

It might have been their imagination, but it sounded like Asgore was whistling.

'This time, Toriel remembered that I liked cinnamon, and she said that the other humans sometimes felt familiar. Same with Papyrus, and Undyne, and Sans, even before what he just said. Whatever is happening to me... the other humans could do it too. Until they didn't. There's a way out of this.'

Gripping their frying pan in one shaking hand, they slowly marched into the throne room...

The sunlight was dazzling, and it took a few moments for Frisk to realize they were not staring at the cracked holes in the mountain above the throne room, but a window. From there it didn't take long to realize they were lying down in a bed. The child sat up and slowly took in their surroundings; a hotel
room. Their list and phone was on the nightstand, and their shoes were on the floor next to it.

Hands rushed to pockets to confirm that, yes, everything was still there, and Frisk let out the breath they had been holding. Whatever godlike power Asriel had possessed during their last battle had left some sort of imprint on the world, beyond simply the destruction of the Barrier. Frisk could feel the potential inside of the glowing spheres of light, like a snowball at the top of a hill, ready to roll down, getting bigger and bigger and bigger until it surpassed a critical threshold and an Idea was transformed into a Reality.

With what little power they had left, Frisk would Save Asriel Dreemurr.

But they had a job to do first.

Everyone was counting on them to lead them into the human world, to find a way to make room not only for living space, but in this society that had not known magic or monsters for who knew how long. Once everyone was safe, on the surface, in the sunlight... well, one step at a time. Besides, even though they knew that those Dreams could save Asriel, Frisk did not know how yet. They couldn't risk trying to use them and wasting their power on nothing at all. Learning about the theory of magic would have to wait until after everyone was settled in on the surface and had homes and jobs and social media accounts and things like that.

The miniature stars were counted and returned to Frisk's pockets, and the child pulled on their shoes. The sun had risen, and that meant the clock was ticking.

“Another egg, Mr. Forsythe?”

“Uhm. Uh. I'm good. It was delicious, but I'm not used to having my food melt in my mouth like that.”

“Very well.” Toriel smiled. “Officer Steve, can I interest you in another egg?”

“Probably shouldn't, but I will definitely have another cup of your coffee. It's really taking the edge off my headache.”

“What's wrong with your head? Did you get into a fight or something?”

Officer Steve shook his head in response to Undyne's question, and immediately winced as he did so. “Well, since you people are still here the next morning, no offense, my head seems okay. And I wasn't in a fight or anything. I just needed something to take the edge off after last night's shock, and took it a bit too far- ah. I think somebody who you might be able to persuade to accept a fried egg has just shown up, your Majesty.”

Toriel turned to see Frisk walking into the hotel lobby, rubbing the heel of one hand against an eye and clutching some papers in their other hand.

“Ah, good morning, Frisk! Come, we have saved you a seat.”

Frisk found themselves being drawn to one of the empty chairs at the table and sitting down as a plate with two sunny-side-up eggs and some slices of toast slid in front of them. At the head of the table, Toriel was balancing a skillet above a fireball floating over the surface of the table; while the heat from the pan was obvious, the table itself appeared completely unharmed. Magic in action again.

“Where did this come from?”
“Yo.” Quentin Forsythe raised his hand. “After Brenda showed up for the morning shift I got to thinking and it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“An inspired choice, to be sure.” Toriel smiled. “We are very much in your debt, Mr. Forsythe.”

“If anything, that's the other way around. Nothing like having... having real, actual monsters walk through the door to vindicate a lifelong conviction that there's more to that life than what got written down in the history books.”

“Yeah, you poured gas on the conspiracy theory fire,” Officer Steve grumbled, but one corner of his mouth was twitching like he was trying to keep from smiling or laughing. “Thanks for nothing.”

Frisk's gaze tracked around the table, noticing a gap that their mind had not registered earlier, as well as the fact that Asgore's portions seemed much smaller than some of the portions on other plates.

“What's Sans?”

“We were...” Alphys stopped talking, yawned, and shook her head. “Sorry. We were working on... getting the UnderNet Relay set up late last night after he got back. So he's probably out of it.”

“AND THAT IS WHY WE MUST CATALOG EVERY STEP OF OUR HUMAN AMBASSADOR OUTREACH SO THAT HE CAN SEE WHAT HE MISSED BY BEING A LAZY LAYABOUT!” Officer Steve winced at Papyrus's enthusiastic volume, and the skeleton turned around to activate the camera on his phone. A few moments later, there were assorted chimes and dings as different phones got notifications, and Frisk pulled theirs out to see an UnderNet notification; CoolSkeleton95 had posted a status update consisting of a picture of Papyrus sitting at a long table with several monsters and a few humans, eating eggs and toast.

“Well... nothing brings people together like good food, so that's a good start to diplomatic relations.” Frisk unfolded some of the papers they had brought to the table. “But there's still a lot to do.”

“Yeah, I've been meaning to ask, and not just because it's my job to keep tabs on all of you now. What exactly are your plans? I mean I'm not authorized to say yes or no to anything and I'm not really sure who does ultimately have the authority to do that, but is there a direction you're working towards? A specific goal or goals?”

“Yes.” Frisk nodded. “We are trying to get as many monsters living on the surface as possible, as fast as is practical.”

“How many monsters is that?”

“Between seven and eight thousand monsters,” Undyne supplied. “I heard Sans talking about it on our way to see Asgore's speech, we were due for another one before too long so whatever the paperwork says, the actual numbers could be higher or lower.”

Officer Steve's eyes blinked, then slowly opened wide as realization kicked in.

“Eight thousand people... Jesus H. Christ.”

“So the sooner we get started, the better.” Frisk held up one piece of paper. “Fortunately I know what to do to get the ball rolling. Officer Steve, when, uh, when everyone's eaten and is ready to travel, can you escort us to the offices of Banner, Banner, and Paulson?”

“Yeah, ZJ was at the park last night, he told me all about it. The queen used fire to threaten people.
They're definitely here to take over. We gotta organize some kind of resistance!"

On the other side of the booth, another man pulled out his phone and started thumb typing.

“What are you doing? Calling up somebody who can help?”

Eventually the typing finished, and the phone was turned around, showing a video clip of a white, furry monster producing a fireball and a small child grabbing it and holding it up. It was hard to tell the exact age of the child, or if they were a boy or a girl, but there was no mistaking the child’s expression. There was no pain, no fear, only a little impatience and exasperation.

“...huh.” The man who had been advocating forming a resistance movement less than a minute before stared at the phone screen for a while, before scratching at his chin. “ZJ left that part out.”

“Seriously, this is why everybody else stopped listening to ZJ ages ago. Didn't you learn your lesson after the whole Mayan Calendar Doomsday thing?”

“Hey, come on. We've been buddies since fifth grade and besides a stopped clock is still right twice a day.”

“And what about the other twenty three hours, fifty nine minutes and fifty eight seconds in the day?”

The booth was silent.

“Did you just do the math for that in your head?”

“Yeah, I found this book on how to do fast mental calculations at Joe's House of Stuff.”

“Oh.”

It was hard to believe that the Banners were brothers. One was tall and lanky, the other short and rotund; one with thick glasses and one without; one with a close trimmed beard and the other clean shaven. Their hair styles, their posture, the very structure and shape of their faces had almost no resemblance; Paulson, the junior partner of the firm, had more in common physically with each of the Banner brothers than either of them had with each other.

On the other hand, all three men had the same deer-in-the-headlights expression as they looked across the table to see two giant monsters resembling goats and a young human child acting as if everything was perfectly normal.

Frisk hoped that it didn't mean they had to start over again.

“Well, gentlemen? In your expert legal opinions, do you see any problems with our plans as currently organized?”

Mr. Paulson blinked, reached up to rub his head, and then pulled some papers toward him.

“In regards to the matter of movement to the surface, the primary obstacles from a legal standpoint would fall within the purview of immigration law. This is a very politically charged issue on its own, but the various... steps that would need to be followed would start with the United States of America to officially recognize your nation, which... to speak plainly, might take a while. You can expect a similar time frame for recognition from other countries, for much the same reasons. All other issues involving establishing any sort of permanent settlement would, at some point, involve the purchase of
land; legally this would require the paperwork identifying the purchaser as a valid legal entity with the rights to do so under United States law. This does not necessarily require citizenship or any association with the United States itself, but the process is considerably more complicated for foreign nationals and even businesses.” The lawyer raised his hands apologetically. “Unfortunately none of these are problems that can be resolved overnight.”

“We expected as much,” Toriel replied with a nod, and Paulson rearranged some of his papers.

“There are some stopgap solutions that have occurred to me while... while the situation was being explained. I haven't had a chance to explore them in specific detail, and some of them may prove to be invalid, but... Mt. Ebott has never been accurately surveyed, on foot or from the air. It technically falls under the authority of the Bureau of Land Management, and for reasons that may well have had more to do with the political issues of the time than the actual properties of the land itself, technically qualifies as a national park. Only technically, since the National Park Service has no actual presence, even on paper. We may be able to invoke some of the more obscure provisions for national parks to at least allow temporary housing on the surface, but we would need a long term strategy in motion at the same time we made our case for that. Another alternative is possible because of the veins of metal that your kingdom mined. Mining claims played an important role in the history of Lost Eagle County, and there are county, state, and even federal laws that make special cases for anyone attempting to develop the mineral resources on a plot of land. I'd have to go through them to see which ones applied and if there were any mitigating circumstances that rendered them moot in your case. There is a third option but I do not consider it viable in either the short or long term.”

“What is it?”

Paulson turned to look at the King. “Because your kingdom, and your civilization, predates the formation of the United States as a country or possibly any human nation, and certainly predates the existence of Oregon as a state, we could make the argument that you qualify as an indigenous tribe, which has a lot of precedent but would put you in the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I don't know how much you know about the history and the politics of this country, but native tribes have more or less always been given the short end of the stick. So I'd just as soon cross that off the list before we even start.”

“Agreed.” Frisk nodded. “They kind of skimmed over that stuff in school but I spent enough time in the librarby to know we don't want anything like that.”

“Alright then.” Paulson dragged his pen across a sheet of paper he had been writing on. “That's out. In regards to your concerns regarding saturating the human economy with gold, while I do not specialize in financial or contract law I do share those concerns. Perhaps my partners can provide us with a little insight on that issue.”

Paulson looked to the Banner brothers, who slowly seemed to come to the realization that, yes, this was really happening. The younger, taller brother spoke first.

“Gold as currency is, much like immigration, a politically contentious issue. Though not to the same extent right now. Leaving aside the practical limitations in exchanging it, simply placing it on the open market all at once, as Frisk said, would cause undesirable economic effects. There are also numerous legal restrictions on the sale of gold as a commodity, due in no small part to the different values of gold in the economies of different nations, especially those which still adopt a policy of arbitrage. Having said all that, it is not overly difficult to create a legal and financial entity which is capable of brokering in precious metals. Such an entity would be able to act as a go between for the commodities market itself and any person wishing to exchange gold for other forms of currency.”

“Like those Cash For Gold commercials,” Frisk offered, and the lawyer's mouth tightened.
“I'd like to think that this entity would provide its patrons with something much closer to the market value of the gold they were exchanging. Also, many of those places went out of business for reasons varying from mismanagement to explicit violation of the law. I'd like to avoid those scenarios as well. The largest problem, as I see it, is that the entire point of this entity would be to prevent the devaluation of gold by not dumping it all on the market at once, but without putting some on the market there would be no money for anyone to exchange. It's not simply a matter of a lack of starting capital, there's an abundance of ways around that. It's just that I don't see a way to solve the problem that doesn't involve causing that problem in the first place.”

“At least, not without breaking the Eddie Murphy Rule,” the older brother finally spoke up.

“What Rule is this that you speak of?” Toriel asked, and the older Banner brother smiled.

“It's a law that was passed to prevent those who have advanced knowledge of commodities information from exploiting that knowledge to their own profit in the market. It comes from a movie with Eddie Murphy as one of the stars, where the antagonists attempt to use information from a crop report to corner the market for frozen concentrated orange juice, and the protagonists pull it off instead.”

“Knowing that monsters do have access to a large amount of gold, in and of itself, could be legally actionable for any of us,” the younger brother added.

Frisk nodded. “So if we needed the capital to start this thing, we'd still have to put some gold on the market, with the resulting economic hit, meaning everything monsters tried to trade in would lead to diminishing returns.”

“Correct.”

“Then unless somebody comes up with a better idea in the next few days, we might as well. Until we have explicit news to the contrary, I am moving forward on the assumption that we are going to have approval to move monsters out of the Underground and, at the bare minimum, onto the slope of Mt. Ebott itself. We are going to have a lot of monsters who are going to need a lot of supplies to get started.” Frisk pushed a slip of paper across the table. “My phone can't presently connect to the existing surface telecommunications network, but this is the address where everyone is staying for the moment. When you have a number, either in US dollars or in the weight of gold needed to start this exchange program, let somebody know and we'll start putting it together. You can also use that as a billing address once we can actually pay in US dollars. Actually, thinking about it, the retainer was in Gild, so would that present a conflict of interest?”

The younger brother shook his head. “Only if we were to actually sit on whatever organizational body administrated such an entity, and somebody could present probable, actionable cause for undue influence for the sake of personal gain. There's no actual restrictions keeping us from accepting payment in forms other than federal reserve notes. That's what pro bono work is about at its most fundamental.”

“Not that this is pro bono, of course.” The older brother interjected.

“Of course,” Frisk nodded. “Frankly, and I mean no offense, but I feel a bit better about our prospects knowing that you three have a financial stake in our success.”

Paulson grinned. “That might be the nicest lawyer joke slash backhanded compliment we've ever heard here. Thanks.”

“You're welcome. I think.” Frisk frowned, then shook their head. “If that's everything, we should get
moving. We're supposed to be at city administration pretty soon.”

“Right.” Paulson nodded and turned to his colleagues. “I'll tag along as legal counsel while you two hash out the framework for a commodity exchange entity.”

“That sounds good.” The younger brother stood up, prompting everyone else to stand as well. “I can't say I've never had a case quite like this, but I can say that today has been unlike any other day. It's been... well, interesting meeting you all.”

Hands and paws were shaken, and Paulson stacked his papers and collected them inside a briefcase for transport.

“Heh. It's actually kind of funny. If it wasn't for the whole kingdom thing, we could probably make a compelling legal argument that everyone under Mt. Ebott is classified as a United States Citizen by default, and skip all of that hoop jumping. Everyone was born here after all.”

Asgore froze, blinking in surprise, and the lawyer immediately began to backpedal.

“I apologize, I meant no offense and that was perhaps in poor taste considering—”

“Can we do that?”

Paulson stared at the king.

“By do that, do you mean argue that all monsters are actually US citizens by default?”

“Yes, would that make things easier?”

Paulson turned to his partners, who stepped back. The older brother shook his head.

“You got yourself into this Simon. You can get yourself out.”

Paulson looked back at the king, moved his lips silently for a moment in rapid thought, then nodded.

“It is possible, at least in theory. You haven't actually been recognized as your own nation yet, so... this is an all-or-nothing strategy though. If your claims to citizenship aren't accepted on these grounds, that leaves you and all monsters in a sort of legal limbo. Certainly I don't expect that any attempt to form your own nation state after the fact, no matter its size or scale or governmental foundation, will be recognized as such. But it would allow us to avoid the most complicated and time consuming hurdles of immigration or diplomatic relations with the United States itself.”

“Then let's do it that way. It will get people out of the Underground faster and easier. And it would show that our desire to integrate and live in peace with humans to be genuine, instead of an empty gesture.”

“The king is right,” Frisk nodded. “Having borders, even unguarded ones, draws a line between people and organizes them into Us and Them in the minds of the population. Even between states, counties, and school districts. We don't want that, and we can't afford to reinforce that kind of thinking among humans that already do.”

“...very well. I guess... your nation, you would know what would need to be done to formally disband it as a legal entity by your own laws. I will... start hunting down precedent and court rulings for cases involving native born citizens in isolation. Or even better, the precedent for religious enclaves and retreats.”
“Wait, like the Sages?”

Paulson shook his head at Frisk’s question.

“They would not be a proper example. Despite their belief system and their... recent transgressions... they didn't really exist in isolation. Most if not all their children went to local schools, they had business licenses on file and health insurance records and credit cards and so on and so forth; they were more like a gated community than anything else. But historically there have been many examples in the United States of groups with unique religious perspectives moving into seclusion and isolation. The more violent ones tend to get the lion's share of the press coverage but there are many nonviolent examples as well, such as the Amish Mennonites. Sometimes people will leave such retreats and attempt to integrate with a nearby community or society on a national level, but when their parents' religion demanded isolation from an existing society for whatever reason, they don't have the type of paperwork most people take for granted. Birth certificates, Social Security Numbers, photo ID, things like that. There are procedures in place for people in those situations, though I doubt they have been used on the same scale that we would have to rely on in this scenario.”

“I'm not sure if the Underground could qualify as a religious enclave.” Frisk turned to Asgore. “The only thing I heard while I was down there was the Prophecy of the Angel.”

“How does that go?”

Toriel cleared her throat. “Passed down from the days when the Barrier was first created, there was a Prophecy of an Angel. One who had seen the Surface. They would return, and the Underground would go empty. I am dramatically oversimplifying, of course.”

“If it turns out we do have to invoke the isolated religious enclave precedent for this to work, I do not believe there is an arbitrary threshold of complexity for what that enclave believed.” Paulson smiled. “In fact most religious enclaves had central tenets not dissimilar from the prophecy you describe, predicting eventual escape to a better world. Though, this is probably the first time I've heard of a case where that better world was the ordinary every day world we all take for granted. I'll get started on that right after the City Council meeting.”

In the firm's lobby, doors to a meeting room could be heard opening; and Undyne's head turned as if it was a needle in a compass, drawn magnetically to the disturbance in the environment. This fact was not lost on Officer Steve even while listening to Papyrus comment on the law office and the variety of new and novel experiences he had accumulated during the short trip over to the law firm. In a few seconds, the royal family and the child that was serving as ambassador appeared.

“Hey Asgore, how did it go? We got a plan?”

“Ah. Yes. It is not an ideal plan, but it presents a decent chance of success and the most rapid integration with, and transportation to, the Surface.”

“Sweet!” Undyne pumped her fists up in the air, and Asgore smiled.

“Perhaps we should save the celebrations until after our task is complete, though I appreciate your enthusiasm.”

“Where to next?” Officer Steve asked. “The meeting with Metzinger?”

Frisk nodded. “That's the plan.”
“Alright then. Give me a minute or five to check in with the station and I'll be ready.” The policeman stood up, pulled out his radio with one hand, and his smartphone with the other. Walking away from the group to keep from being drowned out by Papyrus's projecting voice, his mouth traded words over the police band while his thumbs danced across a touchscreen keyboard.

11:22 AM: hey mike done at law office
11:22 AM: heading out to see metzinger
11:22 AM: hal still contained right
11:22 AM Rock_It_Science: yeah I got him
11:22 AM Rock_It_Science: all clear
11:22 AM: good
11:22 AM: hey
11:23 AM: question
11:23 AM Rock_It_Science: go ahead
11:23 AM: you really sure we shouldnt be trying to get frisk back home
11:24 AM Rock_It_Science: im sure
11:24 AM: its just
11:24 AM: I think this kid has been staying with the monsters n the hotel
11:25 AM Rock_It_Science: I remember how frisk used to act wen they came to the librar
11:25 AM: and whoever ther parents are they gotta be lookin
11:25 AM: god knows child services is in over their head so that wont help n e body but still
11:26 AM Rock_It_Science: if theyr lookin they wil find out soon
11:26 AM Rock_It_Science: internet is going crazy
11:26 AM Rock_It_Science: if they show up and frisk runs to them
11:26 AM Rock_It_Science: all well an good
11:26 AM Rock_It_Science: and if frisk runs away
11:26 AM Rock_It_Science: theres gon be a reason for that
11:26 AM: a lots riding on you being right about this
11:27 AM Rock_It_Science: no shit
11:27 AM: gotta move will check in at city hall

11:27 AM Rock_It_Science: roger dodger
“Channel Fifty Five wants a statement on the BADTF withdrawing.”

“Another one? The other three weren't enough?”

“Those were over the last three days. They want a statement from you today.”

In the city administration building, two figures marched down the hallway. One was a tall, thin man with short black hair and a gray pinstriped suit, and the other was a slightly taller woman in a sweater-and-skirt combination, carrying a clipboard.

“I thought no news was good news.”

“Not when your job is to tell the news, Mr. Metzinger. In that case no news means no business, which means no advertisers, which means no money.”

“Right, right, right. Okay... 'We are happy that the situation could be resolved with so little damage and loss of life.' There. Anything back from the zoning board about Bastion Circle?”

“Nothing yet. I heard from Kylie that they're caught in a buck passing loop.”

“This does not surprise me as much as it should. Anything else that can't wait until after this next meeting?”

“The school board called again. Chairman Harrison wants you to come down on Officer Ward for his grandstanding.”

“Oh my god. Those idiots are already drowning in bad publicity and he wants to make it worse.”

“Guess that's a no then.”

Mr. Metzinger rolled his eyes, then remembered that his assistant could not see him do so because she was walking behind him. “They instituted the zero tolerance policy. They stood behind the teacher that took a student's insulin. They refused to accept even partial responsibility or fault after the student had to be rushed to the hospital in a diabetic coma. When you back the wrong horse, you lose. That's how gambling works.”

“Speaking of which, Mr. Abernathy called again asking if you had considered his offer.”

“I have. Please take a memo. Mr. Abernathy, in regards to your previous requests for consideration of the permit of a casino to be built within the Ebott's Wake Township, I will refer you once again to the results of the public vote in August, which was 83% against. The people have spoken. In regards to your commentary about your employers potentially donating considerable sums of money to my next opponent, I will not be seeking re-election after the end of my term in office and never intended to do so in the first place. As a result, you are cordially invited to go fuck yourself. Best regards, Walter Metzinger.' End Memo. Got it?”

“Got it. I will type it up for you to look over after your meeting.”

“Great. That it?”

“Just two more things. Councilman Cobb wants to move the municipal bond issue back a day.”
“Did he say why?”

“No.”

Metzinger shook his head as the pair stopped outside a door. “I'll call him after the meeting. I hope this is just a scheduling conflict. What was the other issue?”

“Another media request. The Ebott's Wake Herald wants your stance on monsters.”

“...what?”

“You know. The monsters from Mt. Ebott, the ones that showed up after the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi were destroyed. It's been all over social media since last night.”

Metzinger sighed. “I have a town to manage. I don't have time for anything except that and my family, and I certainly don't have time to comment on any sort of meme going around on social media. Or whatever this is.”

Walter Metzinger pushed the door to the meeting room open and stepped inside... and immediately stopped. Seated at the table in the center of the room were...

“Hello Mr. Metzinger.” A child of indeterminate age and gender stood up. “I am Frisk, and I am acting as Ambassador for the Kingdom of Monsters. May I present King Asgore Dreemurr, Queen Toriel Dreemurr, Captain Undyne, Dr. Alphys, The Great Papyrus, and Sans the skeleton.”

The child gestured to each figure in turn, who gave some sort of acknowledgment or recognition.

“Mr. Paulson is serving as legal counsel for our position and interests, while Officer Ward has been providing us with a police escort to and from various places.”

Metzinger turned towards the policeman, who returned the man's gaze and expression. It was a look that carried a lot of information, for anyone who knew how to interpret it. The politician opened his mouth and said the first thing that came to mind.

“Did Hal Greene put you up to this?”

Officer Steve sighed and shook his head. “So far as anybody knows, Hal Greene doesn't yet.”

“...alright then.” Mr. Metzinger looked over the assembled group of figures again. The two large figures introduced as royalty could have been sophisticated suits, and the doctor and... pirate? The child had referred to the one called Undyne as a Captain, and they had an eye patch... those two could have been chalked up to detailed make up jobs. The skeletons could have been animatronics, but the larger one moved too much, and too smoothly, for that to be the case. And no human could possibly fit into a costume with those dimensions.

“...I was under the impression that this was a meeting about investments in the city and township, but I can see why that was a ruse now.”

“Actually,” the child spoke up, “that is likely something that will happen as a side effect of our goals. It's just not a central part of them.”

“...well. Suppose we could start with your goals, and see where that takes us.”

“Hello caller, and thank you for calling in to Beanpole's Request Line. What can I play for you this
“Hey, have you heard anything about those monsters that showed up during the party last night?”

“Uh... I don't know what that song is, and I don't recognize the name of the band... what? Uh, Jeff is trying to tell me something... oh. Well, this is the first I've heard of anything like that and I'm not sure I believe it. I certainly haven't seen anything like that. Anyway, caller, can I play a song for you?”

“Uh... well, I've always been partial to Total Eclipse of the Heart by Bonnie Tyler.”

“Ask and you shall receive, caller. We'll have that coming up right away.”

“That should do it. You want me to send you an invoice in the mail, or what?”

“Hold on, you take Visa?”

“Yeah, I got one of those reader attachments for my phone.”

“Okay. Here you go.”

A card was produced, and made several trips through add-on device before the application recognized it and started running.

“Okay, there we are. That's... two new locks and two sets of keys, normally that would be about a hundred and thirty dollars but with the Goodbye Guardians special promotion the final total comes to fifty six dollars and twenty one cents.”

“Money well spent. Can't be too careful these days.”

“Yeah. Even with the Guardians gone there's a lot of ne'er-do-wells out there, and a lot of people really wanted better security back when they were running wild but didn't want to draw attention to themselves by getting it. I've gotten eighteen orders in as many hours today.”

“Probably because of the monsters. I know that's what made up my mind.”

“...the what?”

The customer pulled out her own smartphone. “You haven't heard yet? There was this big thing about them showing up last night. It's all over YouTube.”

The locksmith shrugged. “Well, like I said, I've been busy for a while. Haven't even had a chance to check my email or text messages, never mind look at popular YouTube videos.”

“Here it is.” The customer turned their phone so both of them could see the screen. “Officer Steve faints around the minute and seven seconds point.”

“Whoa, really?? Steve's in this?”

The only sound was the noise of the video playing as the locksmith and the customer observed the events recorded the previous night, until the video reached it's end. The locksmith shook his head as he handed back the customer's credit card.

“Son of a bitch. I'm always the last to find out anything. I think I better play catch up with the world before my next job.”
“Might be a good idea. Anyway, thanks for the help Mr. Stanton.”

“Any time. Oh... right. If anything goes wrong with the locks in the next three months let me know. I'll cover it free of charge.”

“Thanks!”

Half an hour later, Metzinger's tie and jacket had been removed, and he ran his fingers through sweat soaked hair.

“Eight thousand monsters. Getting driver's licenses, and houses, and apartments, and jobs, and...”

The politician trailed off, and Frisk picked up. “And paying taxes and starting businesses and so on and so forth.”

“And so forth,” Metzinger muttered, shaking his head. “Jesus Christ. The logistics for security alone, for police presence, it boggles the mind. Never mind the actual transportation.”

“Uh, we have p-plans in the works for that.”

“Yeah, even if we had to throw some of em together at the last minute.”

Frisk made eye contact with Metzinger before rolling their eyes in a manner that Metzinger interpreted as ‘See what I have to work with?’

“The only major logistical problems on the Surface are the lack of access roads from the cave entrance to the existing road network inside and outside Ebott's Wake. Because Mt. Ebott is under the authority of the Bureau of Land Management, as I understand it we cannot legally make a permanent road for a number or reasons, but temporary measures to clear the way for travel are permitted, it seems. Since this is intended to be a one way trip, that shouldn't be a problem.”

“...right.” Metzinger's expression, and delayed response, clearly indicated that he didn't follow Frisk's reasoning. The man turned to the lawyer in the room. “How in the heck are you not freaking out right now?”

“They beat it out of you in law school.”

“...really?”

“No, Mr. Metzinger. That was an attempt to use humor to release tension.”

“...oh. Figures.” Metzinger rubbed both eyes with the heels of his hands, then stared at the monsters, blinking. They were still there.

“Okay... explain it to me one more time, because I don't think everything registered the first time around.”

“That is understandable. The monsters were born here in, or at least under, this country. None of the explicit restrictions on birthright citizenship apply to any monster. We can therefore argue that monsters are already United States citizens. What we would need from you and the council would be an official recognition of that fact. It's not explicitly necessary but it does add to the paperwork we can use as a foundation for our case if this position is challenged.”

“...alright. And then what happens?”
“And then monsters start moving out of the mountain, Mr. Metzinger,” Frisk responded. “You will probably see an increase in foot traffic to any local government building that can issue photo identification, the notarization or certification of legal documents as appropriate, and applications for business licenses. We're all going to be very busy for a while.”

“No lie...” the politician shook his head. “I can't promise anything. I don't even really know how I feel about this, but even if I did, I can't do anything unilaterally. The rest of the city council would have to put it to a vote. And in order to have an issue to vote on we would need to organize a special election for the town to vote on it. That alone is going to take a few days.”

“That is alright,” the king replied. “Our own preparations in the Underground will take several days to complete as well.”

Mr. Metzinger turned and looked at the king. He seemed completely at ease, but perhaps that was a mix of royal deportment and political acumen. It was like he, and the queen, and almost everyone in the room was confident that monsters being accepted was some sort of foregone conclusion.

Almost. That yellow lizard in a lab coat seemed really nervous.

“If you're willing to make the preparations for a special election, or set them into motion, we can get out of your hair and work on the problems on our end. Would that be acceptable, Mr. Metzinger?”

The politician stared at the human child, and not for the first time he wondered why a pre-adolescent child was taking such an active role, even speaking in an official capacity as the monster's ambassador to humanity.

“...sure. That sounds good. I'll... ugh, my head. I'll get started on that.” The man stood up from the table, prompting everyone else to follow. “Got to say, this would have been a lot easier for me if you had your own country and just wanted to open diplomatic relations with the United States. Could have kicked it up to the County Commission, they could have taken it to the Governor, and the Governor probably could have called Congress or even the President.”

“Probably. But monsters have been trapped behind one Barrier for ages. Now that it's been destroyed, they're not going to be happy with another one, even if it's just a line on a map. We aren't actively trying to make things more difficult for you, Mr. Metzinger, and I think I speak for everyone present when we regret any inconvenience.”

“Right... well. I guess I better get to work. It was... it was interesting meeting you all.”

“And on a lighter note, some viewers may remember the town of Ebott's Wake, Oregon. Previously we have reported on a raid conducted by the Bureau of Alcohol, Demolitions, Tobaccos and Firearms, assaulting the compound of an aggressive religious sect which had been terrorizing the town and several of its neighbors for several years. With the cult removed, the town had gradually attempted to return to normal, but not before a wild celebration that started Halloween over a week in advance. You can see that many of the people in this small town have gone the extra mile now that they have the chance. That is very impressive work, especially the skeletons. We'll take a short break for our sponsors now and when we come back, we will have Douglas Eagleton ready to answer your questions pertaining to law and liability in this week's 'Legal Eagle' so stay tuned.”

Frisk glared at the paper as they scribbled down words on it as quickly and clearly as they could.
“Okay, so... our biggest issues are public opinion before the vote and exchanging gold for dollars. The gold exchange we'll have to leave to Mr. Paulson and the Banner brothers to iron out, and that lets us focus on public opinion. I... I don't know as much about this as I need to so I will need to head to the Library later to check out some books.”

“IF WE NEED TO SWAY PUBLIC OPINION, WE SHOULD BRING METTATON TO THE SURFACE TO HELP!”

“Uh m-maybe that's n-not what Frisk means by-”

“Mettaton? He is that robot whom Papyrus enjoys watching on television, is he not?”

“Yeah! He was that guy trying to egg me and Alphys on so he could boost his ratings!”

Toriel's brow furrowed in confusion.

“I thought that Mettaton was shaped like a rectangle?”

“Uh, he was. I. Uh. I f-f-finished some upgrades s-so he can change into a d-different shape.”

“Oh, I see. And Undyne, I believe you meant 'Alphys and I' just now.”

Undyne stared at Toriel before turning to look at Alphys.

“Wait, you went on a 'pretend date' with her too??”

Alphys buried an increasingly red face in her claws, sputtering in protest. Frisk sighed.

“Toriel was talking about your grammar, Undyne.”

“Oh. OH. That makes sense. Because I was thinking, if we all just met you, how could Alphys manage that so fast-”

“hey, time is money in the shipping business.”

Papyrus and Alphys both made annoyed, frustrated sounds, almost in perfect sync with each other. Frisk managed to keep their laughter to a single snort before smothering the rest.

“Hmmmm... I suspect that was a pun, but somebody will have to explain it to me in the future. As for the present, I shall prepare lunch for us all.” The queen stood up from the table, and Frisk watched her walk over to the front desk where somebody else had taken over for Quentin Forsythe. To her credit, the woman now manning the desk had taken the presence and behavior of monsters with a mixture of acceptance and indifference that was calmer than any human reaction yet; in fact, she hadn't even batted an eye when Undyne began to ask her enthusiastic questions about her collection of facial piercings.

As the woman pulled out some of the food that Quentin left behind in the mini fridge beneath the desk, Frisk turned to Sans.

“About how long until Asgore is done with what he needs to do in the Underground?”

“he said it would take about an hour. if he was running late or early he said he would call.”

“Okay then. And Officer Steve shouldn't be back for another couple of minutes with his coffee.” Frisk looked around the table at the monsters, one by one, before settling their gaze on Alphys.
“Aside from trading gold and swaying people to vote in our favor, there is one other big problem we need to figure out. Or six other big problems, depending on how you look at it... Alphys, you had a network of security cameras recording what was going on throughout the Underground, right?”

“...y-yeah.” Alphys' voice was quieter than it had been at any time that day, and Frisk tapped the paper with their pencil nervously.

“How far back do those recordings go?”
In Their Footsteps

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“All of you are missing the two most important points, here. The first is that we cannot be expected to act according to the wishes of the public when this was something that nobody could have possibly predicted before yesterday, and therefore could not bring up during the election cycle. Holding a special ballot on the issue is the only real way to get feedback. The second is that the Guardians are dead. Gone. Extinct. And yet they've still left scars in our town that are going to take decades to heal. That healing process has barely started, and if we suddenly turn around and say the Sages were right all this time? It's going to be like lighting a match next to a gas leak.”

Walter Metzinger paused for effect, looking around the council chamber. A lot of the men and women looked as nervous as he felt, and the others probably were just as nervous and simply managed to hide it better.

Which, he realized, they were probably thinking the same about him.

“Men and women and children died or went missing. Anybody who starts singing that same old song and dance about how monsters will kill us all isn't just jumping the gun. They are reviving a system of thought that tells the people of this town, 'hey you, your parents, your children, your friends had to die.' Good luck getting re-elected after that.”

“All well and good for you to say, Mr. One-And-Done. You're not running for re-election so it's the rest of us left holding the bag when your bad ideas come back to bite us.”

“Trying to focus everyone's anger on me does not solve the essential problem, Mr. Harrison. It just makes you look petty and short-sighted. A special ballot lets all of us know what the people in this town and township want us to do, rather than trying to guess. As you pointed out, I can afford to guess wrong. You can't. Why are you fighting me on a course of action that clearly benefits you?”

Mr. Harrison managed to close his mouth before he said anything, but the fact that he opened his mouth meant it was already too late. The councilman sat down, while another member of the council stood up.

“Mr. Metzinger, any election poll activity costs money, no matter what issues are on the ballot. We have to vet polling locations, we have to train supervisors and workers, and in this case we will be doing it on a very short notice.”

“As the saying goes, you get the government you pay for. You do raise an important point, normally poll workers have nearly a month’s notice before we even call them in for training, never mind the actual poll work itself. All the more reason to get started right away.”

“You can't just brush off the issue of funding, Metzinger! We don't have it in the budget!”

“Ah, yes, I've been looking over a lot of the budget items trying to find the reason for the 2013 and 2014 shortfalls, now that I didn't have to worry about the town collapsing into civil war.” Metzinger picked up a stack of papers from the table in front of him. “Business revenues were down obviously, nobody knew what was going to happen next so people saved instead of spending. A lot of property got sold or even abandoned so the tax situation didn't look too good either, but I did a little more digging and called a few different appraisers and the municipal assayer from Lone Point to help me
check my numbers, and-

“You do realize that a filibuster is for when you're trying to stop the other side from voting, right?”

Metzinger grinned; Mr. Harrison may or may not have known that his name was on one of the sheets of paper but either way he had the attention of the council now.

“I've been the one pushing that time is of the essence since the moment I walked in. If anybody else wants to move on, I am certainly on board. I'd like to call for a vote on the issue of a Ballot Action To Determine The Public Position On Monsters.”

There was some grumbling from the rest of the council, but nobody raised further objections. The Council Arbitrator, more colloquially known as the Grand Poobah, struck her gavel once.

“All in favor of a Proposal for a Ballot Action?”

Hands came up, and Metzinger managed to suppress a smug, gloating expression aimed at Mr. Harrison. Dragging the tax and property appraisal issue out in front of the council had been taking off the kid gloves. There was no reason to make it personal.

At least, not yet.

“All opposed?”

Two hands raised. A clear minority.

“Very well. Let the record show that the Council Vote was 13-2, in favor of the proposed Ballot Action.” The Grand Poobah raised her gavel and struck the ceremonial bell on the desk. “Moving on to item three on the agenda, the petition for the repeal of noise ordinances along Tesseract Road...”

“not happening, kid.”

Frisk stared at the skeleton, standing in front of the computer console. Behind Sans, Alphys fidgeted with her claws, not really wanting to be involved.

“...why not?”

“Pretty sure Toriel would be very upset with me if she knew I let you watch a video recording of somebody dying. Never mind six somebodies. And she knew all of them, so that just makes things worse.”

The child nodded and turned away.

“I guess I can't argue with that. I don't really need to see it. But other humans will eventually. Right now all the questions are about monsters in general, especially magic. Sooner or later people are going to ask why monsters showed up now, and why... why Asriel Dreemurr showed up with... with the body of a human child.” Frisk ran a hand over their face and sighed. “That means they need to know what happened with the first human, and all the other humans, and how that ties into the Barrier and the war.”

“yeah, not looking forward to that. probably be better for us if we made something up-”

“If we lie about any part of it, sooner or later somebody will find a contradiction in what we're saying and that's just going to dig us deeper. So whatever we tell everybody has to be the truth. Six other
dead humans is not something we can just forget to bring up, and it's going to come up at some point, so we need to get ready for when it does. We can't bring it up right now because we need the people to vote in favor of monsters when that election thing happens.”

“Actually I, uh. I was. Heh. I k-kinda thought that was going to come up when T-T-T... when the queen was speaking yesterday. In the park area.”

“Right. Our luck's not going to hold out forever. When the question does come up, we need answers ready and waiting.” Frisk sighed. “Just... tell me one thing. Did Asgore actually kill any of the humans himself?”

“N o .”

Frisk didn't have to look at Sans to tell that he was doing his creepy no-lights-in-the-eye-sockets expression.

“Alright. Good. When you figure out who did... we'll need to talk to them. I can understand why things turned out the way they did but I can also see a lot of humans not, and even if they don't blame monsters as a whole they might want to go after the individual monsters who-”

“Won't be necessary. I already know that nobody killed them.”

Frisk turned to look at Sans with a confused expression, and saw him shrug.

“Told ya, Frisk. Toriel asked me to watch over any human that came out of the Ruins. The Underground's a dangerous place when you're not made of magic. Temperature extremes, fast flowing rivers, old puzzles, new machines... and so on. You have no idea how lucky you are... if luck is what it was.”

The skeleton and the human child stared at each other for a few moments.

“...guess that makes sense. Alphys?”

“Y-yes?”

“Make sure you do get the final moments of each human, if they were on camera. Also stuff leading up to that. Any fights that ended with the humans or the monsters running away, especially. There's no real way to get around the war but maybe we can, I don't know, make it look like a cultural thing as much as Asgore's anger, with the whole magic bullet exchange thing. And get as many different examples as you can find of social interaction between monsters and the fallen humans. Random conversations, buying food, things like...”

Frisk trailed off, and then their eyes went wide.

“Alphys, you think you've got this handled by yourself?”

“Sure, as long as the video t-t-toaster doesn't break down on me again. I should be done with more than enough t-time to meet Undyne in Waterfall later.”

“Okay. You do that. And while that's happening, Sans and I need to go talk to some people.”

“we do?”

“Penny for your thoughts?”
“Hmmm??” Asgore looked around with a start, but relaxed when he saw Officer Steve standing by with a paper cup in one hand. “Oh. Hello Officer Steve. I suppose I was caught up in reminiscing. It has been a long road, getting to here and now.”

“I'll take your word for it.” Officer Steve sat down next to the king and started blowing on his coffee to cool it down. “You know, this puts a lot of the legends about Mt. Ebott in perspective.”

“...oh?”

“Yeah. It's said that people who climb the mountain never return. I guess if you guys couldn't leave... nobody else could. And those legends have been around since, well, forever.”

Officer Steve watched as the King's expression grew somber, and seemed to be seeing some place and time far away.

“I mean, I'm not accusing you guys of anything. But, if you did happen to know of a hunter or an explorer that happened vanish on Mt. Ebott, and you could fill people in on what happened, I think that might go a long way towards the whole bridge building thing you're working on-”

“Their name was Chara.”

Officer Steve stared at the king for a few moments, watching as the giant monster leaned over, rested his elbows on the table, clasped his paws together, and let his chin rest on them. The monarch's eyes were still a long ways away.

“They fell down from the Surface... they said they did not really believe the legends, and that was why they came to the mountain. My... my son found them. We could not... with the Barrier in place, no one could leave. Not monsters, and not humans. They were... Asriel and Chara were inseparable before long. Games, lessons, exploring the Underground. It was... that. A monster and a human, side by side, that gave everyone hope for the future. A future of not merely freedom, but coexistence.”

The police officer stared at the king, who had retreated into his own thoughts, and carefully put the cup of coffee on the table before pulling out a chair and sitting down next to the king.

“...Chara, you said their name was?”

“...yes. They and Asriel were like siblings... until Chara became ill. My... we tried to heal them. We could heal the damage, but we could not stop it from returning. They... Chara lingered for... some time. Before they succumbed. Asriel was...”

The king seemed to come back to himself, turning to the policeman; tears had trailed down into his beard.

“You are an officer of the law, you said. Your responsibilities therefore cover both the protection of the innocent and the punishment of the guilty?”

“...I prefer the former to the latter but it is my job to bring in anyone who may have broken the law so they can be tried by a jury of their peers.” Officer Steve swallowed and tried to lick his lips without looking like he was licking his lips. Everything felt very dry all of a sudden. “Why do you ask?”

“...in the Underground, as King... my authority was absolute. And as such, so was my responsibility. I may need to speak to you about certain matters, very soon.”

Steve stared at the King. As an officer sworn to uphold the law, presented with the implications of
possible wrongdoing, every instinct compelled him to keep the king talking. On the other hand, the king was about seven and a half feet tall with massive horns and enough muscles to crush a modern car like a beer can, and that was without the issue of magic that the queen had demonstrated, but which seemed to be something monsters did as naturally as breathing.

Clearly this situation called for a certain amount of tact and subtlety.

“All right, then. Let me know when... uh. Whatever it is. Needs to be taken care of.” Officer Steve pushed back his chair and stood up, planning to give the king his space... and happened to look right at the queen, standing by the threshold of the room.

Horns, red eyes, long floppy ears, protruding muzzle, or fur notwithstanding, Steve had been to enough domestic disturbances to recognize the look on the queen's face.

“Officer Steve... may I speak to you? Privately?”

That tone of voice was pretty familiar too.

“AN EXCELLENT QUESTION! THE SKY IS DEFINED PRIMARILY BY THIS LARGE GLOWING BALL CALLED THE SUN! IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO NOT LOOK DIRECTLY AT IT WITHOUT SPECIAL GLASSES OR GOGGLES FOR SOME REASON! THIS SUN DEFINES THE PASSAGE OF TIME, WITH ITS PRESENCE IN THE SKY DEFINED AS DAY AND ITS ABSENCE AS NIGHT, AND WITHOUT THE OVERWHELMING BRIGHTNESS OF THE SUN AT NIGHT THE REAL STARS CAN BE SEEN!”

The crowd of furry monsters, slimes, ice elementals and other monsters made noises of awe and excitement, and one monster in particular spoke up.

“Yo, do the stars really look different from the Waterfall stones?”

“INDEED THEY DO! THE ACTION OF THE ATMOSPHERE UPON STARLIGHT PRODUCES SOME OF THE SAME REFRACTION EFFECTS, BUT THE NUMBER AND SCALE AND COMPLEXITY OF PATTERNS IS DRAMATICALLY LARGER!”

“And is it true they move around?!”

“WHILE THEY DO APPEAR TO MOVE, THIS IS A FUNCTION OF THE ROTATION OF THE EARTH ITSELF ON THE SURFACE, SO THEY ALL APPEAR TO MOVE IN TANDEM. IT WOULD BE LIKE THE ENTIRE ROOF OF THE WATERFALL CAVERNS WAS MOVING ON MASSIVE ROLLER BEARINGS, BUT SILENTLY! OTHER ASTRONOMICAL OBJECTS DO MOVE RELATIVE TO THE STARS, FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS, BUT THEY ARE CATEGORIZED AS PLANETS, COMETS, METEORS, SATELLITES, AND OTHER NAMES ACCORDING TO THEIR ORIGIN AND PATTERN OF MOVEMENT! INDEED, THE SKY ITSELF IS SO EXCEEDINGLY COMPLEX THAT EVEN WITH THOUSANDS OF YEARS TO STUDY IT IN DETAIL, HUMANS ARE STILL FINDING NEW STARS!”

“Well, Papyrus is having fun.”

Sans chuckled in response to Frisk's grasp of the obvious as they walked towards a blue furred monster with two elongated ears leaning next to a cart. The monster's eyes moved to one side as he noticed the movement, and then turned to face the two figures in surprise.
“Hey, Sans! How's it going? Managed to find any buyers for that Fried Snow yet?”

“naw, thinking of selling the franchise once we get settled in on the surface.”

“Which is partly why we'd like to speak to you,” Frisk interrupted. “There are plans in motion up there that I think you could help with.”

“What??” The Nice Cream vendor blinked, then grinned and shook his head. “I think you got the wrong guy, Frisk. I just sell ice cream with jokes printed on the wrapper.”

“And that is why we need your help.”

“kid's got an interesting plan, you should at least hear em out instead of giving them the cold shoulder.”

The monster rolled his eyes. “Ugh. Fine. On one condition, you don't make any more puns around me for the rest of today and all of tomorrow.”

“you drive a hard bargain, but okay.”

The queen held her paws together for a moment, brow furrowed in concentration, before lowering them and turning to Officer Steve... who had made it a point not to wander too far from the hotel room door.

“Officer Steve... from what I overheard, it sounded like... Asgore was telling you about Chara and Asriel.”

“...yes. He mentioned that Chara was a human that fell into the underground cavern beneath the mountains, and that they became very ill and passed away.”

“...that is true. There is more to it... Chara said that they came from this... village, this town, although they did not ever use its name. As their... illness... progressed. They spoke often of seeing the Golden Flowers again.”

“...Your Majesty. A few years ago, there was a child who went missing by the name of Chara Cater. And...” Officer Steve sighed. “Some time after that, they reappeared. Rumor has it that they were killed by a giant monster with massive claws, horns, and glowing eyes.”

The queen stared at the police officer.

“Officer Steve, what I am about to tell you must be in the strictest confidence, at least for the immediate future, for it played a pivotal role in the start of the war that ended with monsters imprisoned beneath the mountain.”

Steve swallowed, but managed to nod. “Okay. I understand.”

“Are you familiar with the concept of the Soul?”

“...well... I'm not a theologian, or a priest, or a preacher or anything like that. But I make it to church every Sunday as often as I can. Try to be a nice person, or at least, avoid being a bad person.”

“...I see. You are speaking of the religious connotations of the Soul. What I speak of is something different. The Souls of monsters and humans are very real, with measurable and distinct effects upon the world and upon each other. In monsters, the Soul is considered to be the culmination of being,
inextricably linked to both our bodies and our magic. Human Souls... are different, in several ways. Monster Souls dissipate immediately upon death, or after a few seconds at most, depending on various circumstances. Human Souls, on the other hand, linger in the world. It takes time for them to fade from this world and move on to the next.”

The queen paused, and Officer Steve noticed with a start that at some point, she had transitioned from an angry voice and body language into the posture and tone of a school teacher.

“I'm with you so far.”

“Good. For reasons that nobody understands or remembers, the Barrier that imprisoned our kind in the Underground was impassible except for beings with strong souls. Neither a monster Soul, nor a human Soul could pass through. It took a human Soul combined with a monster Soul. With no humans in the Underground, we had... dedicated considerable time and effort to finding a way to destroy or bypass the Barrier that did not depend on human Souls. But we had not made sufficient progress by the time that Chara became ill...”

“...wait. What do you mean by a human Soul combined with a monster Soul?”

“Asriel... was overcome with grief when Chara died. He absorbed Chara's Soul, and became a creature not unlike what you describe. He carried Chara's body through the Barrier, to fulfill their last wish... and you no doubt are aware of what happened next.”

Toriel stared at the window, her face hard and angry.

“I saw the cell phone video of... Asriel showing up. It was shaky and out of focus but I know that he grabbed Chara's body and ran.”

“...he brought Chara's body back to the Underground, and... he died. For all his power... he was still killed by the humans that attacked... Officer Steve, do you have children?”

“...not my own. But a friend of mine did. And... the Sages attacked him, not too long ago. His children... we don't.” Officer Steve stopped speaking abruptly, and cleared his throat. “Byron and I were pretty close. He always joked about me being Sam and Andrew's honorary uncle. Apparently I was the most responsible in our circle of friends.”

“...Sam and Andrew, you said their names were?”

“Yeah.”

“And they were... children of your friend. Who was attacked.”

“...that's right. He didn't make it.”

“...so... you can understand. What it is like. To have someone torn away from you.” Toriel covered her mouth with her paws for a moment, then lowered them again. “I am sorry for your loss, Officer Steven Ward.”

“...As I am sorry for yours, Queen Dreemurr.” Officer Steve sighed. “Based on what you told me. It's clear that a lot of ground needs to be covered in the future. A lot of questions need answers. But right now is not the time.”

“But soon, I hope.” The queen breathed in deeply, and let her breath out slowly. “Thank you for your time and confidence, Officer Steve.”
“All in a day's work, ma'am.”

“Looks like our biggest bottlenecks besides the broken catwalks are the darkening rooms and the ferries.” Alphys stared at some old faded blueprints that had been covered in more recent additions and notes before finally being covered haphazardly in her own writing. “The transition between each part of the cavern is connected by the river at least, but there's only so much we can do with that.”

“Like, you get to go out on the surface and you immediately come back down here to mess with the Underground? Way to keep your priorities straight.”

“Oh, let her off the hook Catty. She's gonna get us all out of this dump. At least, when she's done staring at Captain Undyne!”

Alphys looked up from the blueprints with a start, scales turning red. “What?!”

“Oh come on, Alphys! We both saw the way you were staring at her!”

“Yeah! Like, spill the beans already! Have you smooched her yet?”

Catty rubbed her paws together and smiled evilly. “Have you done more than smooching yet?”

Before Alphys could form a coherent response of any sort, Undyne appeared holding a pot in one arm, a shovel resting on her other shoulder. Towering above her in the pot, a shape not unlike a mushroom seemed to be... dancing, for lack of a better term. Sweat glistened on her scales and soaked through her tank top, and Alphys could see the defining shapes of the Captain's muscles in extreme detail.

“Okay, that was a chore and a half. Alphys, how's it going here?”

“G-g-g-good! G-got a lot of b-b-b-b... choke points figured out, and going to g-get some guys from the CORE here to work on construction to get p-past them!”

“Awesome! I'm going to go drop this guy off with 03 and 04 for the time being, and then Muffet asked me to head to the Ruins to round up all the spiders there so we don't forget anyone. So...”

Undyne carefully balanced the shovel on her shoulders as she dug around in her pocket and tossed a shining metal object towards Alphys. “Here's the hotel room key in case you have to head back before I'm done. Don't want a repeat of last time.”

Undyne disappeared in moments, and Alphys followed the Captain's backside with her eyes until she was out of sight... only to turn to see the smug, excited faces of Bratty and Catty.

“Catty, did Undyne say hotel room just now?”

“Like, it sounded like it to me!”

Alphys groaned and buried her red face in the blueprints as her friends started laughing in excitement.

The figures gathered around the table, in the dark room, peering at the papers and the crude map in the center.

“Yeah, there's like, a fish monster with an eye patch, some sort of dinosaur in a lab coat, two giant
“goats, and two skeletons.”

“So... like a Dungeons and Dragons adventuring party where the Game Master just gives no fucks.”

“Yeah. Gotta wonder what else is down there under the mountain. Vampires? Gelatinous cubes? Wights?”

“You know, last time I checked my library, I didn't see any artwork with a skeleton wearing a fur lined jacket. Or slippers. Or... whatever the heck the tall one is wearing.” One figure turned his phone around to show the rest of the group a picture of a tall skeleton wearing some sort of costume. “What the hell is that around its neck? A cape? A scarf? I can't tell.”

“Turn off your phone, asshole. You just torched my night vision. Now it's going to take twenty minutes for that to come back.”

“Look it is not my fault Greg subscribes to the Mazes and Monsters ideals of mood lighting.”

“It's not mood lighting. I told you, the fixture burned out and my landlady is dragging her feet on calling an electrician.”

“You know light bulbs aren’t that-”

“The fixture, not the bulbs. If it was the bulbs this would have been fixed four days ago. Can we just move on? Is Thomas going to be here today?”

“You know he said to start without him, he had some papers to file or something, I didn't really catch all of it.”

“Okay then.” Greg cleared his throat. “You assemble the party, or most of it, outside the inn. Ferover the Chronomancer is, ironically, oversleeping, so you have some time on your hands. Before anyone can think to go back in to get him, a warrior in dark polished armor rides up to the inn on a mighty war horse-”

“I roll to seduce the gazebo.”

“...that was three sessions ago Derrick.”

“Love will find a way.”

“No it won't. The warrior brings the horse to a stop outside the inn....”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, everybody! Fingers crossed that 2018 breaks the streak and good things happen all around!
The child glanced over the list, pulled out a pencil, and made some notes before folding the sheet of paper up again and walking over to the table in the hotel lobby. Nine sets of dishes and utensils had been set out on the table, though Toriel had not produced any fire yet; the queen looked up from the chopping board where she was preparing ingredients and smiled.

"Ah, hello Frisk! Dinner will be ready before too long. How was your excursion with Sans earlier?"

"Probably successful. At least, we've done everything we could on our end. Do you know where Officer Steve is right now?"

"Alas, I do not. He said something about filing some paperwork before it got out of hand but he said he would return before too long."

"Okay. In the meantime, would you mind looking over this checklist I wrote up earlier?" Frisk handed the sheet of paper to Toriel and the boss monster unfolded it carefully, and the queen's eyes
immediately narrowed.

“Uh. If that isn’t possible to read, I can do it again with larger block letters.”

“It is fine, Frisk. I simply left my reading glasses in the Ruins. I suppose it is fortunate that Dr. Alphys added an option for magnifying text on my cell phone.”

“I think some cell phones have that as a standard option, but I don’t know for sure.” Frisk pulled out their own cell phone and began navigating menus. “Here it is on mine but that could be Alphys planning ahead.”

“Perhaps.” Toriel returned the sheet of paper to Frisk. “That seems to cover all of the preliminary concerns. There are... other issues which concern me, but we cannot begin to resolve them until at least half of what you have listed there is taken care of first.”

“...right. Uhm. I don't know for sure if I'm getting ahead of myself, but... no, thinking about it some more, I'm definitely getting ahead of myself. It can wait till later tonight, or at least tomorrow.”

The queen stared at the human child for a few moments.

“Alright, then. In the meantime, we still have a while before everyone returns for dinner. Do you have any other ambassador work you need to work on?”

“No, the only things I can do right now I need Officer Steve's feedback to know if they will work out.”

“Excellent.” Toriel smiled. “In that case, would you like to help me prepare dinner?”

“...yeah. Yeah, I think I would like that. Uhm. What do you need me to do?”

“Here, I will demonstrate.”

Officer Steve stepped out of the police cruiser and automatically turned to look at the dented VW bug that had followed him in to the hotel room parking lot. It wasn't until he got a good look at the driver that he relaxed and resumed his walk up to the lobby doors.

“Ah, hello Officer Steve! You are just in time to join us all for dinner. Please, take a seat if you like.”

“Think I will, thank you Your Majesty.” Officer Steve took off his hat and made his way over to one of the empty chairs. Several of them were already occupied by monsters, specifically Undyne and the king, while Frisk was still standing next to Toriel where she was preparing food. “Been getting by on coffee all day so actual food sounds like a great idea.”

“Oh, speaking of which.” Frisk carefully put down the spoon they had been using to mix ingredients, stepped away from Toriel's improvised magical kitchen, and walked over to where the policeman had taken a seat. “I was wondering what is legally involved in Ebott's Wake to have an event focused on food.”

“...when you say focused on, do you mean...?”

“Like, the chili cook off, the Jam Jamboree, things like that.”

“Oh... well, those are as much traditional as anything else. I mean modern food safety regulations are important, but that's as far as it goes.”
“Alright. Makes sense. But what if we wanted to do something like that which was not traditional? Like, something brand new?”

“Well... legally if it's for economic gain you would need to file for a permit from the city. If it was a volunteer thing for charity, that's a different permit entirely. In both cases you'd have to reach an agreement with whoever owns the venue that you want to use, like, the Arts Council for the Memorial Auditorium.”

“What about the park? Who do we see about that?”

“Ordinarilry that would also fall under the authority of city administration, but it's a moot point since the park is still reserved for the celebrations for the Guardians being defeated and will be until the end of the week.”

“Oh. Wait, what kind of celebrations are involved?”

“Lot of Halloween themed stuff. Games for young kids, art and history programs for adults. Couple of speeches are planned. Oh, and Friday night there's some fireworks planned.”

“That sounds cool. So... is everything completely reserved?”

Officer Steve shook his head. “We're definitely reaching the outer limits of what I know, kiddo. I'd have a better chance of giving you a useful answer if I knew what you had planned.”

“Oh. Guess that makes sense.” Frisk breathed in slowly and let it out slowly. “Whether or not the special election that Mr. Metzinger was talking about happens, I think we need to make it easier for humanity as a whole to see part of monster culture. And the easiest way to do that would be to let them try monster food.”

Officer Steve opened his mouth, then closed it for a few seconds, then opened it again.

“You know... thinking about it, that's a really good idea. Tell you what. Tomorrow morning I'll roll by city admin and figure out what's needed for food vendors during this week's celebrations and let you guys-”

“Look out, coming through!”

Officer Steve turned at the sound of Quentin Forsythe's voice, only to see a large box surrounded by a blue light and hovering in mid-air as it was pushed through the lobby doors. The policeman immediately rose to his feet out of reflex, but none of the monsters appeared alarmed, and, he belatedly realized, neither were Forsythe or Frisk.

“Okay... that kind of caught me by surprise.”

“You got surprised by a fridge???” Forsythe closed the door behind Papyrus, who was holding out one gloved hand in front of him that was covered in a blue glow of its own.

“No, I was surprised by the whole levitation thing. I can't believe that's actually a sentence that I had to say.”

“Huh. You know when Papyrus offered to help me out, I can't say I expected this specifically, but for some reason I wasn't that surprised. Oh, should probably explain. I ran by Wal-Mart and grabbed this mini fridge to set up in one of the rooms so you guys wouldn't need to keep stuff in the central office or at the front desk. Seemed like a good idea and also it was on sale. There was something else... oh, right. I need to sign in. Excuse me.” The desk clerk headed over to the office, followed by
the on-duty desk clerk that had taken over for the morning shift. The glowing box floated gently to the ground, and Papyrus walked over to the table and took a seat opposite Undyne.

“I AM HAPPY TO REPORT THAT ALL OF OUR WORK IN THE UNDERGROUND WAS AN UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS!”

“What kind of work is that?”

Undyne turned to the policeman, who still hadn’t returned to his seat. “Transportation bottlenecks, at least for the most part. Also getting a running tally of all monsters with limited mobility or environmental tolerances, so they don’t get left behind. I was mostly doing the second one, Alphys was working on the first.”

“Ah, speaking of which, where is Dr. Alphys?” Toriel asked, placing a skillet over a fireball she had willed into existence. “Would she not have returned with you, Papyrus?”

“OH, THE BRILLIANT DR. ALPHYS HAS BEEN WAYLAID BY MY BROTHER, WHO IS NO DOUBT TORMENTING HER WITH SCIENCE BASED PUNS OUTSIDE THESE VERY WALLS AS WE SPEAK! THOUGH PERHAPS BEING A SCIENTIST SHE WILL BE MORE INCLINED TO APPRECIATE THEM.”

“I see.” Toriel smiled, revealing the tips of her fangs. “Well, with any luck, Sans can conclude his puns in time for them both to join us for—”

Toriel stopped speaking as a woman rushed through the lobby with a furtive glance towards the boss monsters and vanished through the lobby doors. Almost immediately, there was a surprised noise of alarm, and a few seconds later, Sans walked in followed by Alphys.

“what's their problem, it's almost like they never saw a skeleton talking about quantum uncertainty before.”

“SANS YOU KNOW VERY WELL THAT THIS IS LITERALLY THE SITUATION WE ARE WORKING WITH!”


“welp. somebody has to keep him out of trouble. later.”

“Man, do I have to do EVERYTHING?! Papyrus, wait up!”

“H-hey, wait for me!”

One by one, monsters ran down the mountain trail (or backtracked into the cave in Sans’ case) until only the Royal Family and the newly appointed Ambassador remained. Frisk sighed.

“Didn't see that coming.”

There was a high pitched laugh, and Frisk felt themselves smile without thinking about it.

“Oh dear. Maybe I should stop them before things get out of hand,” Asgore's voice rumbled, and the king began to walk towards the mountain trail. Frisk saw Toriel's gaze follow the king, and cleared their throat.
“Uh, your Majesties. Asgore. And... and Toriel. Just a moment.”

“Hmmm? I am sorry, what did you need, Frisk?” Toriel peered down at the child with a quizzical expression on her face.

“Uhm. What Asgore did. It wasn't good. We all know that. We all agree. But... he does regret it. But if that hadn't happened...”

Frisk looked at where a small boss monster was standing next to Toriel, a small paw engulfed in the queen's massive one, clinging to her robes out of a combination of nerves and emotion.

“I'm not saying that, you know. Everything's okay. Or the ends justify the means, or anything like that, but I am saying. I am saying that... that you can't regret bad choices all your life. Your choices, or those made by others. That's all.”

Toriel stared at Frisk for some time, and the human child looked down at the ground, unable to match the queen's gaze.

“...I suppose. In the end. There is much wisdom in what you have said. And I would be a fool to ignore that, after what...” the queen's voice faltered for a moment, “after what you have done for us today.”

“While I appreciate what you are saying, Frisk, you need not defend me,” Asgore responded. “I have made mistakes. I will live with them, and the consequences of them.”

“That's another thing. The other humans... we will need to find their families and explain what happened, and probably make reparations. But we can't do that right away or any chance of living in peace ends before it starts.”

The king and queen both nodded.

“That is a reasonable precaution,” Toriel replied. “There is also much more that must be done.”

“Yeah.” Frisk stopped talking for a moment, and swallowed. “I have some ideas, but I need to stop at the Library in town first. Check some books, and look up some information on the internet. Those kinds of things. I'll... I'll find a way to contact everyone when I've found what I need.”

“That sounds fine,” came the reply from the king... and the silence that followed was thick with unspoken thoughts.

“Frisk... you came from this world. The village at the base of the mountain, correct?”

“Yes. I did.”

“...that means that you have some place to return to, do you not?”

Frisk nodded, not meeting Toriel's eyes.

“Yeah... I have... places to go. Things I need to do.”

“...I see. Still. At least let us walk you back home, to explain what has happened. I imagine that there will be many questions, and we can help answer them.”

Frisk stared at the town, trying to keep their face neutral and impassive... when something warm brushed their hand.
“Frisk... you could always stay with us. If you wanted. If you need to. It's the least we can do, after...”

Frisk squeezed their eyes shut, but they couldn't stop the tears that had already started running down their face at Asriel's invitation. There was an impression of movement, and Frisk felt something soft rest on their head... a massive paw.

“Asriel makes a valid point. Even if you have places that you must go... you will always be welcome with us.”

Asriel's fingers wrapped around Frisk's hand, and the child opened their eyes and looked at the young boss monster.

“No matter what you decide to do, we're all going to be there for you.”

“...thanks.” Frisk turned to Toriel. “Uhm. If it isn't. If it isn't too much trouble. Is it okay if I stay with you? Just for tonight?”

Toriel smiled.

“Of course, Frisk. You may stay with us, and we will care for you, for as long as you need.”

“...thank you.” Frisk's voice was soft and hoarse. Asriel's paw squeezed the child's hand, and Asgore's paw appeared to grasp their other hand.

“Come along, now!” Toriel said with a smile, pulling on Asriel's other paw. “Everyone is waiting for us!”

The four figures, two very large, and two small, walked down the mountain slope together....

Frisk's eyes opened.

Darkness, defined by the edges of shapes that caught the dim sources of light from appliances charging or in standby, and the starlight outside the window. A hotel room.

The sound of breathing. Toriel, in the other bed.


Not Asriel.

He was still down in the Underground.

Frisk squeezed their eyes shut. In their mind's eye, they went over the dream over and over again. There had to be a hint, a clue, a way to do it right the next time around. Something they had missed. Some object they needed. Some person they had to talk to.

But there was nothing.

Asriel was trapped Underground, and there was nothing they could do.

The child's eyes squeezed even tighter against the burning that threatened to spill out into the world, and their teeth ground together to keep from making a sound, and their lungs burned with the effort of staying quiet because if they cried, if they even made a single sound they would wake up Toriel
and she would want to know what was wrong and she would keep digging until she found out...

'and when she discovers that instead of her own child, her own son, she had to settle for some random IDIOT that jumped down a hole she's going to snap your neck and why shouldn't she you stole his life you stole his place he should be sleeping in this bed not you he should be sitting at the table when she makes breakfast not you he should be the one she tucks into bed at night NOT YOU all you've done is browse the library and talk to police and lawyers and politicians anybody can do that you're not special you're not worth the trouble you're not worth the air you breathe you SELFISH BRAT"

A sob managed to make it out before Frisk could stop it, and the child's whole body flinched in anticipation of the consequences of waking up Toriel-

“...Frisk?”

There was the sound of rustling sheets and creaking bed springs, and light beyond Frisk's eyelids as a lamp was switched on. “Frisk, are you-”

Frisk curled up into a shaking ball; fear was now running wild in their brain, in the space that hadn't already been filled with accusations of wrongdoing and failure and worthlessness, and it was all too easy to imagine another fight. Toriel had been holding back in the Ruins. There would be no reason for her to hold back now. Frisk would burn and Frisk would die and there was no reason to think that they would get it right the third time. Everyone would be trapped and Asgore would still need one more Soul and-

Frisk cried out in fear as they felt Toriel touch them, but there was no pain. No neck snapping, no claws rending flesh, no fire causing their skin to char and blood to boil. The queen rubbed the child's back gently.

"It is alright, my child. You had a nightmare. That is all. I am here. You are safe, I promise.”

Frisk's composure crumbled under the onslaught of grief and guilt, and one sob became two, two became three... until the child was crying not merely with their eyes, or their voice, but their entire being. Toriel carefully picked up the child, wrapped her arms around them, and began to rock in place with the practiced experience of a mother, which just made Frisk cry harder as they buried their face in the queen's robe to muffle the sound.

"it's not alright it's not alright I can't fix it I can't fix it everything is broken and I can't fix it I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm so sorry but this keeps happening everything is broken everything is ruined and it's my fault I should have done things different I don't know what I'm doing I can't fix anything I can't help anyone it's all my fault"

Oblivious to the storm of thoughts in the child's mind, Toriel continued to try to comfort them, saying soothing words... until at last, Frisk cried themselves out, and mercifully drifted into a dreamless sleep.

Shaking hands counted, again and again. One by one. Tiny stars moved from one side of the bed to the other. Six and one. Five and two. Four and three. And then back again. Seven tiny stars, bursting with potential.

Had they had that number the previous day?

Had they had that number going down the mountain?
Memory would not cooperate, going on random tangents that had nothing to do with the subject at hand.

In the end, Frisk returned the stars to their pockets and took a deep breath, and walked towards the hotel room door. As it had been the previous morning, the lobby was filled with a mix of monsters and humans having breakfast. Toriel's height made it difficult to see what was cooking in the pan, but the smell indicated pancakes or something similar, and Frisk started walking towards the one empty chair around the large table while trying to focus on what everyone was talking about.

“I c-called Ice Wolf and asked him to start taking cut branches to the ice fields on the Snowdin Road and cover them so we d-don't have any trip hazards for monsters leaving the Ruins.”

“AND I, FOR THE SAKE OF CONVENIENCE AND EXPEDIENCY, DEACTIVATED ALL OF MY PUZZLES!”

Officer Steve blinked at Papyrus, then turned to Frisk as the child took their seat at the table. After a few moments, Frisk realized that as the Ambassador, it fell to them to clear up cultural confusion.

“Oh. Right. Monsters used puzzles as a delaying tactic in case any humans showed up after the war, and eventually it became traditional. Buttons, levers, spikes, steam vents, mazes, sliding blocks, hidden switches, stuff like that.” Frisk shrugged. “It was fun.”

“DON’T FORGET THE MULTI-COLORED TILE MAZE!”

“Yeah, that one wasn’t as fun.”

“AH, OF COURSE HAVING A STRAIGHT LINE OF PINK TILES TO WALK UPON FROM ONE SIDE TO ANOTHER PRESENTED NO CHALLENGE WHATSOEVER TO A PUZZLE ENTHUSIAST LIKE YOURSELF! AN UNFORTUNATE SIDE EFFECT TO THE PUZZLE GENERATION PROCESS BEING COMPLETELY RANDOM.”

“There was that.” Frisk rubbed their eyes. “Officer Steve, do you have that paperwork for food vendors to set up shop during the park?”

“Not yet, that particular office doesn't open for another thirty five minutes. Soon as it is, I'll swing by, get the printouts, and bring them to you. Oh, and not sure if you heard and can't remember if it came up last night but the City Council voted to approve a special ballot measure. No idea when it will happen though. Typically these things take a while to set up because they have to call up volunteers to work the polls, train them to use the machinery like the poll book and the voting machines and how to handle physical ballots and so on and so forth, and they also have to make sure that enough volunteers are available to work the day they decide on. Gotta say though, I'm curious as to what you're going to be having people sell.”

“Well, we talked to a lot of people in the Underground yesterday, but there’s probably more people who will want to give it a try. So far we know for sure that Mettaton will be there, and tentative green lights for Nice Cream, Sp.”

“SPAGHETTI! I COULD MAKE A PASTA PRESENTATION TO STUN THE SENSES OF ALL THE HUMANS ON THE SURFACE!”

For the first time, Officer Steve saw an emotion that looked like terror, or possibly horror, appear on the young human child's face. Considering that they had spent considerable time in the presence of giant goats, talking skeletons with glowing eyes, and reacted to the existence and use of magic with complete nonchalance, the fact that it was this issue that alarmed them was concerning. Still, it was
reassuring that the child was able to show a wider range of emotions than they had before; Steve rarely saw a poker face that good on somebody so young without it leading back to some sort of trauma.

“Actually, Papyrus, I seem to remember now that I owe you some spaghetti, so why don't we make that a collaboration? We can set up a table and get some pots and I can teach you what I know of the human preparation of pasta? And we could meet in the middle with something that combines elements of both techniques. Sort of like a bridge.”

“a bridge made of limp noodles.”

Frisk turned to the short skeleton. “Yeah, haven't you seen a suspension bridge? Cables hanging down?”

“aha, i getcha now.”

“MY BROTHER'S CONVOLUTED LOGIC NOTWITHSTANDING, THAT IS A SUPERB IDEA! I WOULD BE HONORED TO COMBINE MY PASTA PROWESS WITH YOUR OWN, FRISK!”

“yeah, just think of the-”

“SANS DON'T YOU EVEN-”

“pastabilities,” Sans finished, winking at Officer Steve. There was a giggle from the queen, and a muffled laugh from Frisk, and a long, exasperated groan from Papyrus.

“WHY DO I EVEN BOTHER.”

Hands groped blindly for the source of the noise, and by the time fingers wrapped around the cell phone the brain attached to those hands recognized the sound as a ringtone. The phone was placed roughly near the ear and a mumbled response was produced.

“Eh. Lo?”

The phone continued to ring, and confusion kicked part of the brain into action until it figured out that the call had not been answered yet. A thumb flipped over a button on the screen and the phone returned to its position next to the ear again.

“Ehlo?”

“Hello, Mr. Carrow, this is Brenda at the Clerk’s Office, we have a special election ballot issue coming up and we were wondering if you were available to work the polls again?”

“What? Oh. Right, sure. When is it?”

“The election is currently scheduled for Friday and training is for tomorrow.”

“Wow. Usually you guys call me like, a month or two in advance.”

“We apologize for the short notice but it is a special election issue that just came up.”

“We have the training session to be set at the Memorial Auditorium tomorrow at nine AM until eleven AM.”

“Okay. Right. Got it. I'll be there.”

“Alright, we will put you down for that. Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Justin pulled the phone away from his ear and ended the call, and let his head fall back down on the sofa armrest.

“Well... won't say no to twenty five bucks for just sitting around.”

“Huh? What was that?”

Justin raised his head and reluctantly sat up, turning to look at the figure that had just entered the room carrying a soldering iron and an empty gallon jug of milk. “Mornin Hal. Just got a call from City Admin. Signed up for a special election ballot poll worker job thingy.”

The man standing by the doorway gave the man lying on the couch a confused look. “Waaaait. What do you mean morning?”

“I mean, morning. As in, the sun's up.” Justin's eyes darted towards the time on his phone screen. “It's almost eight thirty.”

“...wow. Time flies when you're boring out a cylinder.”

“Taking your word for it.”
“Gooooood morning, Ebott's Wake! You're listening to The Brink of Dawn on KEBT FM and I am your friendly neighborhood community radio announcer, Brett 'The Brett' Brinkmann. We've got some news and we've got some tunes coming your way, but first a quick thank you to one of our many sponsors, Das Boot Sub Shop. 'Das Boot, Sink Those Hunger Pangs!' And now the news! The citywide festivities following the defeat of the Sages continue; yesterday's performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* by the Ebott's Wake chapter of Shakespeare in the Park was very well received, and if you're still in the mood for entertainment of a theatrical nature, then good news! The Belmoley Players are in town once again, setting up at the Memorial Auditorium for a special showing of *All My Sons* tomorrow and Friday! Some listeners may remember their most recent theatrical production, *BEEEEEES! The Musical* by Lone Point's Lyla Rosewater, so you know you're in for a treat... and Jeff has informed me that Gary is ready to tell us all about today's traffic! Gary, what do your pilot's eyes see?”

“Good morning, Brett! My eyes see a town free from the tyranny of oppressive religious fanaticism, but not from the vagaries of motor vehicle safety hazards! A semi tractor trailer has somehow managed to jackknife itself on Park Lane, and only the efforts of our valiant fire department can free it from its self inflicted prison! Also at least three pickup trucks have been found attempting to do donuts in the ruins of the Bastion Circle compound, and all have been incapacitated from a combination of metal and broken glass perforating their tires! According to Officer Carmichael, all three drivers were well above the safe legal limit for intoxication, which may explain a few things! Remember, drinking and driving are like oil and water, they do not mix and trying to combine them is an extremely dangerous exercise in futility!”

“Can't argue with that even if I wanted to, which I don't. Anything else you can tell us Gary?”

“Well since you asked Brett, I did notice that when flying around Mt. Ebott on the way back from the Quarterhorse Fields Airport that my instruments did not malfunction this time! While I doubt any listeners can apply this information towards saving time in traffic on this fine day, I am inclined to consider it a good omen!”

“Well, we're definitely overdue for a few of those. Thank you Gary, and now it's time for more news. The Ebott's Wake City Council voted yesterday 13-2 in favor of a Special Ballot Initiative for... okay, it says here 'Monster Citizenship Referendum' which, uh, I'm guessing is related to either some of the special events in the park or some legal recourse to keep what happened from happening again. Those are my best guesses. Jeff, do you...? Alright, well, maybe we can call and get some answers during the break. Moving on, the Ebott's Wake Community College is holding a Job Fair at the extension office downtown, so anybody who's looking to change careers or just start one might want to head down to Kelly Plaza today. The Job Fair starts at ten thirty AM and ends at six PM. In less positive news, the Wal-Mart Auto Service Center has been temporarily shut down after last night's grease fire. Representatives have reassured customers that the fire was contained and the rest of the store was unaffected, and they will be re-opening as soon as possible, but declined to provide a time frame for recovery and re-opening. And Jeff has just informed me that we have a few callers waiting on the switchboard so I guess we'll take some calls now. Hello, you're on The Brink of Dawn with Brett Brinkmann!”

“Hello Brett, I'm a first time caller, long time listener, and I wanted to say that I think the special ballot thing *has* to be about the monsters that showed up in the park Monday night.”

“I'm sorry, what was that?”
“The monsters. There was like, a dinosaur and a pair of skeletons and something like a cross between a lion and a goat or something. I heard they’ve been running around town trying to figure out who to talk to so they can see the President.”

“...okay. You said Monday night?”

“Yeah.”

“After everyone was ‘celebrating’ for most of the day.”

“Hey, I only had like, six beers! Eight, tops!”

“Hey, I'm not judging. Can't say I didn't think about it myself, but I had a job to do. Thank you for calling in. Jeff, who's next? ...okay. Hello caller, you're on the air with Brett Brinkmann!”

“Hey Brett, just calling to let you know that other guy? He's not crazy. I saw the monsters with my own eyes and I didn't have anything to drink at all! There were two giant goats, two skeletons, a dinosaur in a lab coat some sort of, I dunno, pirate fish? There was an eye patch involved.”

“...okay then-”

“But what I heard is that they want to buy the land that has Mt. Ebott so they can build a city on it or something like that!”

“Well, that's... interesting? Thank you for calling. Man. Wednesday mornings are always the weirdest. Jeff, does the next... right. Fine. Might as well get it out of the way. We have time for one more caller and then we need to pause for station ID. Hello, you're on the air with Brett Brinkmann!”

“Hello Mr. Brinkmann. My name is... my name is Frisk. I heard the callers just now and I thought I would call in and clarify some points.”

“...kid how old are you?”

“I'll be nine in January.”

“Sounds about right. Do your parents know you're on the phone right now?”

“It was my mom's idea.”

“...really??”

“I'd just like to clarify for everyone confused about the monsters, all they want is recognition under the law and to have the same opportunities that humans do on the surface. Find a job, find a place to live, enjoy the sunrise and sunset and everything that we take for granted. Also you mentioned the festivities in the park, we will be setting up vendor stalls there later today. I think that's it. Thank you for your time.”

“Uh. You're welcome? I think? Still not sure what just happened but it's time for station ID, and when we get back I'll have some music waiting for you, so keep it tuned to KEBT FM!”
The Underground's Brightest Star

9:49 AM SockPuppet90: ey frisk

9:49 AM: who is this

9:49 AM SockPuppet90: sans

9:49 AM: oh

9:50 AM SockPuppet90: alphys gave me your undernet contact data last night so we dont have to play cell phone tag again

9:50 AM: ok yeh thats a good idea

9:50 AM SockPuppet90: o btw

9:50 AM SockPuppet90: know u been busy in the underground and u r busy now

9:50 AM SockPuppet90: but if u get a chance

9:51 AM SockPuppet90: mite wanna change your profile stuff

9:51 AM SockPuppet90: cuz right now it just says HUMAN and that might cut it in the underground

9:51 AM SockPuppet90: but now u gotta narrow it down a bit

9:51 AM: ok

9:51 AM: print outs are lmost done can u meet me at librarby

9:51 AM SockPuppet90: gimme a sec

9:52 AM SockPuppet90: literally

Frisk put their phone in their pocket as the printer finally spit out the last sheet, grabbed the stack of papers and almost started running for the door.

“Thank you for your help, Mr. Van Garrett. I promise I'll be by to pay for the printouts as soon as possible.”

The librarian shrugged. “Don't sweat it. The Librarby can afford to eat the cost of basic office supplies every now and then, especially for a good cause.”

“Well... uhm. Thank you again. Are you going to stop by the park later today?”

“It depends on the traffic we get. Not absolutely certain, but not ruling it out.”

“Okay. Thank you again!” Frisk ran outside where a skeleton was waiting.
“hey kiddo. you got it all figured out?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I think these will help.” Frisk held up the papers so Sans could see the pictures on them, an arrangement of intricate green shapes and diagrams with labels. “There’s not a lot we can do if somebody tries to spend counterfeit money at monster food stands, but I think this will help people spot the obvious fakes.”

“if you say so.”

Sans started walking down the steps and Frisk followed.

“so how long did it take you to put that together?”

“A while. The whole counterfeit money thing is why there are rules against having accurate pictures of real money, and Google Image Search can only take you so far. How about things on your end? Did anyone else agree?”

“yeah, which is good because a couple of folks had second thoughts about being around crowds of humans all day.”

Frisk frowned.

“I guess that's just built into the problem. I can't blame anyone for being nervous. But I am glad we got more volunteers. A bridge has to be built from both ends.”

The pair walked in silence for a bit, and then Sans chuckled.

“that is very true.”


Frisk stared at the cat monster's rictus-like grin and glassy eyes.

“Uh... I just wanted to give you this.”

“Oh... hey little buddy. Sorry I didn't recognize you, Mettaton had me up all night packing stuff for today's events, so I'm spacing out a little bit.” The sheet of paper was taken from the child's outstretched hand. “What's this?”

“It's a quick chart of the denominations of human money in this country. We don't use gold for currency up here so I'm handing these out to everybody.”

“Oh thank god. I was wondering about that but when I brought it up Mettaton just told me to get more boxes of burgers. At least somebody's thinking about stuff like that.”

Frisk shrugged. “Doing my best. One thing I can't help with is figuring out how to price this stuff in US Dollars. I'm not sure how much the ingredients cost and I have no idea how the monster cooking processes differ economically from human cooking so I don't know how to factor time, energy and labor into the equation either.”

“Huh. What about just pricing stuff the same as the closest human thing?”

“Uh, the only human food that dissolves into pure energy when you eat it is cotton candy, so it's not
a totally accurate comparison. But I guess that's better than nothing. Is the menu the same as in Hotland?”

“Not quite. The boss thought today would be a great opportunity to promote some new stuff. So there's MTT-brand soda, and an omurice in the shape of his butt now.”

“…what.”

“Tell me about it.”

There was an awkward silence, until Frisk reached up to scrap their head.

“Well, I can't help with that, but... I know McDonald's tends to sell sundaes and stuff for two or three dollars depending on the size, and burgers for three or four. Not counting the stuff on the dollar menu... how long are the legendary heroes?”

“About twelve inches.”

“Okay, foot long sandwiches are like six dollars at Das Boot. And a good steak at a high quality restaurant... I've guessing ten dollars? Fifteen? It's not something I have any experience with.”

“You said good steaks. What about Mettaton Face Steaks?”

“...right. I don't think they're made out of real meat and that's going to be a sticking point up here for anyone who isn't a vegetarian. Uh... I guess seven or eight dollars. You're completely on your own with the omelet rice.”

“Right. I'll think of something. Anyway, thanks for the help buddy.”

“No problem. I'll check back later in case there are problems.” Frisk proceeded to run along the sidewalk, papers clutched in both arms. Occasionally a familiar face would jump out at them, but a lot of the vendors were completely new and unfamiliar... such as the family of bat monsters carrying cases of soda bottles.

“Uhm, hello?”

“Sorry, we're not open for business quite yet,” one large bat said while a case of soda glowed with a blue light and lifted off the ground. “You'll have to come back later.”

“I know, that's why I'm here. I have this thing for you-”

“Like I said, we're still closed, and we're trying to set up.”

Frisk looked down at the papers in their arms, trying to figure out how to phrase their next statement to get the monster's attention, when a smaller bat wearing striped bib overalls walked out from behind the table.

“Hey! You're Frisk!”

“Uh. Yeah. That's me. I got something for you here.” One of the sheets of paper was handed over to the young bat monster, who grabbed it deftly with one thumb. “It's a chart of what human money looks like, so it'll be harder for anybody to try to cheat when trying to pay for monster food today.”

“Oh, okay. Mom?”

“Casey I'm sorry but I'm really trying to concentrate right now, can you give me a minute?”
Casey the bat looked at Frisk, and the human child shrugged.

“We're all doing the best we can right now. Speaking of which I better move on. Casey, she said?”

“Uhm. Yeah. That's me. Casey Bat.”

“Well. Nice to meet you Casey. Have a good day.”

Frisk headed off towards a fruit stand that had a familiar geriatric turtle stocking it, and Casey held up a wing in a wave that the human child could not possibly see.

“Uhm, you too! Thank you!”

The policeman looked around at the milling crowds dotting the park like islands in the sea, centered around the food vendors. Some had wheeled carts, some open-air tents, a few went so far as to provide tables and chairs for people eating. Based on the tones of voice and body language that he could hear and see, the overall mood seemed to be positive, excited, or curious depending on where he was focusing his attention.

That attention was interrupted as his phone buzzed.

11:07 AM IM_the_walrus: hey steve
11:07 AM IM_the_walrus: howzit
11:08 AM: its fine
11:08 AM: watching things at the park
11:08 AM: you here?
11:08 AM IM_the_walrus: neg
11:08 AM IM_the_walrus: joe got a job 4 a new door lock
11:08 AM IM_the_walrus: n a new door
11:08 AM IM_the_walrus: n a new frame
11:09 AM IM_the_walrus: reinforced
11:09 AM IM_the_walrus: so he called me up
11:09 AM IM_the-walrus: borrowd hals torch to weld with
11:09 AM IM_the_walrus: not bad money for an hour of work
11:09 AM IM_the_walrus: fuc if this keeps up wont have to crash at hals any longer
11:10 AM: cool
11:10 AM: good lick
11:10 AM: gdi
11:10 AM IM_the_walrus: uh wat
11:10 AM: good luck
11:10 AM: fucking fingr slipped
11:10 AM IM_the_walrus: sure it did
11:10 AM: up yrs justin
11:11 AM IM_the_walrus: was that another slip
11:11 AM: get ur mind out of the gutter
11:11 AM IM_the_walrus: no
11:11 AM IM_the_walrus: u still on 4 meme haus friday
11:11 AM: definitely
11:11 AM IM_the_walrus: ok good 2 no
11:12 AM IM_the_walrus: jos redy 4 me gota run
11:12 AM: ok cya

The cell phone was returned to its pocket and Officer Steve migrated towards one crowd that seemed to have a white, furry head with long ears and horns, and an also white skull sticking out of the center of the mass. After negotiating his way through the milling observers, Steve noticed there was also a small human child at the epicenter, watching and tending to assorted pots, pans, and other cooking utensils that were suspended above what had to be yet more magical fireballs by outdoor camping gear. It was not clear exactly where everything had come from, but Quentin Forsythe had gone out of his way to purchase a small refrigerator for the monsters' convenience. Perhaps this was the result of a similar action.

“The important thing about spaghetti, or any pasta, is that it continues to cook for a little bit even after it's removed from the water.” Frisk grabbed some insulated mitts from the table and reached for a pot that was much higher than they could safely reach, and Steve felt a protest start in the back of his throat before the queen moved toward the pot.

“Ah, my child, perhaps I should handle this part.”

“...okay. If you could drain the noodles into that colander, I'll check on the sauce and the meatballs.”

Toriel grasped the pot without bothering to use the mitts Frisk had reached for, causing some murmurs in the crowd that had gathered around the open-air cooking lesson. Frisk also seemed surprised for a short time, then stepped to one side and removed the lid on the skillet that held a large number of meatballs.
“These meatballs are sort of half steamed, half fried. Of course any heat source will work. Baking, boiling, even deep frying, it just depends on the texture you want and your sensitivity to oil and grease, among other things.” Frisk replaced the skillet cover and took the lid off of the sauce pan next to it. “Like I said before you don't have to use tomato paste, but if you don't have a garden or they're not in season it works fairly well for the base of the sauce. The garlic powder and oregano are pretty well mixed in so it's just a matter of keeping the mixture from burning. That's one thing that monster and human cooking has in common. How do the noodles look?”

“They appear to be fine, although they are steaming considerably.”

“Okay then.” Frisk replaced the covers on both dishes, then walked over to the cooled noodles, reached out, and quickly grabbed one to hold up to the crowd.”

“This is about the amount of curve you want in your noodles. Too much and they're probably going to just fall apart when you try to get them on your fork. Not enough and they might crunch when you bite into them. Everyone has different preferences of course but right now we're trying for something that could be considered *al dente.*”

“WHO IS AL DENTE AND WHY ARE YOU COMPARING BOILED SPAGHETTI NOODLES TO HIM?”

There was some laughter from the crowd and Frisk turned back to face the skeleton.

“Uh, it's not actually a name, it's a phrase from another language that means a specific amount of firmness. It was just easier to use that phrase than come up with our own in English. I think the technical term is loan word, but honestly we just totally steal words from other languages and never look back.”

“THAT SOUNDS HIGHLY ILLEGAL!!”

“Yeah, but it's a victimless crime.”

More laughter rippled through the crowd as Frisk grabbed one of the plates and a pair of tongs, carefully collected a small pile of noodles on it, then ladled tomato sauce on top and crowned it with a single meatball from the skillet. The plate was held up to Papyrus.

“Here, take it for a test drive.”

The skeleton squinted at the noodles, causing a few humans in the crowd to comment in surprise at the flexibility of the monster's skull, then twirled some noodles and sauce with a fork and carefully took a bite. Even more commentary from the humans in the crowd resulted as the food seemed to disappear, not falling out from behind the skeleton's lower jaw.

“...THIS... THE TASTE... IT'S INDESCRIBABLE!” The fork immediately returned to the plate, collected more noodles, and disappeared behind the skeleton's teeth, then repeated the process again and again.

“What's indescribable?”

Officer Steve looked away from an ecstatic Papyrus to see that Undyne had made her way through the crowd, and a small but noticeable gap had formed between her and the humans. Then again, she was tall, loud, and extremely muscular with a mouth full of sharp pointy teeth, so maybe that was only to be expected.

“Papyrus really likes the spaghetti we made,” Frisk explained. “Except for the fire magic from Toriel,
it was prepared using the human cooking techniques I know.”

“Really?? Cool! You gotta show me that sometime! But the real question is, Papyrus, is it better than your spaghetti?”

“I DON'T KNOW. I'VE NEVER EATEN SPAGHETTI BEFORE.”

Frisk turned to stare at Papyrus, then looked back at Undyne, whose expression was probably the same one that was on the human child's face.

“Wait, if you... then that means... NGAAAAAH! If you don't like it, then why do you keep MAKING it?!!”

“BECAUSE EVERYBODY ELSE LOVES IT!”

Undyne's eyelid twitched, and Frisk quickly topped off a plate with noodles and sauce before walking over to the fish monster.

“Here. It's probably best if we don't question it. Does anyone else want to try the spaghetti?”

There were a couple of comments to that effect and Frisk returned to the stack of plates and started filling them with noodles. Officer Steve took that moment to backtrack through the crowd and move on to other food stands.

“Why do the apples have claws?”

“Wahahahaha! What, you never seen a crab apple before, sonny?”

“Do they pinch you?”

“Put yer finger real close and find out!”

“Cinnamon bunnies, fresh from the oven!”

“Pumpkin rings, still hot from the fryer!”

“we got hot dogs, hot cats, hot animals of every size and shape, as long as that shape and size fits into a hot dog bun.”

Officer Steve stopped in his tracks as he saw a familiar skeleton sitting behind a wooden table covered by a roof... that... was covered in a thick layer of snow, glittering in the sunlight.

“Sans?”

“hey Officer Steve, how ya doin'?”

“So... is this like that thing with Papyrus making spaghetti, or...?”

“what, you never seen a skeleton with two jobs before?”

“...actually that does make sense. What's with the snow though?”

“i'll get around to cleaning it off eventually. can i tempt you with a hot dog?”

Officer Steve eyed the food on display and shrugged.

“Sure, how much?”
“for you, on the house. want anything with it?”

“Got any mustard? Also, is the mustard extra?”

Sans somehow managed to grin even wider as he pulled out a yellow bottle and placed it on the counter.

“i was about to get ya, but i see you've played this game before.”

“Yeah, well, spend a while as a beat cop and you get used to a lot of food vendors and their, uh, quirks.” Some mustard was applied to the hot dog and Officer Steve took a small bite, which was chewed slowly. “Hmmm... don't think that's real meat... but I'm not sure actual hot dogs are made of real meat, to be honest.”

“Not a lot of room in the underground for livestock, as a rule. Actually there used to be a factory that made synthetic meat but it had to shut down. Nobody liked the stuff and the sounds of the machinery hurt people's ears after a few minutes. So it's vegetarian alternatives for anything except chicken eggs.”

“Huh. How'd you grow the vegetables and stuff without sunlight?”

“magic.” Sans shrugged. “not a farmer myself but somebody here probably could give you all the details if you wanted to ask around. actually the king might be able to give you all the details you could ever want. he loves gardening.”

“I was just curious but I might ask him. When things settle down. If they settle down.”

“OOOOOHHH YEEEEESSSSS!”

Officer Steve almost dropped his hot dog as a loud electronic voice boomed from the adjacent vendor, and a crowd of people stepped back, leaving gaps and spaces wide enough to see through. The policeman could see a roughly six foot tall shape that resembled a human body except for the wide shoulder pads, high heeled boots, and some sort of cavity in the lower torso that looked almost like a plasma globe.

“Behold, the surface premier of Mettaton EX!”

The crowd was silent, until...

“What does the EX stand for?”

“Why, it's short for EXtraordinary, darling. I asked the brilliant Dr. Alphys to base my advanced form on the greatest human celebrity of all time: David Bowie!”

“...actually that answers literally every other question that I had.”

Officer Steve shook his head and took another bite of hot dog.

“You know, at this point I really need to stop being surprised at anything you people do. It's getting to be exhausting.”

Sans shrugged as Mettaton began heading through the park with a small but steadily growing crowd around him, hanging on his words and actions. “you and me both, buddy. culture shock is a two way street.”

“Right... oh. Sorry.”
“huh?”

“I said 'you people' just now. Probably not the best choice of words.”

“hey, you consider monsters people. That's what we're aiming for. 'sides, it's only one word difference between 'you people' and just plain 'people' so frankly I think we're off to a good start.”

“Well... suppose there's that-”

“Is he gone?” The monster that resembled a cat standing behind the counter let his face relax and shook his head. “Ugh. I need a cigarette after that. If you got orders, let's hear em now, I want to take my break like, right away.”

“Oh, what's in a Legendary Hero?”

“Ice Cube Lettuce, Cherry Tomato, Bunion, Dill Piccolos, Merica Cheese and sliced Water Sausage on toasted bread.”

The customer opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. “I understood some of those words.”

“Here, let me show you.” The monster turned around and started opening boxes. A green cube that seemed to be breaking off into rectangular leaves was placed on the counter top, followed by a tomato with a large, woody stem coming out of it, a green onion with a bulb that resembled a toe, a pickle with a series of holes in it, and a block of multicolored cheese that seemed to be a mix of blue cheese and pepper-jack considering it was white with flecks of red and blue. Finally a loaf of bread resembling a sword, complete with hand guard and pommel, was placed on the counter along with what looked like cattail seed pods. The monster immediately began putting the ingredients together.

“So we slice the bread, then the water sausages. Not a lot of meat in the underground if you're wondering. Layer that, then the cheese layer, then we prepare the ingredients. Slice the bunion, the piccolo, the cherry tomato, gotta be carefully not to break the blade on the pit, break off some squares of lettuce and done.”

As fast as it was described, a sandwich was created.

“...that was impressive, but you did say toasted.”

The monster sighed.

“Right, I knew I was forgetting something. Gimmes five seconds.” The sandwich was placed on the counter top, and both paws rested on the surface near the ends of the sandwich, a few inches away. There was a build up of tension in the air, almost electric, and then the crowd jumped back as white lightning jumped from both paws and grounded itself on the sandwich. After several seconds, the lightning stopped, revealing a much browned and slightly smoking sandwich. “Here you go, sorry for the delay.”

Some dollar bills were handed over, and the customer picked up the sandwich, carefully biting into the end of the “blade” …and then taking another careful bite.

“Not bad. Definitely not like anything I've had before.”

“I figured.” The monster pulled something out of its pocket, then produced another small electric arc and inhaled deeply, then exhaled some strange smoke that made strange shapes before dissipating, at which point Officer Steve realized that the object was some sort of magic cigarette. “Mettaton’s
always going on and on about how 'this is how they do it on the surface' and I'm not exactly an expert in the field, but I'm pretty sure you guys don't eat hamburgers made of sequins and glue.”

“Is that what's in a Glamburger??”

“Yeah. I mean it's technically edible, but so are Temmie Flakes. And those are just torn up construction paper.”

Another customer stepped forward. “What about the steak in the shape of Mettaton's face? Do we want to know what's in that?”

“Not if you're actually going to eat one. Also, you don't want to eat one.”

“...I'm afraid to ask about the Starfait.”

“Actually that's probably safe. It's just ice cream mixed with berries and nuts, sprinkled with edible glitter. And it's against company policy but I could probably leave the glitter off if you wanted.”

“Sounds good.” A handful of bills were held out. “One Starfait, hold the glitter.”

The monster pulled out the cigarette from its mouth, dropped it in a trash receptacle, and accepted the money.

“Coming right up.”

The sun was much lower in the sky when Frisk made their way over to the MTT Burger Emporium stand and found its occupant cleaning off the counter top.

“Hey, uh... this is awkward, but I just realized now that I don't know your real name, and I know you don't like that nickname.”

The monster sighed and shook his head.

“Don't worry about it, little buddy. Mettaton already called me Burgie back before he started photo bombing those humans with the big video camera.”

“Right, I heard about that. How was... everything here?”

“Sold out of Starfaits and sandwiches. Sold one Glamburger and one Face Steak and I'm sure those were for dares or challenges or stunts. No takers on anything else.”

“Cool. Uhm...” Frisk scratched their head. “The big vote that will let us know how hard or easy things will be up here is not for another few days. I'm hoping today convinced a lot of people to vote in our favor. But even if they do, it's going to take a while to get everybody moved up here.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Right. But... I got to thinking after I heard about Mettaton chasing after the Channel 55 news crew like a reverse paparazzi-”

Burgie snorted.

“Sorry, go ahead.”
“Thanks. Anyway. I got to thinking after that happened and I know you wanted to be an actor, so... if you still want to do that, there's some options in town. If Mettaton's going to hog the spotlight when Channel 55 shows up, maybe don't apply there, but there's a radio station in town and they're always hiring new interns. That might help. There's also some theater clubs, and the Shakespeare in the Park group.”

“...huh. Well, the whole 'who you know' thing didn't work out very well for me. Maybe I should focus on 'what you know' instead.” Burgie stopped wiping down the counter, pulled out another cigarette, lit it and grinned. “Thanks for the pointers, little buddy.”

“Any time.”
Hedging Bets

The essential nature of the problem is not the drop in crude oil prices, but the motivation behind them. OPEC is definitely attempting to limit shale oil development here in the United States, but the only way they can do that is to make it unprofitable. And the only way they can do that is to export more oil, increasing the global supply. However they can only do that for so long before they have to raise prices again for their own economic survival, especially the member states with less diversified economies who have the most to lose from an arrangement like this. Whether or not any shale oil extraction firms go out of business between now and then, the oil reserves will still be in the ground, and the technology to recover them will still exist.

The man sitting at the computer stopped typing, and grabbed the computer mouse, clicking away from the word processor software to a web browser. Graphs and charts detailing the highs and lows of commodity sales filled the window.

“Hmmm... gold's dropped a lot today... silver and copper haven't changed that much-”

The man's appraisal of the precious metals markets was interrupted by a beeping noise from his phone.

4:39 PM Gil_Bates06: HEY DWAYNE

4:39 PM Gil_Bates06: CHECK THIS SHIT OUT

4:40 PM Gil_Bates06 sent a file: omgrealmonsters111.mpeg

4:40 PM: derek i dont have time 2 watch pirated episodes of old nickelodeon cartoons

4:40 PM: i have a newsletter 2 write

4:40 PM Gil_Bates06: NO NO ITS REL

4:40 PM: nd erans 2 run

4:41 PM: ill watch wen i get back ok

Dwayne put his phone back in his pocket, then frowned when the instant messages sound played four times in rapid succession. The phone was pulled out and Dwayne changed his status to Do Not Disturb before returning the device to its pocket.

“Jesus, that guy really has to get his fucking priorities straight.”

“cy Tori. Papyrus tells me that the spaghetti table was a big success.”

Toriel looked up from the improvised cooking station in the hotel lobby and smiled. “Ah, hello Sans!
Yes, I believe we drew a considerable crowd, even compared to other food vendors.”

“well, if the price is right...”

“Yes, that likely had something to do with it. Public relations and diplomacy notwithstanding, it was a delight to watch Frisk demonstrate their cooking acumen. I believe they are as enamored with the prospect of teaching others as I am, at least where cooking is concerned.”

“where is the kid anyway?”

“In the hotel room we share. They were visibly tired after today’s public exhibition and I suggested to them that it might be wise to rest before dinner.”

“sounds like a good idea to me too, actually. see you at dinner, or better yet, just slide the plate under the door.”

Toriel sputtered in laughter for a moment as Sans walked away. “Sans!”

“you rang?” The skeleton reappeared, approaching from a different direction.

“...you are fooling absolutely nobody, Sans. Dimensional Bridges are the most demanding and exhaustive capability of a very demanding and exhaustive part of the Magic Spectrum. You use them not only casually, but for the sake of humor as well.”

“Hey, hey, hey, I don't have to put up with this mockery from you, I have a whole bar full of monsters back in Snowdin waiting to mock me.” Sans winked.

Toriel laughed again and resumed mixing the contents of a bowl. There was a scraping sound as Sans scratched his chin.

“Actually, while I'm here... I noticed a few things while I was selling hot dogs and other hot animals.”

“Yes?”

“Some of it was word choice, good and bad, that the humans were using. Surprised me but a lot of it was good. Not that I'm complaining. There was other stuff too.”

“Such as?”

“...well, it occurred to me... Frisk has been wearing that same shirt since I saw them on the Snowdin Road.”

“Ah. Yes.” Toriel's mixing slowed slightly. “I have been meaning to find time to return to Home and get some extra clothing, for both them and myself, but there has never been a free moment to do so.”

“Tell me about it. Fortunately, we have a stopgap.” Something was placed on the counter top next to the mixing bowl, and Toriel stopped stirring completely.

“What is this?”

“Human money, from the hot dog stand.”

Toriel resumed mixing.

“No. I cannot simply take your money, Sans. No matter if it is Monster Gild, Human Dollars, or
some other form."

“What am I gonna buy with it, shampoo? This is half of why Frisk wanted us to set up monster
vendors in the park to begin with, to jump start monsters joining the human economy before that Gild
Exchange is up and running. We have the stuff, it will save us time and effort, there's no reason I can
think of not to. Besides, now that we have human money we can actually purchase food ingredients
up here ourselves, instead of relying on the generosity of that Forsythe human. He seems like a good
guy, all other things being equal, but kindness and an open mind don't automatically come with deep
pockets."

“Enough. You have made your point and I cannot fault your reasoning.” Toriel shook her head.
“Frisk will likely know the closest businesses with the appropriate selection of retail goods. I will ask
them tomorrow.”

“Alright then. And, just because shopping sounds like less work, I'll come along with you guys and
see how the surface economy operates.”

“Ah, there it is,” Toriel commented, though not with much venom. “I was wondering when you
would seek to salvage your reputation.”

“hehehe.” Sans made a show of looking at his coat sleeve. “well well, unless my wrist is running
fast, it's time for me to go pick up everybody down in Waterfall. be back in a flash. literally.”

Toriel managed to snort, and Sans relaxed and vanished in a flash of blue light.

“...Frisk... don't you have anything better to do?”

Frisk stared at the young child, the waning light from the cave far above adding a little golden tinge
to his white fur. Hands reached out, grasping Asriel's paws.

“No. Nothing is more important than being here, now. With you.”

Asriel ducked his head, smiling, but with a red blush visible even under his fur.

“...you've already done all you can, Frisk. There's nothing more you can do.”

“Not right now. But maybe later I can-”

“It took the power of six human souls, and every single monster soul, to come back all the way. For
me to stay, I would need seven human souls. Seven humans... seven people... would have to...”

Asriel's smile had disappeared, and he shook his head.

“I can't let that happen.”

“There could be another way. All you had to work with was what was in the Underground. With all
the stuff on the surface, we could, we could do some research, study human souls, find a way to-”

“I spent a lot of timelines trying to change back, Frisk.”

“But-”

“You have to let me go. You've come a long way, and you've done so much. But you can't do this.
And if all you ever do is think about what you lost... you're going to end up like I did. You're going
to be miserable, always wanting what you can never have.”

Asriel pulled his paws away from Frisk, and stepped back, towards the patch of golden flowers. Frisk tried to reach out, to close the distance again, but they couldn't seem to get any closer.

“You have mom and dad. You have Sans and Papyrus, and Undyne and Dr. Alphys. You've already made them so happy. And you can be happy too.”

“...how?” Frisk tried to speak around the lump in their throat. “How can I just... walk away from this. How can I just live my life, knowing that you're still here? How can I be happy, knowing that you can't be?”

Flecks of magic started to float away from Asriel, and he closed his eyes.

“You can't Save everyone, Frisk. I spent a lot of timelines trying to do that, too. If you try... all you'll do is rip everyone else's happy ending away. Again and again. Soon, I won't be able to care. But right now. I don't want that. And I know... that you don't want that either.”

“Asriel—”

“Time's up. Goodbye Frisk, and...”

The figure of Asriel dissipated, like the memory of the king in a previous timeline, but instead of falling into a pile of dust the motes rose up into the air and winked out of existence. There was a rustling in the flowers and, too late, Frisk realized that Flowey had been there and had immediately run away before they could speak to him.

“...come back. Please. Come back. Asriel... Flowey...”

But nobody came.

There was, somewhere, the sound of a fan blowing.

It took a few moments for Frisk to remember where they were and to open their eyes. Still the same hotel room. Still the same hotel bed.

Still just Frisk.

Frisk sat up, shook their head, and managed to get upright, walking over to where their shoes had been left the night before. One was being laced up as Toriel walked out of the bathroom.

“Aha, you are awake. This is good. There are things that must be done today, and you are the person to speak to about them.”

“Uh, okay. Do I have time to use the bathroom first?”

“Of course, I did not mean that we had to get everything done right away... though of course the sooner we start, the sooner we finish.”

“Right. That's true.”

Several minutes later, Frisk walked out of the bathroom, running their fingers through their hair in an ultimately futile attempt to make it look more organized.
“I wonder if Asgore would have asked me to be Ambassador if he knew my hair always looked like this, and not just after falling into an Underground cavern.”

“Why would that have impacted his decision?”

“Because presentation counts in politics.”

“Ah, I understand. You speak of deportment and symbols of office.”

“That too... so. I'm ready for whatever it is we need to get done today. What's next?”

“Today, we must... complete what was started yesterday. Yesterday we acquired human currency, and today we will spend it. That will link our presence with the human economy. Is that not correct?”

“Sounds... about right to me. What do we need to buy? More ingredients?”

“That would be a good place to start, although there are other items which may prove useful. As you would be familiar with businesses which sell goods on the Surface, you would also be familiar with typical prices.”

“Right... price gouging might be a possibility. Some businesses won't have that opportunity though. Franchise based.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the name of the business and a lot of its practices are all tied together in a package that somebody buys. It's a way of getting the advantages of a known business model and brand without building it all from the ground up. Or at least, that's as much as I understood from the book on home businesses I read at the library.”

“I must say, I do not think you and Sans were gone that long the night we came to the Surface. You must read exceptionally fast.”

“Well, I do. But I read that book a long time before I fell into the Underground. The Library has always been my h-” Frisk stopped speaking abruptly, swallowed, and slowly started again. “I always felt like I belonged there. Speaking of which. I would like to stop there and check some more books later, if we have time after getting everything we need. Is that alright?”

“Yes, that sounds fine. In fact I would very much like to see this Library for myself.”

“Yeah, it's a great place... uhm. I guess. We should probably go now.”

“After you, my child. Oh, and Sans will be joining us on today's excursion.”

“Oh. Well. This should be interesting.”

“Oh my... that is quite a selection.”

“Yeah. Joe's House of Stuff is the largest thrift shop in the Pacific Northwest... which will sound more impressive when you know more about geography, I think.” Frisk pointed down the various aisles. “Kitchen and cooking tools, housewares, clothing and accessories. Assorted furniture in the back, next to the loading dock. There's also books, toys, video games, magazines, artistic and decorative items, and several other categories I can't remember off the top of my head.”
"how about musical instruments?"

"If there's a special section, I don't know where they are. But I can't imagine they'd be hard to find."

Toriel continued to stare at Sans, whose grin just seemed to get wider and wider. "I see. How do they keep track of the prices? Is there a chart we may use for reference?"

"Sometimes they'll have a sign over a container organizing goods by price, but a lot of them will have individual tags. Look for something that looks attached by strings, or else something applied directly to the item with adhesive."

"Very well then."

"you two have fun, i'm gonna see what this place has in the brass horn department."

After pausing to wave at the woman behind the kiosk with the cash register on it, who appeared to be having difficulty reconciling the evidence of her senses, Frisk followed Toriel as the queen made her way through the various sections. The meandering journey meant that the child rapidly lost sight of Sans, and only stopped when the queen started looking through racks of clothing.

"Hmmm... come here, Frisk. Let me do a comparison."

"...okay."

The queen took a shirt off the rack, then held it up next to Frisk in a practiced motion, the type that all mothers use at some point when comparing relative sizes in a clothing store.

"Hmmm. Only a few striped shirts to speak of." Toriel shook their head. "Perhaps that is not a shared custom."

"I'm sorry? I didn't catch all that."

"Ah, do not worry. I was simply mumbling to myself, as us old folks are known to do. Now... you mentioned presentation before. What, in your estimation, would form an outfit that would say to the world 'Official Business'? I understand what monsters would look for, but not humans, and for that I must turn to you."

"...okay, I can... this looks about right." Frisk walked up to one clothes rack. "This is a buttoned shirt with a collar. Coupled with some dress slacks, dark socks, leather shoes, a dark jacket and a tie, you get something called a business suit. Because it's what you wear when you want to show people that you mean business, I guess. But... I'm guessing that this is for me to wear when I'm representing monsters in an official capacity, correct?"

"Correct."

"Alright, then we should probably stop halfway. I doubt they make ties in my size and I, uh. I never learned how to tie one myself anyway. It wasn't a skill that came up very often. So, just the dress shirt and dress slacks."

"I feel I must comment that neither of these articles of clothing particularly resembles a dress."

"Oh, right. That's because the terms dress shirt, dress slacks, or other articles of clothing named in that way are called that because they are what people wear when they get 'dressed up' as opposed to simply casual wear or ordinary clothing. That's they way I heard it anyway. I'm sure there are specific terms for different categories of clothing but we will have to look them up on the internet."
Perhaps we will have time for that later. For now-

Somewhere in the building, a trumpet was played experimentally, followed by a set of practice scales and arpeggios. Toriel rolled her eyes.

“For now, let us find Sans before he gets into too much mischief.”

“What even is this?” Undyne poked the oddly shaped golden brown lump on her plate. “I mean, I know what mashed potatoes look like but this looks like it ended up in a camp fire or something.”

Toriel made a sharp 'ahem' sound while Frisk put some food on their own plate.

“It's fried chicken. We stopped by Joe's House of Stuff earlier today, and then we went to Wal-Mart to get more food and cooking supplies. I saw that chicken breasts were on sale, and, well, one thing lead to another. Your commentary is appropriate considering how I've only ever made this one or two times before.”

“Really?” Officer Steve looked over at the child. “How old are you again?”

“I'll be nine in January.”

“...an eight year old child handling hot oil?”

“It's perfectly safe as long as you treat it with respect. The same is true of all sources of heat, and every tool used in the preparation of food.”

“And I was standing by in case of emergency, Officer Steve,” Toriel added.

“...yeah, okay, while that is...” Officer Steve looked at the expression on the queen's face, which seemed to be trying to hide a sense of personal offense at the mere implication that she would allow a child to be put into harms way. “Actually never mind. It, uh. It smells and tastes decent, regardless of appearance.”

“Thank you, Officer Steve. Is it okay if I ask how your day went today?”

“Not terribly eventful, which is amazing in and of itself. Got called in to fill out some paperwork, got a call from the Lost Eagle County sheriff's department about some stolen anhydrous ammonia... yeah, pretty standard stuff. I'm guessing it's the calm before the storm, since tomorrow's that whole voting thing. I gotta say, I've never seen politicians move that fast, even when it was a life or death emergency. This whole week has been something else from start to finish.”

“A lot of stuff has changed recently, Officer Steve. Maybe that's one of them.”

“Maybe... might just be a fluke. I kind of want it to be a fluke. I don't think the police department can keep up with a legislature that moves that fast.”

“So, how does this voting thing work? I've only ever seen it in some of Alphys' videos and it's usually like in a school classroom or something.”

Officer Steve stared at Undyne for a few moments before responding.

“Well... this time at least... they have the Ebott's Wake Auditorium lined up. Lot of voting machines. Each person comes in, the poll workers confirm that they're on the voter rolls, and somebody shows them to a machine. They make their choice and they leave. Considering they only have one thing on
the ballot this time it could probably take less than a minute.”

“Uh, what k-kinds of machines? Like, computers? Couldn't somebody hack them?”

“Not the way I understand it. Uh. I have a friend who does poll worker stuff more often than not when it comes up, and he also knows computers pretty well. The information is stored three different ways, and each vote is time stamped. All three setups are compared and anything that doesn't match raises a red flag. As he put it, you'd either have to have unrestricted access to all three forms of data and manage to edit them using a machine that has no editing features, which means external hardware that only a few companies in the country are authorized to manufacture, or you'd have to be some sort of godlike entity that can control individual electrons and magnetic fields with your mind.”

“Oh.” Alphys suddenly became very quiet, and Officer Steve turned to stare at the lizard based on some gut feeling.

“...I am hoping that this is not rude, but can... magic actually do that?”

“...m-m-maybe? I'm g-g-good with Energy magic. Electricity and... magnetism... b-b-b-but! I wouldn't know how to change that kind of stuff without looking at the machines first! I don't know what Operating System they have, what hardware ports they have, or the data formats! So I couldn't do that even if I wanted to!! Which I don't!!!”

“...okay then. Good. Because that's a couple different kinds of illegal.”

“Don't worry about it, Alphys! We don't have to cheat our way to victory using nerd stuff! We just have to stand outside the voting place to remind people what to-”

“Undyne, that's also illegal,” Frisk interrupted.

“...what??”

“It's called electioneering, and it's very not allowed. Also if you're too scary or intimidating, that could be interpreted as voter intimidation, which is even more illegal than the other illegal stuff. It would probably be for the best if we all just spent tomorrow here watching news stuff on TV.”

“Seriously?! What else don't I know about that's going to get in our way?!”

Graphs, charts, still pictures of skeletons and giant goat monsters and a robot with more than a passing resemblance to David Bowie filled the monitor. In one corner, a video was paused on a screen with a human child holding out a sheet covered in pictures of US currency while a bat creature wearing overalls was about to accept it.

Dwayne followed one of the descending graphs with a shaking finger for the sixtieth time.

“Gold for currency. Has to be. The land assays in Lost Eagle County showed copper and tellurium in higher proportion than... it was never economically feasible until the last few decades and the mining firms had been sold off so... no, too much on the market, too fast. The precious metal markets won't stabilize. Silver's going to drop. Platinum group metals are going to drop... low oil prices won't cascade to the market fast enough... shit, shit, shit....”

A shaking hand pulled out a phone and carefully navigated through a contact list.
“Derek, pick up, it's Dwayne... dammit, fine, I'll leave a message then. About that video you sent me...”

Dwayne turned to look at his computer screen again.

“I think now I'm the one who has something you need to see.”
Democracy Inaction

One and six. Two and five. Three and four. The same in reverse. Frisk counted and recounted, as if the tiny stars would evaporate if they did not pay attention to them like some sort of quantum thought experiment made real.

Which, given how little they knew about magic, was not off the table.

A handful of Gild was dropped in the shoe box next, along with some pencils and pens, and sheets of paper. Some had important notes written on them, others were blank, waiting for important notes as yet to be written.

Frisk stared at the box for a moment, then picked up their phone again. A few seconds later, there was a flash of blue light, and Frisk was staring at a dull red orb in their hands. It didn't exactly feel or look like glass or plastic, so it was probably some sort of carefully shaped crystal. That was about all Frisk was able to figure out.

Still, there was somebody who might know. Frisk got up off the floor, orb in hand, and headed for the motel room door. A few steps down the hall brought them to another door, and they knocked, trying to strike a balance between loud enough to get attention but not so loud as to be annoying.

“Yeah, yeah, keep your pants on!”

The door swung open and Frisk stared up at Undyne, hair wrapped in a towel.

“Oh, hey punk. You need something?”

“Oh, uh, I didn't realize you were getting ready for bed. Never mind, it'll keep until tomorrow.”

“What? Oh. No, no, that's not it. Alphys wants to do... something... with my hair, and apparently this is part of it. Thought we'd give it a shot.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So what do you need?”

“Well...” Frisk held up the orb. “Remember when I called you about solving the piano puzzle? I still have this thing and I'm trying to figure out what it is.”

“That? I told you before. That's an ancient artifact.”

“Okay, but what does it do?”

“No idea. That's what makes it an artifact. If we knew what it was, it would just be an ancient coffeemaker or an ancient compass or an ancient pizza oven or something.”

“That... that actually makes a lot of sense. So nobody knows what it is?”

Undyne shrugged. “I asked Gerson about it and I ended up listening to an hour long story about fighting with onions in The War. So he might know, but it'll take a while to get it out of him.”

“...I have to ask why it was hidden behind a puzzle in the first place.”

Undyne rolled her eye. “Because that's how puzzles work, duh. You leave something that looks
interesting or valuable behind spikes or sliding blocks or a combination lock or something else so humans get distracted trying to solve it out of greed or curiosity. Honestly I wouldn't have bothered if Papyrus hadn't been so insistent.”

“Yeah, I can get that... do you think Alphys knows what it is?”

“I asked her. She said it was obviously artificial and not local to the Underground, and it used to be part of something else, but there was no way to know what that was... hold on a second.”

Undyne disappeared inside the hotel room and there was a knock.

“Hey Alphys, you done in there?”

“J-j-just about?”

“Okay, good. Frisk has a question. You remember that red crystal ball thing?”

“What?? OH! Oh right! I'll be right out!”

A few moments later, there was the sound of a door opening and Undyne reappeared with Alphys; the scientist was wearing a Mew Mew Kissie Cutie T-shirt and sweatpants, in contrast to her more formal lab coat.

“Okay, what's this about the red crystal?”

Frisk held up the orb again. “I found this behind one of Undyne's puzzles in Waterfall. I was hoping somebody could tell me what it is or was.”

“Oh, right, right! Uh. This is a. Well. The crystal it's made up doesn't match chemically or structurally with the crystal in Waterfall, or anywhere else in the Underground. So it's definitely from around the time of the War or before that. But all the technology in the Underground is based around using the properties of the crystals in Waterfall. In theory we could compare the differences between crystals and figure out what they must have been hooked up to, but in practice that covers such a wide range of possibilities that it doesn't go anywhere. It would be like trying to figure out how a car works just by examining... uh, I d-don't know, the door handle or something.”

Frisk looked down at the orb, and then up at Alphys again.

“Okay. I think I understood all of that. So it's not dangerous?”

“No more than a single hex nut or machine screw is dangerous. You could probably hurt somebody with it if you threw it at them hard enough but that's true of just about everything.”

“I see... well, I guess that's more than I knew before. Uh, Undyne, you're the one put it in the puzzle to start with. Do you want it back, or...?”

“Pfft. What am I gonna do with it? And where am I gonna keep it? You hold onto it, Frisk. You solved the puzzle, you get the reward, that's how it works.”

“...okay. Uhm. Thank you. For the artifact, and the information. I, uh. I had best get ready for bed. Tomorrow is going to be busy. Uh. Hope the whole, hair thing works out.”

“Thanks, punk. See you in the morning.”

“G-good night, Frisk!”
“Good night, guys.”

Frisk headed back down the hallway, orb in hand, as Undyne and Alphys retreated back into the hotel room. The red orb soon found a home next to the pile of coins, and Frisk stared at the shoe box before grabbing the lid and placing it on top, then scribbling “Frisk's Stuff” on the lid with a black marker.

There was an awful lot of magic in that box, between the coins, the artifact, and the tiny stars.

Whether it would be enough, in the end... that was the question.

Hands shook as the soup was stirred. It was simple stuff, a mix of canned vegetables in canned chicken broth but it was all they had time to put together. The lid was placed on the saucepan and Frisk climbed down off the step stool, dragged it over to the sink, and turned the hot water handle. It would take a few minutes before the water was hot enough to wash with so they looked at the pile of dishes, tried to organize it, flat surfaces like plates first they stacked easier, then cooking utensils, then forks and spoons and knives then finally cups and glasses but the pile of dishes wouldn't come apart, everything was stuck together like glue and they couldn't make anything budge but they still had to do laundry and pick up the trash around the chair in the living room was he asleep yet? Couldn't risk waking him up though but if he woke up in the dark and tripped on something he might hurt himself and then he'd find them and there was something else something important something important think think think think smoke the smell of smoke something burning food is burning have to put it out forgot I forgot I forgot what else did I forget-

Eyes opened in the darkness, and Frisk stared up at the ceiling, trying to muffle their breathing. Their heart was going a mile a minute and their lungs burned like they had run a marathon, but they couldn't risk making noise, couldn't let anyone know they were there because then they would see what they had done, everything they had broken and they would cut them out like a tumor and-

And from the other bed, Toriel made a sound. It was a distinctive noise, somewhere between a snort and a snore, but it was also definitely not a noise that humans would make.

Reality started bleeding back into Frisk's mind, along with memory and logic. They were in a hotel. With Toriel. And in other rooms, the other friends they had made in the Underground. They had spent the previous week trying to organize the legal and social impetus needed for humans and monsters to live side by side, or at least get the process started.

Toriel's behavior, her choice of words, and her responses to some of Frisk's actions and statements implied that she genuinely did want to keep them safe. Actually making sure things stayed that way... that was where things got tricky. Toriel was a monster, and monster food was fundamentally different from human food because of the magic, so it was unlikely that Frisk would be responsible for cooking. Or for that matter, capable of cooking food that Toriel could eat. That left laundry, cleaning, and... washing dishes.

Of course there was also the Ambassador work that was the whole reason they had this second chance in the first place. And Toriel was very keen on starting a school for monsters as soon as everyone was moved onto the surface. If monsters got to move onto the surface. But if the town voted No, they couldn't just trap monsters again. They couldn't make a new Barrier. The monsters could still relocate, although that would be much more complicated than just moving. But where would they move to? Canada? They'd have to get through Washington State for that, assuming
Canada was any more inclined to allow monsters in than America was. The coast wasn't that far, maybe they could find some uninhabited islands? Or build floating cities and ships?

'Can't forget about Asriel.'

And that was the real clincher. Whatever happened with the vote. Whatever happened with their living situation. They still had to find time to figure out how to help Asriel, in between a normal school day and homework and diplomatic relations and household chores. And all of it while figuring out what Toriel expected and wanted, while not accidentally doing something that made her so angry she'd get rid of them.

In other words, get everything right the first time, and never, ever screw up.

“Alright... daisy chain the power strips for the poll machines together in series... as if there was another way... and plug in the night light into the last power strip to verify electrical power reaches all the machines.”

“Uhm. I can't find the nightlight.”

“I'll check the other bags. Go ahead and start booting up the machines.”

“Oh. Is it safe to skip steps like that?”

Justin looked up from the instructional papers at the kid. Well, kid was a relative term.

“...you're about to graduate high school, right?”

“Uh. Yessir. Need community service hours before next April. And it was either helping with the election or volunteering for the Library book sale. My older brother helped with the sale once and he said definitely skip that, it messed up his back.”

“Hmmm. Doesn't help that the book sale is in May and it'll be too late by then.”

The kid shrugged. “I could have done it this year but my brother kept saying that it was a bad idea.”

“Well... books are heavy. I was lucky. There was a co-op placement thing when I was in high school, managed to get that done in a month. But that's neither here nor there. Thing is, I've done this a few times, so I know what instructions are vital for the operation of the equipment, what instructions are important to streamline the voting process, and what instructions are just people higher up in the chain of command covering their asses in case something goes wrong. The nightlights just serve as an indicator in the event of power loss or interruption. These machines are always charged up first so they can run on battery power if that happens. So yeah. We can skip this step and come back to it.”

“Okay. Sorry. Wasn't sure.”

“Don't worry about it. Better to ask questions when you're unsure than just blindly follow orders and get ambushed. I'll see if anyone else has seen the nightlights.” Justin turned to the elderly woman with the pinched face setting up a poll book on another table. “Hey, Agnes, you seen the nightlights for the power-”

“Excuse me, I am trying to concentrate.”
“Is it helping?”

“I wouldn’t have to deal with this infernal contraption if not for you frittering away valuable time doing somebody else’s job.”

Justin stared at Agnes. “Well if the polling machines aren’t running that kind of defeats the whole—”

“Enabling laziness is why this country is going to hell in a hand basket. When I was younger children understood respect and they did the job that was in front of them and—”

A walking stick that spread out into four rubber contact surfaces slammed onto the table next to the poll book and Agnes jumped in her chair as an even older woman glowered at her.

“When you were younger you blew off the homecoming parade float so you could go skinny dipping with Calvin Therrick. You don't get to point fingers at nothing or nobody.”

Justin nudged the younger man with his elbow.

“Best part of this job is the Senior Citizen Grudge Match. But if the reporters do come in later for an interview, best not to mention that.”

The hotel lobby was more than a little crowded; a small television was currently showing the slightly snowy picture of a large building with the words “Memorial Auditorium” over the entrance doors, which were almost invisible behind the long lines of people that had formed. In the lobby proper, two skeletons, two boss monsters, a tall fish monster, a short lizard monster, and multiple humans were all vying to get a look at the screen.

“The lines here are literally stretching around the block. Local elections rarely if ever see this kind of turnout, which is almost as unprecedented as the events that have lead up to this special ballot in the first place.”

“Hey, Quentin, you gonna sign out or what?”

“Huh?” The man looked up from the TV screen over at the front desk where a woman with assorted metal face piercings was waiting with a bored expression. “Oh. Sorry. Totally slipped my mind. Be right there.”

Quentin got up from his seat, and Frisk noticed a skeleton sidle over to the chair and sit down in it.

“Not cool, Saaa...”

The child’s rebuke ended when a yawn split their face open, and Sans chuckled.

“the early skeleton catches the chair.”

“THAT IS NOT HOW THAT WORKS.”

“Frisk, you are up awfully early. Are you sure that you would not prefer to return to sleep? We will be sure to wake you in time for breakfast.”

“I'm fine. Just had trouble sleeping last night. A lot's riding on today and. Well. It kept me up for a while.”

“you gotta learn to take things as they come, Frisk. freaking out isn't going to change the outcome
one way or another, so why waste the effort.”

“I wasn't freaking out. I was trying to come up with backup plans just in case.”

“any good ones?”

“Not really. Best thing I could come up with was moving to the coast and building a floating city in international waters. It's the kind of solution that causes more problems than it solves.”

“don't rule it out just yet. maybe file it away as Plan Arrr.”

“SANS IT IS TOO EARLY IN THE MORNING FOR THIS.”

A lone sailboat bobbed in the sea, and a tired occupant made his way along the boat, checking lines and other details of a maritime nature. With the sun fighting to be seen through the early morning mist, intermittent shadows were filed away as normal and did not register in the man's conscious mind.

The splashing and dripping of water was likewise ignored, until the man had finished his inspection and turned around.

“Hi! I'm Onion-san! Onion-san y'hear?!”

“HOLY FUCKBALLS-”

There was a louder splash as the man fell over the side of the boat, followed by more splashing as the man surfaced. Two other splashes followed as two other figures emerged from the water. An orange face with buck teeth and thick glasses stared at the man with concern.

“Wow. That came out of nowhere. You alright?”

“Need any help? Long as we're in the neighborhood and all? ;)” A face that resembled a horse more than anything else winked at the man.

There was one final splash as somehow the man's body propelled itself up out of the water and onto the sailboat, then dove for the hatch inside the cabin and shut it with a clicking noise. From inside, the sound of nervous, high-pitched laughter was accompanied by the static of a radio, and eventually, a cracking noise followed by some sort of buzzing sound.

“...what do you think he's doing?”

“Who knows, man. I didn't even expect humans to be in the ocean. They don't have fins or gills, right?”

“I think that's right.”

“Let's just wait for him to come out again. I'm sure it's all just a misunderstanding. ;)”

“Well... I don't have any better ideas.”

There was a rapid fire knock on the office door, and a woman looked up from her computer to see a man in a ragged suit, red faced and out of breath.
“Kathy. You're heading to Ebott's Wake.”

“What? I thought the cult stand off thing was over-”

“It's not the cult stuff.” The man pulled out his smartphone and unlocked it, then turned it around; Kathy saw a video of what looked like somebody in an intricate cat costume prepare a sandwich and then produce some very impressive special effects.

“Okay whoever did the special effects on that video we should probably hire-”

“They're not special effects. It's all over social media. I know you hate it when people say the phrase going viral but that's exactly what's happening. We need to get out in front of this. Look,” the man turned the phone around, tapped and dragged the screen, then turned it around again so that Kathy could see a video of what looked like a human child in a striped shirt handing out sheets of paper to a bat that was roughly their size wearing overalls, a giant turtle leaning on a cane, and what looked like some sort of anthropomorphic rabbit with blue fur.

“...what the hell is this? Did the furry fandom take over the town as soon as the cult was wiped out?”

“That's your job to find out. Every other network and cable news agency was all over the standoff, but so far it looks like they're ignoring this. That's our chance to get viewers.”

“Figures. Alright. Have you called Ben yet?”

“And Matt, and Ian. The whole nine yards. Closest airport is in a small city called Quarterhorse Fields but they don't do direct flights out of state so it looks like you'll have to change planes in Portland.”

“Okay, okay. I'll run home, grab my overnight bag and I'll meet everybody at the airport. This still sounds like a fools errand but fine.”

“hey, anything good on the tube?”

The crowd of monsters barely turned to look at the skeleton that walked in, as all of them were staring at the television that had been mounted in the corner of the bar over the defunct jukebox. Sans strolled up to the bar proper and tapped on the wood until the fire elemental behind it finally turned to face him.

“hey Grillby, how's the signal been?”

“...pretty clear. Thanks for setting that by the way.”

“no problem... so, what's the mood been like down here? Everybody seems glued to the set.”

“...lots of nervousness. Guessing that having the Barrier come down, and then not knowing for sure how the humans are going to handle things, some people are higher strung than others.” Grillby shrugged. “...still better than it was before. But can't ignore the tension.”

“I figured. We've been putting our heads together on the Surface trying to come up with other stuff. This is just the opener. If it doesn't work, we got other stuff we can try. And if nothing else there's apparently something called Squatter's Rights and while I don't understand all of the stuff the human lawyer said, I think that means we can build on top of the mountain. So you know. One step at a time.”
“...right. You want me to pass that along, or keep it hush hush?”

“Go ahead and pass it along. The king is pretty keen on people not losing hope, after we finally got this far.”

“...okay then.”

There was a muffled sound of metal on metal, and Grillby looked down at the bar... to see a cloth sack that partly opened to reveal the reddish gleam of gold. The elemental's head looked up at Sans, and while it didn't have very obvious facial features, those who knew the bartender well enough would have recognized the expression of shock.

“It's a new start for everybody. Don't worry, I'll be sure to start a brand new tab once you open a new bar up on the surface.”

The skeleton winked, walking back toward the door and out into Snowdin, with the barest blue flash to indicate that Sans had taken a shortcut. Grillby stared at the door, then looked down at the gold, and then up at the television screen where a human was talking into some sort of device.

“The turnout here has been much higher than anyone predicted and the lines are now reaching all the way to the Ebott's Wake Public Librarby. It can't be overstated how unusual this is, even highly publicized presidential elections never draw this level of voter turnout... this is completely new and unheard of in living memory and there are already concerns that not everybody will have a chance to cast their vote before the polls close at seven this evening....”

“Name?”

“Dwayne Riley.”

“How do you spell your last name?”

“R-I-L-E-Y.”

The young man at the poll book typed on the touch screen keyboard. “And your first name?”


“Okay then. Sign using the stylus here... and take this to Mrs. Perry, she'll get you set up on the polling machines.”

“Thanks.” Dwayne took the slip of paper, carried it over to the prune-faced woman standing by some of the machines, and handed it over.

“Checks out. Okay then.” The touchscreens were tapped and the woman glowered at the screen before turning and calling out across the room.

“CARROW!”

A few seconds later, a man started walking away from some of the other machines, and navigated through the crowd to the woman.

“You bellowed?”

“This thing isn't working right. Fix it.”
Mr. Carrow walked over to the poll machine, stared at the screen, then tapped parts of it. The screen changed to reveal a ballot selection.

“The machine works just fine as long as you follow the instructions.”

“What instructions?!”

“The ones on the screen.” Carrow turned to look at Dwayne. “Just press the check boxes to make your selection. Once you're done it will ask you to review, and after that it will ask you to confirm and then you're all done.”

“Thanks.”

“Uh huh.” Carrow made his way back across the room to where more people were lining up next to machines. Dwayne shook his head, looked at the single option on the ballot... and hesitated. If the monsters were allowed to become citizens, the gold would be dumped on the market and accelerate a downward trend resulting in a major recession, if not a depression. But if they weren't, then that meant trade would have to be regulated a lot like international trade, which meant tariffs and restrictions and sanctions... but there was no way to be sure that those in position to impose those measures would do so. In the meantime, the demand for monster food that seemed to be growing on social media would give them economic leverage in a gray market environment, and-

“Whoever invented pants was a warlock!”

Dwayne (and several other people at the polling stations) looked over to see a man in mechanic's coveralls next to the pinched-faced Mrs. Perry, grinning like a maniac with eyes not quite focused.

“It's two tubes of cloth that merge into a single tube of cloth that's even bigger! By combining the tubes he quadrupled their power! You can't argue with math! It's the law!”

Dwayne returned to the polling station and shook his head before voting “YES” on the screen. At least if they were citizens then they would be subject to the same legal trade and financial restrictions as everyone else in the country, and market manipulation would be punished before it got too far. It appeared to be the lesser of two evils.

At least, he hoped it was. There was nothing quite like listening to Hal Greene speak his mind to make logic and reason seem like futile endeavors at best.
“This is it, the Roll-On-Inn Travelers Hotel.”

“Yes, I can see the sign Ian.” Kathy sighed. “Sorry. Let's just talk to the desk clerk and get to the bottom of this.”

“Hey, Kathy, what are you going to do if we go in there and there are actual monsters?”

“Slap myself in the face until I wake up.”

The camera man chuckled as the reporter lead the way to the door and walked in.

He stopped laughing when he saw Kathy walk back out again, take a few steps away from the door, and lean over with her hands on her knees. It sounded like she was starting to hyperventilate.

“Uh. Kathy?”

“I need. A minute.” The reporter gasped, and the cameraman jogged up to the door and peered inside. Immediately he saw odd shapes that resolved themselves into what had to be people with intricate costumes and exceptional makeup... until he saw the skeletons.

Slowly, Ian reached out and opened the door, walking inside slowly. A few faces, some human and others not, looked up at him as he entered, but most of them seemed focused on the table they were all sitting around, which was covered in plates and platters of food, and even two cooking pans suspended over... fireballs. With no sign of a camp stove or any fuel source or anything.

“HELLO, HUMAN! WOULD YOU CARE TO SIT DOWN TO JOIN US FOR DINNER?”

“I... I... I should check on my boss. Be right back.”

Ian turned around, walked out the door, and made his way over to Kathy, still apparently on the verge of passing out.

“Huh. Well ain't that some shit.”


“Yes I did.” Ian held up the pinky finger on one hand, put it in his mouth, and bit down. “Ow. Okay. I think I'm awake. So this might actually be happening.”

“Looks. Like it.”

“...I'll text Matt and tell him to head back here. We can set up for recording or live broadcast or whatever sounds good once you catch your breath.”

“That. Might take. A while.”

“So? Nobody here covering the story except the local yokel public access station. We've got an exclusive scoop waiting for us.”

“Don't. Don't jinx us.” Kathy managed to stand up, and while she was swaying a bit, she didn't seem to be breathing as hard. “How do I look?”
“Like you just had the daylights scared out of you.”

“Well... our job is to seek the truth and report it. So there's that.”

Kathy shook her head, ran her fingers through her hair, smoothed out her clothes, and marched back towards the door. Ian followed behind her, camera at the ready.

“Look at that sunset.”

“Yeah, it's pretty nice.”

“Yeah.” One pair of beachcombers stopped and leaned over to pick up something out of the sand... which turned out to be a pair of sunglasses some other visitor had lost or forgotten. “This morning it didn't look like we were going to get much sun at all, but here we are.”

“Probably a lesson in that. Like Red Sky At Night, Sailor's Delight, or something.”

“Could be...”

“...penny for your thoughts?”

“I would hope that my thoughts would be worth more than that, but...” The beachcomber holding the lost sunglasses in his hands twirled them around nervously. “I've been thinking about everything that happened last week. That cult in Ebott's Wake getting taken out finally. Everyone catching their breath.”

“...yeah, I know about that, but what does that have to-”

“I think it's time for me to come out to my parents. I'm really tired of this cloak and dagger bullshit, sneaking out and alibis and plausible deniability and, fuck, I don't really have the temperament of a spy.” The beachcomber rolled his eyes. “Also I could do without the hinting about grandchildren every time I tell them I'm hanging out with you. Thing is, if I come out, then that's basically outing you too, and that's a pretty dick move under the circumstances.”

“Yeah...” The other beachcomber reached up to scratch her nose. “The whole 'mutual beard' thing was only going to last us so long anyway. Honestly I'm surprised it didn't fall apart in the first month. Even without the whole musical thing it felt like my life turned into some sort of sitcom. Or worse, those hackneyed low budget Hallmark movies with the same three plots being recycled over and...”

The woman trailed off before pointing out towards the ocean, and the man turned to see a sailboat drifting towards the beach.

“...this isn't good. Actually this is really bad.”

“How is it moving against the tide like that? I don't hear a motor.”

With a slow scraping noise, the sailboat ran aground. For a few seconds, the beach was perfectly silent except for the sound of the surf crashing into the sand... and then there was a clicking noise, and the sound of singing.

“Huh... well, drunk sailors explain half of what just happened-”

The woman was interrupted by two figures falling over the side of the boat onto the beach, one of them noticeably without legs and colored a bright orange. The beachcombers stared as the figures
managed to get upright again by leaning against each other, both of them singing badly and out of sync with each other.

“...uh. Lyla, I think I might be crazy.”

“I see it too, so if you're crazy then I'm crazy and we're having one of those shared hallucination things.”

“HEY!” The figure that fell out of the boat that had a more familiar physiology waved a finger in the general direction of Lyla. “You can't... call my friend a... a cancellation! I'll tell you what for and... cancel your favorite TV show! See how yoooou like it! AARON! Where are you, you winking bastard?!”

There was a splashing sound and some sort of muscular figure with a fish's body and a horse's head appeared from behind the boat, flexing impressively.

“Woo! Talk about working up a sweat! ;)

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, but this lady...” the sailor pointed in a direction almost ninety degrees away from the direction that Lyla occupied, “this, this lady, she called you guys a cancellation! I ain't standing for that! Cuz... cuz if you guys aren't real, that means I drank ALL my booze by myself, and... an I'm gonna die from alcohol poisoning. You want me to die, lady?! What the HELL did I ever do to you?!”

“Hey,” the orange figure said, wobbling back and forth. “Hey. You said. Poison. And. I think I figured out. Why I don't feel so g-”

The figure bent over, and liquid poured out of its mouth onto the sand.

“...oh. Yeah. I'ma die now.”

“Naw, naw, don't worry 'bout it, that's supposed to happen. Speaking of which-”

The sailor fell to his knees and started retching, and the liquid that came out his mouth was far chunkier and more foul smelling. Lyla stepped back and turned to look at her companion, who reached up to scratch his head.

“Well... this kinda puts things in perspective.”

“We're rolling.”

“This is Kathy Greenfield reporting from the small town of Ebott's Wake Oregon, so recently the sight of religious and civil violence, now host to an even more shocking development. A civilization of intelligent creatures that call themselves monsters has emerged from beneath nearby Mt. Ebott, telling a tale no less fantastic than they themselves appear... I dunno Ian, I think that might be too much prose.”

“You want to go again?”

“Yeah. Ahem... This is Kathy Greenfield reporting from the small town of Ebott's Wake, Oregon, recently the sight of religious violence, now host to an even more shocking development. A civilization of intelligent creatures calling themselves monsters has emerged from beneath nearby Mt. Ebott, for which the town is named. According to their leaders, monsters have been imprisoned in
the cavern beneath the mountain for ages by some sort of barrier, which has only recently been destroyed. I am standing here with the leader of the monsters, and I apologize if I mispronounce this, King Asgore Dreemurr?”

“Yes, that is correct. Uhm. Hello.”

“King Dreemurr, there are so many questions that it is hard to know where to start.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I suppose a good starting point would be how people responded to you appearing earlier this week.”

“Well, golly, I think most of the humans here were more confused than anything else. Which is perfectly fine by me. The last time monsters and humans interacted was ages ago, we don’t even know for sure how long, and that was a war that monsters lost. Nobody wants a repeat of that, so I am very pleased with how things have turned out so far.”

“Today, many people in Ebott’s Wake are voting on the recognition of monsters as citizens. How is that supposed to work?”

“The way it was explained to me is that since Mt. Ebott and the Underground are part of the territory claimed by the human country of the United States of America, then all monsters could be legally argued to be citizens of the United States since they were born here. I may have misunderstood some of the details, and I apologize if that is the case.”

“King Dreemurr, I hope that I do not offend anyone with my next question, but I am sure that many people out there are frightened by this new turn of events. Are there any assurances that you can give them that monsters do not pose a threat?”

“Well... I think that our Ambassador can address that far more eloquently than I can.”

“Your ambassador? Who is that?”

“Down here ma'am.”

“What the-??”

“Hello. Ambassador Frisk, at your service. What questions do you have for me?”

“...I'm sorry, you are the Ambassador?”

“The monsters needed somebody to act as an intermediary. That meant a human who could speak to humans. That's me. How can I help you?”

“...alright, I just... okay. I guess, is there anything you can say to our viewers who are concerned about this?”

“I can say this. If you are afraid, then that is alright. A lot of the major assumptions about what is and is not true about the world, and what is and is not possible, have been overturned with little to no warning. Fear and concern is a natural response in these cases. When I fell into the Underground, I was afraid too. But the more I saw, and the more I understood, the less afraid I was. Eventually, the extraordinary became ordinary. I believe everyone will have that same experience in time. We will be doing everything we can to shorten that time frame by filling in as many blanks as we can, as fast as we can, about the subjects that are likely to be the most concerning to humans. On a general level
this means the existence of magic and the nature of Souls, while local concerns will deal more with
the social and economic impact of monsters leaving the Underground and moving to the Surface.”

“You said magic just now.”

“Yes. In the same way that humans are mostly made of water, monsters are mostly made of magic.
Magic is a fundamental part of their technology, culture, and daily lives.”

“I suppose a lot of people are going to wonder if humans can learn to use magic.”

“Monster historical records state that at one point, humans could use magic; seven human magicians
created the Barrier that trapped everyone in the Underground. Why humans no longer seem to be
capable of magic is an important question as much for historical reasons as scientific ones, and that is
likely one of many issues we will need to work on once monsters have left the Underground.”

“This barrier has been mentioned several times, what was it, and how was it broken?”

“While I don't know the specific details of the magic and science involved, I do know it was created
by human magicians, as I said before. Anything could enter, but nothing could exit unless it had a
particularly strong Soul. Dr. Alphys was working on finding ways to destroy or bypass the Barrier
and it was one of her projects that was ultimately successful, but we're still trying to organize the
information related to that project. Between the political and legal necessities of the past week, it's
dropped lower and lower on the list of priorities.”

“I can understand that, but can you give us a general outline?”

“...yes. I think I can. One of Dr. Alphys projects involved the creation of a vessel that could interact
with the souls of both humans and monsters, and concentrate all their power into a single focused act,
to destroy the barrier. Storing soul power, and connecting souls to the vessel, had mixed results, but
keeping in mind that all the monsters had to work with was human garbage that washed into the
cavern, the end result is very impressive no matter how many false starts and dead ends were
involved.”

“You've mentioned Souls several times now, are we talking in a metaphysical or religious sense, or
something else?”

“Monster Souls and human Souls are both objectively, physically real. There is also a definite
connection between Souls and magic, as the Barrier demonstrated. This connection is obvious with
monsters, less so for humans, but in both cases they are described as the culmination of a person's
being. How this will affect the study of consciousness and the human brain is something I can't even
begin to predict.”

“...just how old are you, Frisk?”

“I'll be nine in January.”

“You are extremely articulate for an eight year old.”

“Thank you, I do my best.”

“I think that's all the time we have, although I'm sure we'll have more questions for you in the
future.”

“I'll be waiting for them.”
“That was Ambassador... Frisk, just now, answering some questions about monsters and... magic, which comes as a bit of a surprise... anyway! You heard it here first. This is Kathy Greenfield reporting from Ebott's Wake.”

“Aaaand cut. Alright. We got it. I'll take this over to Matt and he'll clean it up and send it out.”

Frisk looked up at the television screen for a few seconds, then returned their attention to the clipboard in their lap; there was an informal “polling” thing going on that didn't necessarily reflect the actual distribution of the votes, and in any case the vote itself was only one step, or roadblock, in a larger process. Other contingencies had to be planned for.

Beneath the branching chart of outcomes, a smaller checklist had formed with a crude grid extending across it, marked with symbols: A table fork, a trash can, a water drop, and a leaf. The pencil moved over past the leaf and drew another shape, this time a rectangle with a small square in one corner and lines in the middle; a representation of a mailing envelope with a stamp.

Behind them, the clinking of plates and the buzz of conversation meant Toriel was putting together dinner for everyone, while the reporters from out of town were getting statements from other human guests at the hotel. And the jingling sound of the bell over the lobby door meant that somebody new had walked in.

“Hey everybody.”

“Hello, Officer Steve! What fortunate timing, we were just about to begin dinner, would you care to join us again?”

“I would absolutely love to your majesty, but I have conflicting obligations tonight. Today has been very busy as you might imagine and it shows no sign of stopping. Speaking of which, does anybody here recognize this guy?”

“Yooo! Hi Undyne! Hi Papyrus!”

Frisk stood up straight, then slowly turned around. The reptilian looking monster that had accompanied them through parts of Waterfall was standing next to Officer Steve. Well, standing wasn't the right term. Bouncing in place was probably more accurate.

“Kid?! What the- How did you get past the Royal Guard at the cave?!”

“Yo, they were spending so much time looking at each other I don't think they even saw me!” The monster child turned to see Frisk standing by the television set, and ran over, almost tripping at one point; Frisk braced themselves to catch the tripping monster.

“Oof! Thanks, Frisk! Oh man, the Surface is so cool! I saw some of the stars on the way down the mountain! Had to stop looking at the sky because I kept tripping, hah! And this place has all those cars and stuff! Or are they planes? I can never get it right. And the buildings are so tall, I get dizzy trying to look at the top! Hey, every human I've seen has the same shape, how do you tell each other apart?”

Frisk stared at the monster child and sighed. “I can answer some of those questions. Why are you here, again?”

“I just wanted to see stuff! It sounded super cool when Papyrus was talking about it in Snowdin!”
“IT IS TRUE, MY STORYTELLING ABILITIES ARE BOTH EVOCATIVE AND ENGAGING!”

“Yeah, what he said!”

Frisk looked up to see that Toriel had walked over to the two children.

“While I can understand your enthusiasm and curiosity, this is a most inconvenient time to attempt to explore the Surface, young one. We are currently in the midst of a complex political process which occupies much of our time and attention.”

“...oh.” The monster child looked down at the floor. “I guess I didn't... think that far ahead.”

Frisk stepped forward and rested one hand on the child’s back. “Sans could probably take him back, but maybe he can stay for dinner at least?”

Toriel raised and eyebrow, but her expression softened. “I suppose that is possible. I do appreciate your pointing me in the right direction when I was looking for Frisk. Very well. You may stay for dinner... I am sorry, I was in such a hurry that I do not recall asking your name when we first met.”

“Oh. Well, my name is Kid, but most of my friends call me Poncho, because of my shirt!”

“Then, Poncho, you may stay for dinner.” Toriel smiled.

“Yo, that's so cool! Thank you!”

“The last few votes have been tallied, and the results are in. Eighty three percent of the voters are in favor of recognizing monsters as citizens. Keep in mind this does not in and of itself grant citizenship to monsters, but with a clear majority it seems likely that the Ebott's Wake City Council will vote accordingly-”

The bar erupted into cheering, obscuring what the human news anchor on the screen was trying to say. Grillby was mildly irritated, but it was hard to be upset for long surrounded by so much happiness.

“Dad, did you hear that? We're going to the Surface!”

Grillby chuckled as his daughter almost tackled him in a hug.

“...sure looks that way. One step at a time, Roastie. The humans have another vote, and there's probably a lot of paperwork after that. But it certainly looks like a good start.”

Roastie let go, and the two fire elementals focused on the screen again, where the human was still talking.

“...likely to take this to the Lost Eagle County administration itself, and, if it passes there, will likely proceed upward again to the state legislature and the governor's desk. If this is contested we could see this going all the way up to the federal courts, but in the meantime a positive vote from the City Council would likely lead to increased monster interaction, at the minimum... I've just been informed that the King and Queen of monsters, and the Ambassador, will be holding a press conference tomorrow morning in Heritage Park at nine thirty. Channel 55 will, of course, be there to bring you all of the latest developments on this story.”
The Council Chamber was in absolute chaos. And that was being generous.

Words shot across the room like cannons in a naval battle from the Age of Sail. Hands and arms slammed into desks, tables, podiums, and even walls to emphasize the words of the speaker, a strategy that quickly lost its impact as each speaker struggled to be heard above the background noise... until a ringing noise filled the chamber, and left silence behind.

Almost in unison, every person in the room turned to the seat of the Grand Poobah, who still held the gavel above the Ceremonial Bell.

“We have reached an impasse. Much is being said, but nothing can be heard. Previously, Mr. Tyler had the floor. Please resume your statement.”

“Thank you.” A man in a ragged suit, with his hair plastered to his face with sweat, stood up. “As I was saying earlier, the reports from Lone Point indicate that this monster presence is far more widespread than we were previously led to believe by the King or Queen. It is literally impossible for us to make the correct decision without all of the facts, and it is virtually impossible for us to make decisions in the best interest of our town and everyone in it when we don't know what is going on. The vote has to be postponed until we know more.”

“We already know enough! The monsters aren't just coming out of the mountain, they're coming out of the sea! Tomorrow it could be the forests, the river, the-”

“Mr. Harrison you have not been recognized-”

“We know nothing about them! Nothing! What are their long term plans? Who is that child that speaks for them? Is that really magic that-”

“Mr. Harrison you have not been recognized. Mr. Tyler, please resume your remarks.”

“I have already said what I needed to say. I cede the floor.”

“Very well,” the Grand Poobah said as Tyler sat down again. “Next on the agenda is Walter Metzinger's statement. Mr. Metzinger, the floor is yours.”

Metzinger stood up while the background noise in the chamber picked up again.

“Esteemed members of the Ebott's Wake City Council. You all know me. I'm sure some of you consider me a perpetual thorn in your side, which may be the highest and loftiest compliment that I can aspire to. Mr. Metzinger has asked me to speak as an authority on the subject of monsters. With the exception of their Ambassador, I think I have spent more time in their presence and interacting with them than any other human being.”
The policeman paused, possibly for dramatic effect.

“Those of you who have been following the events with the school board should know by now exactly how I feel about those who put the lives of children in danger. The child, Frisk, does not appear to be in danger. They accept all of the peculiar characteristics of the monsters as casually as they might accept a classmate rambling about sports, games, or cartoons. Not simply the magic, or the differences in physiology, but the monsters' incomplete understanding of human history and popular culture. I have only seen them afraid once, and that was when one of the monsters was talking about cooking. I don't know if that means that Papyrus is a bad cook, or really clumsy in the kitchen. But in either case, that trait is hardly distinctive from humans.”

There was an undercurrent of nervous laughter, but it quickly died out. Officer Steve continued speaking as if he hadn't heard it.

“Since the moment that monsters emerged from the mountain, the Ambassador has been relentless in finding the appropriate legal processes for moving monsters up here. Let me say that again with the emphasis it deserves. Legal processes. It's not a matter of taking land, money, or political power by force, stealth, or trickery. It's a matter of integration, socially and economically. The monsters are trying to learn and follow the rules, whatever they are. Whether or not monsters will continue to abide by those rules if it is no longer in their interest to do so... I don't know them well enough to predict. But as it stands, they were perfectly willing to put the ball in our court first. And that, right there, I think is significant.”

“Thank you Officer Ward.” Metzinger turned to address the Council. “If monsters are playing by our rules, then here's what we can expect. Revenue from sales taxes. Revenue from property taxes. Tourism from people coming to see the monsters. New businesses and industries based on products and services that humanity has never seen before, or at least not in recorded history, which means new jobs in sales and shipping if nothing else. On the other hand, if we don't vote to accept them, then here's what we can expect. A foreign power on our doorstep. Political brinkmanship and statecraft at a level none of us are equipped or legally authorized to engage in. And eight thousand refugees who are waiting impatiently to get out of the dark. Those are the options we have in front of us. We have to pick one. To that end... I hereby move for a vote on the issue of Monster Citizenship.”

“Hey, it's Beanpole's Request Line and we've got some hot news coming right off the... news... thingy... whatever it is that makes newspapers. Printers? Jeff, how does that saying go? ...presses?? What, like a sandwich? ...oh. Hey, don't gimme that look, I've been up since 4 AM... because some chirpy little insect has a death wish, that's why. I am two more sleepless nights away from burning my whole place down. Anyway! Everybody knows about the monsters now right? Especially after the thing on Wednesday when they were selling food in the park? Well, the Ebott's Wake City Council has just voted to recognize monsters as US citizens, fourteen in favor, zero against, with one abstention, which I think means they deliberately refused to vote yes or no for whatever reason. So... that's a thing that happened. I'm not sure what comes next, but as soon as we hear anything, you can be sure that you'll hear it from us here at KEBT FM! I'm going to go ahead and play Don't Stop Believing for Edna Therrick, and when we come back I'll be joined by Clutch McGee, so don't go anywhere!”

Toriel slowly crept into the hotel room, immediately looking at the bed Frisk was still sleeping in. The child seemed to be undisturbed by the queen's entrance, and she carefully made her way to the
bathroom door. The inside was rather cramped for a Boss Monster, though humans likely found it slightly more accommodating; at least there was enough room to turn around.

With her old robes replaced with the clean ones she had gotten from the Home Castle, Toriel walked out of the bathroom... and immediately noticed that Frisk was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring down at their feet.

“Oh dear. I apologize if I woke you up, Frisk. Sans took me to Home so I could get clothing and supplies. I tried to be as quiet as possible.”

“...for me to wake up, I would have had to fall asleep at some point. I feel like I've been tossing and turning all night.”

“If you were concerned over the City Council vote, Mr. Forsythe told me when I came back in. The Council voted almost unanimously to recognize monsters as citizens.”

“...oh. That's. That's good.” Some tension seemed to leave the child, but fatigue seemed to rush in to fill the void. “I guess... today is going to be really busy, then.”

“I am afraid so.” Toriel walked over to the child and sat down on the bed next to them, placing a paw on the child's back. “It occurs to me that it is several hours before we must be at the park. If you would like to go back to sleep, I will come get you when breakfast is ready, and you can get ready for the day then.”

“...that might help. I was just... I wanted to go over some of our plans before the press conference. But I don't think I would be able to focus right now anyway...”

“Precisely.”

“...okay.” Frisk tried, and failed, to stifle a yawn, and Toriel smiled. “Thanks for... you know. Everything in general. And in particular.”

“You are quite welcome, my child.”

Claws shook as they tested and retested the wiring connections, as much from the mass of humans that had already appeared in the park as anything else. Alphys walked around the stage again, checking the connections of the extension cords and various cables.

“how's it look?”

“AAAGH!” Alphys jumped, causing the few humans who weren't already staring at her to do so, and shook her head. “Sans stop doing that!”

“whoops. sorry Al. didn't mean to do that.”

“I know, I know... I'm wound up so tight I feel like I'm going to snap. I've checked the wiring for the stage eight times in as many minutes, and all the... all the humans showed up to watch, and...”

“I know. You were never much of a public speaker. I can handle the science stuff if you want-”

“OHTHANKYOUTHANKYOUTHANKYOU-” Alphys practically tackled Sans in a hug. “I can't go up there in front of everybody. I can't.”

“wow, good thing i don't have lungs or i wouldn't still have 'em after this.”
“Oh god I'm sorry!” Alphys let go of the skeleton as if Sans had suddenly become red hot. “I was just so... _oh god_. How many people saw that.”

“uh... all of ’em, looks like.”

Alphys groaned and covered her increasingly red scales in her claws.

“SANS! THERE YOU ARE!”

The short skeleton turned to see his brother running toward him, followed by a familiar human in an unfamiliar outfit.

“Hey bro. How's it going?”

“EXCEEDINGLY WELL! THE OVERALL MOOD OF THE CROWD IS POSITIVE, SAVE FOR THE OCCASIONAL AND INEVITABLE Heckler! THERE ARE ALSO SOME HUMANS WITH VERY RUDE STATEMENTS ON SIGNS, BUT THEY APPEAR TO BE A MINORITY!”

“We were always going to have those,” Frisk said with a yawn. “Some of them are probably afraid, and we might be able to win them over in time, but some of them are just jerks. I don't know if we can limit their influence with social pressure or not.”

“WHY WOULD HUMANS GO OUT OF THEIR WAYS TO BE JERKS? TO EXPEND SO MUCH ENERGY TO BE RUDE AND UNKIND SEEMS VERY WASTEFUL AND INEFFICIENT!”

“It is, and they are. Not really sure why. The whole fear-of-the-unknown thing can't account for everyone; people are complicated and have a lot of different reasons for doing what they do, even when they all do the same thing in the end.”

“WAIT, SO ALL OF THE HUMANS WHO VOTED FOR MONSTERS TO BE CITIZENS DON'T ACTUALLY WANT US TO BE CITIZENS? HOW DOES THAT MAKE SENSE??”

“Well, I mean obviously if that's what they voted for, that is what they want. They just might have different reasons. I think a lot of people voted yes not so much because they liked monsters, but because they hated the Sages, and the Sages were always going on about the ‘evil monsters under the mountain’ and so on. It wasn't a vote _for_ us, it was a vote _against_ them. The monster food everybody bought on Wednesday probably helped a lot too, with basic self-interest. In any event, it's better for people to do the right thing for the wrong reason than it is to do the wrong thing for _any_ reason.”

“well, you're the human expert... nice duds by the way.”

“Yeah. Really... p-professional,” Alphys managed to say.

“Thanks. Toriel and I picked them out. I figured this type of clothing was most likely to get people to listen to me. Or least likely to work against me, anyway.”

“indeed, they are quite snaZZy, as i believe the term is!”

“Greetings, humans. I am Asgore Dreemurr. Once, I was King of the Underground. This is no longer true. As of half an hour ago, I signed the final proclamations and authorizations needed to dissolve the Kingdom of Monsters as a legal entity. I have been the reigning monarch of the
Underground for... a long time. To be able to take off the crown, and put it aside, has lifted a weight from my shoulders that has been there since I was old enough to understand the responsibilities that my parents, that my family, that my people entrusted me with. I have guided them as best I could all of my life. Now, with the long sought goal of freedom finally attained... they no longer need a king.”

Huge paws came up, removed the crown from Asgore's head, and rested it on the podium. A few humans snickered upon realizing that the King had the crown equivalent of Hat Hair, and the sheepish grin and quick run through with the fingers of one paw implied Asgore knew it too.

“Long ago, our races shared the Surface, but the world has changed. Monsters have changed. Humans have changed. Nothing will be as it was before... and perhaps that is as it should be, for the world long ago was wracked by war. The future we make now... a future of monsters and humans... will be unlike anything that this world has ever seen. This time, we will do better. This time, we will be better. This time, we will get it right. Thank you for your time.”

“Yes, you with the green shirt and eyeglasses.”

The man in the crowd lowered his hand. “Asgore Dreemurr said that the Kingdom of Monsters was being dissolved. If he's no longer King, and you're no longer Queen, what comes next for you?”

Toriel's smile made the transition from political and social politeness to genuine happiness in a split second.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I have always wanted to be a teacher. Being queen was a necessity imposed by circumstances of birth and the necessities of conflict. I hope to start a school here on the Surface, teaching children math and science and history and so on... ah, you with the yellow scarf, what question do you have?”

“Uh, my question is about magic. Can it heal diseases? Because there are a lot of things we can't cure yet.”

Toriel’s smile disappeared, and her expression became somber and serious.

“I do know that healing magic has... limitations. I cannot speak to the efficacy of it on any specific human illness or injury, and I do not want to get anyone's hopes up... yes, you with the prominent hat.”

“You said you wanted to start a school. Would that be for monster kids only, or anybody?”

“I see no reason why the school should be limited exclusively to monster students. Anyone who wishes to attend will be welcome. All else is trivial in comparison to the desire to learn.” Toriel's face became somewhat cheerful again. “In the long term I hope that monsters and humans who grew up together as peers, whether they become friends or rivals, will have beneficial effects, though in the short term obviously the focus will be on education.”

“How are you going to pay for a school, because my taxes aren't going to pay for that, I can tell you right now!”

Toriel did not seem overly bothered by the interruption or the tone of the woman who interrupted.

“Dissolving the Kingdom of Monsters has required us to liquidate all the assets of the Royal Treasury. Much of those resources will go towards paying for the building of infrastructure for monsters here on the Surface, ranging from the paperwork and licensing fees for identification and
accreditation, to the construction of infrastructure, including education. Having said that, I would be
perfectly willing to simply sit down with students in a public space and explain what I know to them,
in the same way that knowledge was passed down to me in my youth.... yes, do you have a
question?”

The figure on the edge of the crowd lowered their hand. “What will the tuition costs be for students
attending the school?”

“I cannot predict what the monetary costs of attendance will be without more information. Under
ideal circumstances they would be nonexistent and education would be available to all who wish to
attend classes, but in the Underground resources were scarce and I expect that we will encounter
similar obstacles here on the Surface until monsters have integrated with the human economy. In
anticipation of the next question, I do not know precisely what form that will take, although I know
that many food vendors are excited about the prospect of expanding their market to the Surface.
Beyond that, I understand that our experience in recycling materials has economic and industrial
applications. Now, does anyone have any further questions? ...very well. I shall now cede the stage
to the Monster Ambassador.”

Toriel placed the microphone back in its mount, and walked towards the stairs on one side of the
stage, and behind it, Frisk took a few deep breaths.

“you got this, kiddo.”

“...thanks, Sans.”

Frisk walked out behind the stage, made their way up the stairs, and walked over to the podium.
There was a scrabbling sound as the child reached up and managed to remove the microphone and
hold it at a more comfortable distance.

“Thank you everyone for coming out to see us today, and thank you all of those who voted to accept
monsters on the surface. Thank you also for those who didn't vote for us, for being part of the
process anyway. I hope that one day at least some of you will change your minds, and I'll do my part
to make that happen.”

Frisk paused to take a breath.

“In the Underground... I saw things I did not think were possible. And I saw them so much that I got
used to them, and they became the new normal. I think that this can happen here on the surface as
well, that people will see something new and extraordinary, and one day it will be ordinary. Not just
the existence of magic and monsters, but the idea that humans and monsters can live in peace, side by
side, and work together towards a common goal. And even if we don't agree with each other, or like
each other, we can still go along to get along. Because society is more than just a bunch of people in
one spot. Society is about people trying to get along, even when they don't agree. Whether it's
voting, third party arbitration, a coin toss, a drinking contest, or rock paper scissors... we can find a
way to work things out. And if we can't work things out, we can just disagree. We can dislike each
other. We don't have to agree. But we don't have to fight, either.”

The room was filthy, with insects buzzing and swarming, trash accumulating in piles that had already
started to decompose, and perhaps most telling of all a pile of glass bottles, some of which had been
left to their own devices long enough to start housing colonies of mold. But in that chaos was an
island of order: A folding card table, upon which rested a shotgun, a box of shells, several knives,
and what looked like improvised grenades made by somebody whose understanding of chemistry
was limited to its more spectacular and attention grabbing applications.

All of the armaments were carefully organized so that visual inspection of them could be done at a glance. Next to that table was a chair, and that chair also sported items of a martial nature; a gas mask with what was left of an anti-fogging lens kit next to it, a belt with a number of clips and pouches on it, and boots on the floor nearby.

The man in the room, despite going to great lengths to arrange the items earlier, completely ignored them. His eyes were entirely focused on the television set in front of his chair, which showed a child speaking into a microphone.

“A lot has changed already. A lot more will change in the future. But I think it will be a change for the better. Not just the possibility of magic curing diseases, or creating new jobs, or expanding our understanding of the laws of physics. But a change in what we believe is possible. I can't speak for everyone here, but I know that if somebody told me a week ago what was going to happen over the next seven days, I would have thought they were making it up. And here we are anyway.”

The child paused, and looked at something off camera for a moment.

“There is a lot going on in the world right now. War, starvation, natural disasters, man made disasters, and worse. And a lot of people have gotten used to all of it, to the point that they think that this is the way the world works and there's nothing we can do to change it. I hope today marks a point where people no longer think that. The old rules no longer apply. Like Asgore said, we can do better, we can be better.”

The child blinked a few times, but their expression did not otherwise change.

“A good friend of mine told me, before everyone left the Underground, that not everything can be solved by being nice. And he may be right. But I owe it to him, and to everyone else, to try to prove him wrong about that. If we're going to make a better world, for monsters, for humans, for everyone together, then we have to try.” The child smiled. “That is my job now, as Ambassador. Not just to help monsters, but to help everyone. I look forward to working with all of you in the future to make that happen. Thank you.”

The child reached up and strained to put the microphone back in its holder before walking across the stage and down the stairs; the applause started sporadically, then spread throughout the crowd, escalating to whistling and cheering, until it was impossible to hear anything else including the reporter's voice over. The camera tracked over to the group of monsters next to the stage, where two large monsters with horns and fur, two skeletons, what looked like a fish monster in a tank top and a lizard in a lab coat. Everyone seemed to be smiling, although with the skeletons that had to be their default state. The tall one's jaw opened and closed, and it must have been speaking, and the child's face lit up, smiling and obviously laughing even if the sound couldn't reach the camera microphone over the noise of the crowd.

The TV turned off, and the remote tumbled out of the fingers of the man sitting in the chair.

Time passed.

Eventually, the man stood up, looked around the room, and bent over to begin picking up empty bottles.
“I can't wait to try human food!”

“I can't wait to try human booze!”

“I'm gonna get a house with a skylight so I can look at the real stars at night!”

“We're gonna explore all the new smells on the Surface!”

“(And all the new sticks, too!)”

“TEM PET ALL TEH HOOMANS!”

“YAYAYAYA!”

“I heard Waterfall's half empty already, everyone's either heading to the river or to the ocean!”

“How about you, Grillby, what are gonna do up there?”

The bartender stopped cleaning the glass in his hands.

“...probably open up another bar. It's worked out for me so far.”

“Hey, I got an idea! Let's get everyone together for a picture that Grillby can hang up in his new place!” A monster that resembled a hamster in a biker jacket held up his phone. “Everybody line up next to the bar!”

“Wait, we can't take a picture until Sans gets here. It wouldn't be the same without him.”

“what wouldn't be the same without me?”

The monsters all turned as one to see a familiar skeleton standing in the doorway.

“Sans, you're just in time for the picture!”

“huh. okay.”

A bird monster with red feathers stared at Sans.

“Hey, is everything alright? You don't show up as often and you haven't been making a lot of jokes when you do show up.”

“cut me some slack, been hanging out with Frisk and Captain Undyne and the king and queen, trying to figure out how to move everybody. i'm having to shirk responsibility with four different people keeping tabs on me. i spend so much time slacking i don't have a lot left for comedy.”
“Oh... I guess that makes sense.”

don't worry about me, guys. i'm perfectly spine.”

“There it is,” a monster with a massive mouth with massive teeth commented, and the tension in the room vanished. “Come on, let's get this picture taken already!”

“alright. everybody say 'put it on my tab.'”

“Since we're just engaging in basic commodities sales for now, a lot of the prohibitions involving prior knowledge don't apply. This should be enough to get you some starting capital, but the more we sell at any given time, the more the price will drop and the bigger the waves we make in the market.”

“I expected as much,” Frisk said with a nod. “Unless anyone else can think of a higher priority, I think our first step should be to put the money in a fund to cover monster identification. Driver's licenses and so on, so they have some of the credentials needed to establish business relationships in town, buy or rent houses when the time comes, that kind of thing.”

“Typically for the really important stuff you need two or three different types of ID,” Officer Steve pointed out. “Obviously monsters aren't going to have birth certificates or social security numbers... not that you're supposed to use social security as identification, but people do it anyway... so keeping that in mind it might actually be better if you put that money, and any money from later sales of gold, into some sort of fund that can provide for monsters what human businesses can't or won't.”

“Actually I had an idea for something like that when I was talking with the King and Queen earlier this week, but I thought getting monsters licenses and stuff would get our foot in the door,” Mr. Paulson mentioned, shuffling through some papers. “Not sure what it would be called yet, but the primary function would be to function as a reserve of both gold and cash and allow monsters to exchange their money for US dollars for immediate use, rather than waiting for market conditions to be favorable for the sale of gold. In the meantime that gold would be held in trust until those market conditions were favorable for trading again. Obviously there would be liquidity issues, and it does open up anyone working there to the legal liabilities of personal profit using advanced knowledge of market conditions, but I consider it a least-worst situation if we're trying to move monsters up to the Surface as fast as is practical.”

“If the price of gold ever drops below one thousand dollars per ounce, we're in trouble.”

The lawyer and the policeman both turned to the Ambassador with confused expressions. In the end, it was Officer Steve who spoke.

“Why would that be an issue?”

“Because one thousand dollars is a round number that most people can grasp. If the price of gold is fluctuating by ten or twelve dollars every few business days, then somebody who understands how the commodities market works might be concerned. But hearing that the price of gold dropped beneath a thousand dollars will get more people's attention because it's a change in scale. It's the same thing that happens with store prices, the reason that things are priced at a dollar and ninety nine cents instead of two dollars, or nine ninety five instead of ten. Nobody will understand the specifics, but everyone will get emotionally invested.”

Slowly, Mr. Paulson turned to Officer Steve. “...kid's gotta point.”
“Yeah.” Officer Steve closed his eyes and reached up to rub his forehead with one hand. “Frisk, don't take this the wrong way but listening to an eight year old child talk about market psychology and political economy is rustling the heck out of my jimmies right now.”

“...what?”

“Never mind. It's not that important. So... you get this... exchange... trust... thing... if you get it set up sometime this next week, it can start doing for monsters what I guess banks would do for them if they had accounts, which they don't yet, and can't until they get the right identification.”

“That would be the best case. Like banks, the issue of cash on hand to be redeemed is the bottleneck. So monsters will have to wait until we get things up and running before they can start exchanging money.”

“Yeah... boy, what a mess.”

“This problem is trivial compared to all the problems that monsters faced before,” Frisk mentioned. “If the economic and political stuff is taking too long, we still have backup plans for people to start moving out onto the mountain slope, at least temporarily. And there's already the aquatic monsters in Waterfall making their way to the sea.”

“Yeah, speaking of exactly that, I need to cut this meeting short. Supposed to head over there and give everyone a quick rundown on what's been happening.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Thank you for your help Officer Steve.” Frisk held out their hand, and Officer Steve shook it.

“Pleasure’s all mine, Frisk. Simon, stay classy.”

“Ha, ha.” Simon grinned.

The three humans stood up, and the police officer and lawyer walked out of the hotel room lobby. Frisk turned in another direction, walking towards the chairs near the television set, where Papyrus was sitting and watching the images on the screen with rapt attention.

“Hey Papyrus.”

“HELLO, FRISK! I TRUST YOUR AMBASSADORIAL EFFORTS PROCEEDED WITHOUT A HITCH!”

“Well, nothing came up that we didn't expect. There's nothing we can do to speed things up without creating bigger problems for ourselves later.”

“GOOD THINGS COME TO THOSE WHO WAIT! JUST LOOK AT US, MONSTERS WERE TRAPPED UNDERGROUND FOR AGES, AND NOW WE ARE NOT! EMPIRICAL PROOF!”

“...I guess I can't argue with that...” Frisk's eyes turned away from the skeleton to the TV screen, and then opened wide. “Wait, is that Transformers?! I love this show!”

“THEN MY EXPLORATION OF THE CHANNELS OF HUMAN TELEVISION WAS FORTUITOUSLY TIMED! NYEH HEH HEH!”

Frisk immediately sat down in the chair next to Papyrus, staring at the animated exploits of alien robots fighting each other with a smile on their face.
Toriel carefully closed the door behind her, turning to face the rest of the room.

“I apologize for my tardiness. Frisk's sleep has become increasingly restless and I did not want to wake them.”

“I've checked and rechecked. As far as I know, none of our rooms have listening d-devices in them, and I've set up little g-gadgets like in human spy movies to keep anyone from eavesdropping with a laser pickup on the window or the plumbing. This is as secure as we can get without going back to the Underground.”

“Thank you, Dr. Alphys.” Asgore's voice was deep, but soft. “Let's not drag things out. We need to bring up the subject of the fallen humans soon. The longer we wait, the worse it will get.”

Toriel's eyes narrowed and her mouth opened to speak, but before she could say anything Sans pulled an object out of his jacket.

“Frisk was thinking about this earlier. They had Alphys go through the surveillance recordings to get everything we could on the humans that fell. They were pretty insistent that we include parts that showed fighting, probably in case humans accused us of editing everything to exclude any violence or danger.”

Toriel looked at Sans in surprise, then focused on the VHS tape in his hand.

“...will you be showing the humans... how they-”

“Not on this tape. There's another one. The plan is to give this one to Officer Steve, and then let him know that we still have the bodies in case they need to be returned for human funeral rites. The second tape will be available to him if he needs it for any legal processes, but... it shows humans dying. We can't afford for that to leak onto the human internet right now.”

“That's why the recordings are on old magnetic t-t-tapes,” Alphys spoke up. “Not many humans have the t-t-technology t-to watch these anymore.”

Toriel stared at the lizard scientist, then turned to the skeleton, then to Undyne, and finally to Asgore.

“The sooner we present this information, the better. Tomorrow, we will speak to Officer Steve. Any objections?”

The room was silent, until Undyne reached up and adjusted her eye patch.


“I will,” Asgore replied without hesitation. “It is my fault. And so all the consequences must fall upon my shoulders.”

“...then we are in agreement,” Toriel said, turning back to the door. “Sans. Alphys. Thank you for your foresight in this matter.”

“Well, like I said. It was Frisk's idea.”

Toriel nodded. “Yes. I remember.”

The door opened up, and Toriel found herself in the hotel hallway. Walking past several doors, she heard the sound of snoring from the one that Sans and Papyrus shared. Carefully, the door was
opened, and Toriel looked inside the room... to see two empty beds.

“Frisk??”

“Who is it?”

Toriel turned to follow the sound of a muffled voice, and found herself staring at the bathroom door.

“Frisk, is that you?”

“Yes, I'll be right out.”

There was the sound of running water from a faucet, which ended a few moments later, and not long after, the door was opened. Frisk walked out, rubbing their face with a towel.

“Sorry, didn't mean to hog the bathroom there.”

“That is alright, I was simply concerned when I came back in and didn't see you in bed.”

“Oh.” Frisk put away the hand towel and left the bathroom, heading back to their bed. “Is everything okay?”

“...yes. I was just talking with everyone else about some plans for tomorrow.”

Frisk climbed into bed, pulling up the covers. “Anything involving major changes? I ask because I just realized in the bathroom that my idea for getting monsters driver's licenses won't work unless they can pass a driving test first, but I think there's other forms of ID that we can get.”

“Ah... it is, perhaps, too soon to tell.”

“I know what that's like. Worrying about what would happen the next day has been keeping me up a lot this week.”

Toriel walked over to Frisk's bed, knelt down and tucked in the child.

“And yet here we are.”

“Yeah...”

Toriel looked at the child, and smiled.

“Frisk, would you like me to tell you a story, to help you relax before bed?”

“You don't have to. I'll be fine.”

The queen blinked, and watched as Frisk rolled over on their side, facing the wall.

“...if you do not want to hear a story, then that is alright. But... it would not be an imposition on me if you did.”

“...oh.”

“In fact... I think I would enjoy the opportunity.”

“...okay.”

Toriel smiled, and placed one paw on the child's head, tousling their hair.
“Very well then. Where to begin… ah, yes. I remember now. A very long time ago, when monsters and humans shared the surface… there was a brave knight, who heard tales of a dragon atop a high tower, a dragon so fearsome that none dared approach the tower.”

“Oh.” Frisk rolled over on their back and looked at Toriel. “I think I know this one.”

“You do??”

“Yeah. The knight finally made it to the tower, and asked the dragon, ‘Do you need help getting down?’ and the dragon said ‘Yes, thank you, I’ve been stuck up here for weeks!’”

Toriel stared at Frisk, then smiled and started to giggle.

“That is not how the story I was taught ends, but… I think I like yours much better.”

The inside of the fridge was filled with ingredients and covered leftovers. Eggs, bread, butter, various types of cheese and milk, assorted condiments, many vegetables, and even a few cuts of meat. The possibilities were as staggering as they were delicious, but Frisk found their hands reaching for leftovers.

“What sounds good for lunch Asriel? There's some stir fry, there's some spanish omelet, there's some escargot pie…”

“Escargot?”

His voice.

“Yeah. It's a way of cooking snails in butter and garlic. Part of french cuisine. I couldn't really stomach snail pie even though it's mom's favorite, so I went online looking for alternatives and we ran into that. Suddenly it's my favorite too.”

“I was always more about the sweets… well, at least the sweets with cinnamon in them. But I could give it a try.”

“Two slices of escargot pie coming up.”

A drawer was pulled open and a knife pulled out, and the escargot pie was also pulled out and several slices cut off and put onto smaller plates. The plates were carried over to a table, and one was set in front of...

Asriel. He was wearing an orange shirt with a yellow stripe through it, and dark blue shorts, but it was him. The ears, the muzzle, the eyes… the tuft of fur on his head sticking up.

And then the focus was on the pie as part of it was being cut off by a fork, still warm from where Asriel's paw held it, and finally they looked up again and saw Asriel's expression as he tried the pie.

“Mumph… mmmm… mmmmm! Thish ish really good!”

“Everything tastes better with butter and garlic. It's like a law or a UN resolution or something.”

Frisk's eyes opened, then shut again against the glare of sunlight even through the covered windows. Fingers curled up into a fist and the child's arm shook with the strain of trying not to punch or kick or
scream. The dream had felt so real. They could still see his face, hear his voice, feel the texture of the fork in their hand and the taste of the pie....

He had been so close.

And then he was gone again.

Frisk threw back the covers and shook their head. The room was empty, and it was just barely possible to hear the sounds of cooking and conversation from down the hall, even with the door shut. Frisk half climbed, half rolled off the bed, then knelt down and reached underneath it for the shoe box. When the lid was pried off, the ancient artifact, the seven stars, and everything else was right where they left them.

Frisk stared at the box, and one hand came up to their eyes, wiping away the tears that were threatening to run down their face.

“Hold on, Asriel,” Frisk whispered. “Just... just hold on.”

“King Dreemurr?”

Asgore looked up to see Officer Steve standing in the doorway of the hotel room.

“Ah. Hello Officer Steve. I understand that last night you had to play mediator with some of my people.”

“Not as such. The noise disturbance was actually Phil Garrett. Lone Point's semi-official town drunk. But a whole bunch of aquatic and amphibious monsters kind of put everyone at the Lone Point Police Department out of their comfort zones. No harm no foul, although I think they might have to close that stretch of beach for a few weeks.”

“Oh. That is unfortunate.”

“It's almost November. Tourist season is over. They'll live. So... what was it you wanted to speak to me about?”

Asgore sighed.

“I mentioned, earlier this week, my son and the human child that we adopted.”

“...I remember.”

“...Chara and Frisk were not the only humans to fall down into the Underground. There were others. They are dead now.”

Officer Steve's body language and facial expression changed slightly.

“...I think you need to explain a bit more.”

“Yes. We have mentioned the Barrier that kept us trapped for so long. The one way we knew for certain that we could destroy it was with Soul Power. But monster souls dissipate after death, while human Souls linger. I never once considered the possibility of Chara being simply a means to an end. But after they died... and then Asriel after them... my heart burned with a terrible hate for humanity. I decreed that every human that fell down must die, and they would pay for all the suffering of my people with their lives, and their deaths would undo the injustice that had been wrought against
monsters for ages, and... and so on and so on. I remember that I spoke for some time. And it brought
people hope. But every human that fell down was another Chara, lost and far from home. And
precious few monsters were willing to remember that, least of all me... until it was too late to go
back. No human ever made it to my castle before Frisk, or faced me in battle. But I most surely killed
them.”

Officer Steve stared at the king.

“How many people died?”

“Six.”

“...the bodies. Where are they?”

“In the basement of the New Home Castle. We can bring them to you, or you to them, to examine
them and see that what I have told you is true.”

“...when were you going to tell people?”

“I wanted to tell everyone right away. But Frisk corrected me. To appear on humanity's doorstep
with the bodies of fallen humans would invite destruction, just as it did with Asriel.” Asgore looked
down at the floor. “But at the same time. We all knew that to wait too long would end up destroying
everything we managed to build on the surface.”

“...so why me? Why tell me this?”

Asgore's eyebrows rose in surprise.

“We do not know of anyone else we could tell. You are the face of law and order on the surface.
What has been done... should not have been done. And as such, I must surrender myself into your
custody, until such time as-”

“No.”

Asgore blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“No, something's not right about all this.” Officer Steve held up a finger. “An eight year old child is
the political spokesperson, and you confess to what sounds like six counts of murder in just a week?
The day after humans vote to recognize you as citizens you just drop this in my lap? No, something
is wrong. Everything about this is wrong. I don't know if you're covering up for somebody else and
trying to take the fall or if it's something else but I can tell when I'm being jerked around.”

“this is why we made the tape, Asgore.”

Officer Steve spun around, right hand immediately reaching for his sidearm. In the doorway, Sans
held up both hands.

“Don't worry, Officer Steve. I'm not here to give you a bad time.”

“...then what are you here for?”

“In case you wanted to see the fallen humans. Either I bring them here, or you there. Your choice.
But I guess I'm getting promoted to explaining stuff too. Can I put my hands down or are you going
to shoot me when I move?”

Officer Steve stared at the skeleton, and took his hand off of his sidearm. Sans slowly lowered his
“You want to explain things? Now would be a good time.”

“After... what happened to Asriel and Chara. A human was found on the road to Snowdin Town. The coldest part of the Underground. They froze to death. Nobody knew how they got in, or what they were doing there. Alphys was the Royal Scientist at the time, and she was tasked with setting up a network of surveillance cameras to find humans and figure out how they were getting into the Underground. That means we have visual and sometimes audio recordings of humans interacting with monsters in the Underground. Some of it's good, some of it's not. And Asgore was supposed to show you that.”

Sans pointed towards the room's television set.

“...I was wondering why this thing had a VCR hooked up to it.”

“Alphys and I brought that up yesterday morning. Can't find a remote for it, but that's only an issue for some people.” Sans held up his left hand, and the television set turned on and the VCR started to play the tape inside it. The screen flickered, snowy static appearing and disappearing, and the screen came into focus showing...

Officer Steve swallowed. A child, wearing what looked like a ballet costume.

A child.

Sans kept shifting his attention between the screen and Officer Steve as long as the tape was playing. The man had an impressive poker face, almost as good as Frisk's but to Sans he was still an open book.

The title of that book was probably something like Angry With Rage: Somebody's Going To Get Their Face Kicked In.

Twice, Officer Steve seemed surprised, during the first video siting of the human with the glasses and the first siting of the human with the disguise. Asgore probably hadn't noticed, but Asgore was giving the video his undivided attention.

After one final segment where an Eyewalker monster had produced some magic bullets, only to sheepishly let them fade out after the human with the disguise pointed at the cell phone he was pretending to talk on, the tape ended. Officer Steve did not move, or respond in any way, for several seconds... until he turned to face Sans.

“These surveillance cameras. Did they catch the moments when the children died?”

“Yes. Those are on another tape.”

“Do you have it?”

Sans reached into his coat and pulled out a VHS tape.

“...play it.”

Sans walked over to the VCR, ejected the tape of the humans interacting with monsters, and replaced it with the one he had been carrying. A gloved finger pressed Play, and the same snowy static filled
the screen until suddenly there was a picture of a cavern. The child that was now wearing a much less complete ballet costume staggered into frame, hands on their chest with one reaching up to their throat. The child was moving slowly, and eventually tripped and fell.

Officer Steve sighed and looked away when the shaking stopped and the body was still.

“That kid... some of the stuff on the other tape. It looked like she was using an inhaler. Must have had asthma or some other respiratory problem and when it ran out...”

Officer Steve trailed off as the camera switched to a hazy, wavering overview of a cliff rising out of a sea of lava. A child holding what looked like a cast iron frying pan dropped it and then collapsed on the ground.

There was the rough transition from another tape, and Officer Steve watched a child take off a pair of glasses, rest them on the ground, and then jump into a rapidly flowing river. A scene transition showed that child's body caught on a rock in the river, and an armored figure appearing from off screen in order to grab it and pull it out. The cameras changed again as the figure walked off screen, showing an industrial or scientific area filled with blinking lights and beams of energy. A child was punching and kicking some machinery, then turned as some of the beam emitting machines started to flicker. Their mouth opened in a silent yell of what had to be defiance, and they charged through the gap formed by the beams... and stopped, falling to the ground as the system turned on again and piercing them with light blue light. The machines cycled on and off erratically, several more times, with one stopping abruptly and producing smoke.

There was one final transition to some sort of corridor with stained glass windows and pillars, with a figure that was badly back lit but seemed to be wearing a cowboy hat with horns. The figure had a gun in his hand, and seemed to be practicing with it, aiming down the corridor, opening the revolver and checking the cylinder multiple times... before finally placing the gun against its own chest, staggering, dropping the weapon and then falling to the floor.

After a few moments of the same image, Officer Steve spoke.

“Turn it off. I've seen enough.”

Sans reached out and pressed Stop on the VCR just as the tape went back to blank static, and turned back to Officer Steve... who was glaring at Asgore.

“...I'm going to need those tapes for evidence. And you said you still have the bodies. Those need to be turned over to the police immediately. We will have our coroner examine the bodies for signs of foul play, but from what I've seen, most of the deaths would be judged accidental, or related to illnesses, or... self-inflicted. Which just leaves one very important question. Why did you try to claim responsibility when you didn't have to? What possible purpose could it serve to put yourself in the cross hairs like that?”

“Because I am responsible, Officer Steve. As King of the Underground my authority was absolute, and as such, so was my responsibility for all that happened within it. I have lived a long time, and I have seen too many monsters fall down and die because I made the wrong choice... or had to make some terrible compromise when there was no right choice. It does not matter if it was by my hand, or with my magic, or through a royal decree. People have died, and their deaths will be on my hands from now until the day that I die, whenever and however that day comes. I know all too well what it is like to outlive one's children. What it does to a person. I know that there will be a demand for retribution, no matter what human law enforcement says. If it will bring peace, and shield my people from further violence, I offer my life in trade. I started a war which has brought nothing but suffering to both sides. Let it end with me.”
Officer Steven Ward stared at King Asgore Dreemurr.

“...that's not how we do things here. At least... that's not how things should be done. You are right to expect a backlash. But citizens or not. Even if monsters had killed those children... then they would have to be tried in a court of law. Under our current legal precedent, in theory everyone is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. Even if legal proceedings were to find a monster guilty of wrongdoing, or at fault, it remains the responsibility of the court, through the judge and the deliberation of a jury, to assign legal consequences. Beyond that, any violence against monsters is not acceptable. That would be assault and attempted murder and worse, and all of those are illegal. I am only one man, but I will do what I can to see that all monsters are protected from any sort of reprisals.”

“...thank you, Officer Ste-”

“Stop. As far as you are concerned, it's Officer Ward from here on out, until and unless I say otherwise. King Dreemurr, what I said earlier applies to you. Unless the coroner finds something that conflicts with what was on those tapes, you are not considered responsible, in a legal sense, for the deaths of those children, and any violence against you as a result is assault and will be punished to the full extent of the law. However, that does not change the fact that you are a fucking asshole. You don't get to wipe the slate clean just like that. It's clear that what happened is eating you alive. Good. I hope you live a long fucking time with that on your back.”

Asgore nodded slowly, not daring to meet the policeman's eyes.

“I understand.”

“...I think, under the circumstances, that I should leave before I say something that I regret. Either to you, or to somebody else. Please convey my apologies to the queen, but... I will not be available to join anyone for dinner tonight.”

“Of course.”

Officer Ward turned to face Sans, who was holding up two VHS tapes. The police officer accepted them, and the skeleton side-stepped out of the way.

“...King Dreemurr.”

Asgore looked up. “Yes, what is it?”

Officer Steve opened his mouth... but no words came out, and he eventually closed it, walking out the door into the hallway.

“...never mind.”
“So... it's been almost a week. We live in a world where monsters and magic exist... nothing's blown up yet. Honestly I'm not sure if I'm happy so much has stayed the same, or disappointed.”

“Yup.”

Two men sat on opposite sides of the picnic table. One of them wore a well tailored suit, and rolled his eyes at the response of the other, more modestly and conventionally dressed man.

“I was certain that if any event on this Earth could get you to actually emote, this last week would have been it.”

“Nope.”

“Of course not.” The man in the fancy suit turned to look at the people walking and playing in the park. “If nothing else, at least people are less afraid to get out and about... oh, curses. Here comes Jeremy.”

“Damn.”

A slightly disheveled figure ran up to the picnic table and stopped, wheezing for a moment, before speaking.

“Guys! Guys, guys, guys! Check this out. The police are investigating the monsters for murder!”

“Of course they are. And yesterday the navy was going to interrogate them over the Philadelphia Experiment.”

“No, really-”

“And the day before yesterday, the Mafia was involved. And the day before that, the Illuminati was involved.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! I never said anything about the Illuminati!”

“Ah yes, I'm sorry. You referred to them as the Enlightened Ones, correct?”

“I'm serious! Look at me! This is my serious face! My sister is roommates with one of the dispatchers and she said that earlier today a whole bunch of coffin looking things got moved into the morgue, and the monsters were involved!”

The man in the fancy suit frowned.

“While that is far more plausible than anything else that you have told myself or my brother in living memory, it would be more plausible still if it was coming from the mouth of somebody in this town...”
who did not hang on the every word of the resident conspiracy theorist.”

“Quentin ain't said much lately.”

“My taciturn sibling raises a valuable point. Forsythe has been strangely silent over the last week. As I understand it, he has been making inquiries into the possibility that the Sages were concealing a UFO, and not much else. So... if that's everything, good day Jeremy.”

“But I'm telling you-”

“I said good day.”

“You know one of these days you guys are going to ignore me, and you're going to regret it!”

Jeremy ran off, and the man in the suit shook his head.

“Now there's a man sorely in need of a hobby.”

“Yup.”

Officer Steve looked over the paperwork he had been filling out for the third time; his eyes had been moving past the words without seeing them again. Images he had seen on a television screen kept replaying themselves, no matter what else he tried to direct his attention towards.

When the phone on his desk rang, he almost jumped out of his seat, and grabbed it before the first ring had time to finish.

“Officer Ward.”

“Steve, it's Grant. I need you to come on down to the morgue. There's a few things you need to see.”

“On my way.”

The phone handset was replaced in its cradle, and the policeman took off like a shot.

“No, no, no. That's not gonna...” Dwayne Riley sighed. “This is basic economics. Inflation can still happen with gold. It’s not just fiat currency. You guys remember learning about the Gold Rush, right? The price of everything jumped up because everyone was expected to have a whole bunch of gold. The gold standard, while useful to prevent market manipulation by the government, is not a miracle cure.”

“If it’s not that important, why are you so worried about it?”

“It is important, just not because of inflation. Look, a lot of you guys are farmers. You know how a whole bunch of stuff can change your yields. Weather, insects, stuff like that. That means the prices for the commodities you guys get involved in change more frequently, up and down, even before speculation and futures trading gets involved. Precious metals are different. There's a finite supply of gold, silver, copper, platinum, aluminum, and so on. And those supplies can only be extracted at a certain rate based on the technology we have. All this makes the precious metals much more stable. That's how ideas like the gold standard got traction in the first place. But no one commodity, no trader, no firm, no business exists in a vacuum. Any shift in the price of one thing is going to cause a chain reaction that affects the prices of others. With me so far?”
The half dozen men in the garage looked back at Dwayne with various expressions of confusion.

“...okay, let me put this another way. Gold can be used for some things, but most of its value actually comes from its rarity. That's why the price is so high. If more gold suddenly ends up on the market, it's not as rare and the value drops. Now, if you bought something just so you could sell it later when it was more valuable, what would you do if it suddenly wasn't worth as much?”

“...probably hold onto it? I mean, if I can't sell it for more than I paid, then I'm just losing money, so I might as well keep it till the price comes back up.”

Dwayne nodded.

“If the market rallied, Henry's plan would be the smart move. But not everyone plays the long game. A lot of people would see this commodity in terms of the money it would bring them if they sold it. If they see the price dropping, they think they are losing money, so they sell as fast as they can. Now eventually the price will be low enough so that enough buyers will start buying again and the price will stabilize. But... there are three parts of the stocks and commodities markets where a sudden drop doesn't just affect that commodity. Those are precious metals, crude oil, and treasury bills. That's because these things are supposed to stay consistent, so they're used as a barometer for the overall stability of the economy. Any one of those experiences a sudden disruption in supply or demand and it doesn't just affect them, it doesn't just affect the related industries, it has the potential to cause a full blown market panic. And that is the problem we face.”

“...wait... are you saying that if the monsters use gold for money, they'll cause a stock market crash?”

“That's one possible outcome.”

“Shit man, why didn't you lead with that?!?”

Dwayne rolled his eyes. “Because some people here don't understand how the economy works and were making suggestions that would make things worse. So I had to give everybody a crash course to make sure we were all on the same page. The economy is a machine that you have to fix while it's still running. Shade tree mechanic thinking will cost you fingers.”

The garage was silent for a moment, until another man spoke up.

“So what do we do?”

“I'm working on some plans. But before any of them can work, I need more information. I need everyone here to keep their ears to the ground when it comes to anything related to monsters. Monday I'm going to call up all the assayers and pawnshops in the county and ask them if they've seen a surge in interest or sales when it comes to gold. If you hear anything related to monsters, no matter what it is, let me know. I'll see if I can pull a Forsythe and turn all that random information into a big picture.”

“For what it's worth, Steve, I'm sorry.”

Officer Steve tore his eyes away from Sam's body, towards the coroner.

“What did you find?”

“Well, for starters, I can't give you a reliable time of death for any of them.”
Officer Steve raised an eyebrow, and Grant pointed towards one body, still covered with ice crystals.

“This unfortunate child is still frozen solid, and the core temperature is rising very slowly. Meanwhile,” Grant pointed to another body, “this one is hot to the touch. And none of the bodies show any sign of decomposition.”

“Why is that?”

“Magic, I suppose. Certainly it defies most if not all the pertinent laws of physics and medicine as I learned them. They could have died a hundred years ago or yesterday. Both possibilities are just as likely. I can give some causes of death, though.”

“Let's hear them.”

“This child asphyxiated, but the lack of discoloration on the skin of the neck and throat means that there was no external strangulation involved. An inspection with the fiber optic camera showed considerable signs of inflammation in the trachea and lungs. I will need to wait for the toxicology reports to be completed before I can rule out poison, but failing that then I can only attribute this to an allergic reaction or some sort of chronic respiratory ailment. And the lack of swelling in other parts of the body makes allergies unlikely.”

“...there were video records of the children in the Underground. This one... whoever she was... I saw her use what looked like an inhaler several times.”

“Then that makes a respiratory ailment most likely.” Grant moved on to another gurney. “This child, on the other hand, had several burns. You can see where there was damage to the clothing, and the skin beneath it was burned. That in and of itself was not the cause of death, but... do you see these black markings?”

“Yeah.”

“I've seen these before, after the Panic of 79. A few unlucky fellows caught out in the storm were struck by lightning. These black marks are the paths that the electricity followed through the tissue. Whatever caused this burn, I believe it electrocuted the child. I don't suppose the videos showed her touching a high voltage wire?”

“It was more like a... laser. Or a couple of them. They were turning off and on, and it looked like she was trying to run all the way through the gauntlet before they turned on again. Didn't make it.”

“Hmm... I remember reading about an attempt by DARPA to create a wireless taser by super-heating the air between the electrode and the target with an ultraviolet laser, turning it into an electrically conductive stream of ionized gas. Perhaps that is what happened here.”

“Maybe. What about the child that's frozen?”

“I won't be able to examine her in detail until she thaws out, but I tentatively predict that the cause of death will be hypothermia and frostbite. Notice how the fingers, nose, and ears are much lighter than the rest of the exposed skin.” Grant moved on to the body that was radiating a strange heat. “As for this poor fellow, a combination of dehydration and heat exhaustion appears to be to blame. The cracked lips, the lost elasticity in the skin, the swollen tongue, and so on.”

“On the tapes... the monsters said the cameras weren't set up until after they found that girl's body. But this kid died in what looked like a volcano. Lava everywhere.”

“Lava?” Grant looked at the policeman in surprise. “So... Mt. Ebott really is an active volcano?”
“...I don't know. I was more concerned about... well. Other stuff.”

“...right. Well. I may examine his lungs for signs of silica suffocation or noxious gas exposure, once it's safe enough to do so.”

The morgue was silent for a moment, save for the hum of the freezers and the fan on the coroner's computer tower.

“Grant, about Sam...”

“Drowning. I found water in the lungs, and his pallor corroborates that. The water is being tested now. No signs of bruising or defensive injuries on his extremities.”

Officer Steve turned towards the last body.

“...and Andrew?”

“Gunshot wound to the heart. The slug appears to be .38 caliber, and the powder burns indicate that the weapon was discharged extremely close to his chest. But between that and the angle of the entry wound....”

“It was self-inflicted.” Officer Steve nodded. “I saw... that on the tapes too. And Sam... took off his glasses, and jumped into the river. Are you familiar with the psychology behind people who wear glasses taking them off to commit suicide?”

“Do you mean the pop culture explanation, or the actual ones?”

“Both.”

Grant pulled off his own spectacles and stared at the policeman.

“Well, the pop culture explanation is that suicide is an act of cowardice, and as such, these people don't want to see what they are doing. It's complete nonsense, of course, and it's unfortunate that it gained as much traction as it did because it trivializes the struggles of people who do not need any more weight placed on their backs. One of the more common, more accurate reasons is that death is equated with sleep in many cultures, including ours, and very few people wear their glasses to bed. Too easy to damage them. Taking off the glasses, whether out of subconscious habit or deliberate action, makes sense in that context.”

“...I think that was it too. And Andrew... the video quality was pretty bad, back lit, no audio... most of the recordings didn't have audio anyway... couldn't see what he was doing exactly, but he was doing something... checking and rechecking the gun. It was a revolver, I could tell from the way he was handling it. I know for sure that wasn't an accident. Byron and Elijah and I never let him forget the importance of gun safety. And he never did. For whatever reason... he did what he did on purpose. And so did Sam.”

“...I'm sorry, Steve. I know I said it before, but I'll say it again.”

Officer Steve rubbed his forehead. “Thanks. Go ahead and write up what you can on this, and send it to Carmichael. I handed everything off to him once I realized I was too close.”

“Good thinking.”

“Thing is... I know there's something missing. So far, everything on the tapes, and everything you've said... would you say it supports the idea that all these deaths were accidental?”
“Tentatively? Yes.”

“Right. Here's the thing though. At least one child made it through all of this without a scratch. Or at least, no visible scars. And there's something else. Something very strange.” Officer Steve walked over to Grant and looked back at the bodies before turning to face the pathologist again. “Asgore Dreemurr first told me about all of this by claiming responsibility. As in, he expected it to be treated as murder.”

“...was it? I don't like to admit that multiple decades of experience and study and training are useless, but magic is definitely playing fast and loose with the rules.”

“The video evidence disputes that. If it was murder, then there was a golden opportunity here to just pass everything off as a terrible tragedy because everything on those tapes made it look like an accident. If it really was murder, why admit to the crime that nobody even suspects has been committed, without any prompting? Why would he paint a target on his back like that? And even more importantly, if these really are accidents, why would he risk the political, social, and legal fallout of claiming that he killed them when he didn't?”

“...that is strange.”

Officer Steve nodded.

“I think I'm going to talk to the monsters again. Not Asgore, not yet. Sans and Dr. Alphys, they seem to have a science thing going on. Maybe I can get them to tell me what magic can and can't do... like manipulate somebody's thoughts, or body parts. And... I think I need to see the Underground.”

“Inspecting the scene of the crime?”

“If there was one. That's definitely the sixty four thousand dollar and ninety nine cent question right now.”

“Welcome to the Ebott's Wake Librarby, how can I help you this fine Saturday?”

“Hi Mr. Van Garrett. Do you have anything on adoption and custody?”

The librarian stared at the child for a moment, then looked up at the tall furry boss monster behind them, and then back down at Frisk.

“I think so, but I have vague memories of somebody coming in earlier this morning and checking out some of the books on that subject, so there's no way to be sure if what you need is on the shelf. Just head down that row and turn at the shelf with the picture of the lighthouse on the end.”

“Oh, thank you.” The child headed towards the rows of book shelves, and the librarian coughed as the queen started to follow.

“Uh. Excuse me your majesty.”

“Yes?”

“Uh... I may be jumping to conclusions here... but is it your intention to legally adopt Frisk?”

“Yes, that is why we are here, to find the appropriate procedures and documentation to do so. I understand that there is a considerable amount of paperwork involved?”
“Uh. Yeah. Among other things. Although that might not be your biggest obstacle right now.”

The queen raised an eyebrow. “How do you mean?”

“Well, the whole thing with the Sages... they had kids, and not all of them were in the compound when it got raided. In fact, almost all of them were elsewhere. Relatives and trusted associates and so on in Triton, Quarterhorse Fields, Gemini Road, even out of state. But whether they were pulled out of the wreckage of the compound or not... they kind of broke the child services of Lost Eagle County.”

“...broke? I understand that child services must be the name for the legal organization that handles the welfare of human children, but how was this broken?”

Van Garrett sighed.

“Child services rarely has the staff or funding to deal with just ordinary threats to children, and then all these kids got dumped on them at once. I don't actually know how they're coping with the influx right now. If they are. But I'm willing to bet that whatever paperwork is involved in making Frisk your legal charge, it's going to be a drop in the bucket because they’ll be so backed up with other forms and files and so on.”

“Oh... I see. That is a bit unfortunate.”

“It is... but it's a double edged sword and I think it can be made to work in your favor. If anybody objects to Frisk being in your care, they would have to make a call and file a complaint with child services. Swamped as they are, your particular case might end up in the same backlog. Or, if it turns into a media circus and it gets pushed to the front of the line, they're likely to just send somebody to investigate those claims. Long as your place is clean and safe and child friendly, things should be okay.”

“Thank you, Mr. Van Garrett. I will remember your advice, though I hope it proves unnecessary.”

“Same here.”

“Actually, while we are speaking... do you know of any place in town that might serve as a good location for a school?”

The librarian blinked.

“That is... a bit out of my fields of acquired knowledge and personal experience, but I'm guessing that a good location is defined by wide open areas for construction and ease of accessibility. Most of the places that fit the bill are already occupied by other businesses or city facilities. Except for the old high school, but that's got its own problems.”

“Hmmmm? What problems are these?”

“Okay, so... little bit of history lesson here. Back in the first half of the last century, a lot of public buildings were built with a material called asbestos in it. Asbestos is fire resistant, and the idea was that if part of the building caught fire for whatever reason, the asbestos would limit the damage to one specific part. It would give everyone else time to evacuate, it would make repairs cheaper and easier compared to losing most or all of the building, and so on. Sounds like a good idea, right?”

“It does, actually.”

“Right. The thing is... some time later scientists and doctors discovered that asbestos causes lung
cancer. So all of the buildings with asbestos built in had to have it removed, and because it was so dangerous, actually cleaning it up is very expensive and time consuming. Some buildings, like the old high school, it was considered cheaper to just build a whole new building elsewhere in town. In the meantime, that place has just been left to its own devices because there’s not enough money in the budget to handle it safely if the building was torn down. I suppose if monsters can't get cancer, then maybe you could buy it and spruce it up and turn it back into a school again, but you certainly wouldn’t be able to teach human students, or for that matter employ human teachers.”

“I am sorry, what is this 'cancer' that you keep mentioning?”

A book was placed on the counter between the librarian and the queen, startling them both. Toriel and Van Garrett both turned to stare at Frisk.

“It's a disease where the cells of the human body start to multiply faster than they should, taking resources away from the rest of the body and sometimes causing a physical obstruction in the organs they originate in, causing them to not work as well as they need to. And there's no known cure, just really expensive medical treatments that may or may not work. Definitely something we need to test healing magic on at some point.” Frisk turned from the queen to the librarian. “And you were right Mr. Van Garrett, almost all the books in that section were checked out. This was all that was left.”

“...okay then. Want to check it out?”

“Uh. Yeah. Thing is... I don't exactly have... my old... you know. Librarby card.”

“...right. Well, easy enough to fix.”

Van Garrett turned to the computer and started typing, then began clicking with the mouse. “Might as well plan ahead. How is 'Dreemurr' spelled, your majesty?”

“...D-R-E-E-M-U-R-R.”

“Alrighty. Just got to wait for that to print out. Left the address blank since you guys don't have a fixed abode yet, but I know Frisk is responsible enough with books that we can do something like that.”

The librarian grabbed the card as it was ejected from the printer, ran the bar code reader over it, then the book on the counter, and tapped a few keys on the keyboard.

“And done. Enjoy your light reading, and here's your new card.”

Frisk grinned. “Thanks, Mr. Van Garrett.”

“No problem. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“That! Is not! Any! Of your b-business!”

Sans grinned at the obvious embarrassed reaction Alphys had to his question, not that there were a lot of alternatives.

“right, right, was just curious. just thought I could hear Undyne snoring sometimes.”

“We've been together less than a week, Sans! We're not going to jump right into... oh my god. We... we're together!!! It's actually happened! It's happening!”
“you're just now figuring that out after a week?”

The scientist rolled her eyes.

“Are you done having a laugh at my expense, or are you going to keep that up for a while?”

Sans snickered, his eye lights flicking over to the door as it opened... then vanishing. Alphys turned to see Officer Steve in the lobby, staring at them with an expression she could not identify but still didn't like.

“Uhm, hello Officer Steve.”

“Hello. Just the people I wanted to talk to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I need to know some more about what magic can do it and how it works.”

“Uh... d-do you mean like general theory, or something specific?”

“Can it be used to manipulate objects?”

“Well, yeah. Just about every color in the spectrum can do that except for Red.”

Officer Steve blinked.

“Actually I may need you to give me some background on the theory.”

“Ok-kay.” Alphys held up both claws, and a rainbow of colors formed in a straight line between them. “All magic is organized on a spectrum, just like visible light. Each color is associated with a different type of magic, and we use those colors to describe that type of magic as often as not.”

“...okay. So if you wanted to move something without touching it, what would that involve?”

“Well, if you mean what humans call telekinesis, that's Blue Magic. But other colors could do it in a pinch. Yellow magic to create an electrical or magnetic field to attract or repel metal, or Green magic could create shields that could be shaped appropriately, or Magenta magic could be used to link one object with another one and change their states.”

“Huh... okay. Could you use that to, say, disarm somebody with a weapon?”

“Uh...” Alphys let the rainbow fade away. “Sans, d-d-do you mind-”

“No, it's fine.”

“I don't mean to p-put you on the spot, it's just that you're the B-Blue magic expert and-”

“It's fine, Alph.” Sans walked over to one of the tables and grabbed a newspaper that had been left out for the hotel guests. The paper was picked up and rolled into a tube, and Sans carried it over to the policeman.

“Here, take this. I'm going to try to use Blue Magic to take it away from you. I figure this will work better than just trying to explain things.”

“...okay.”
Sans stepped back a few feet, then held out his left hand. The glove he was wearing was surrounded by a blue glow, and Officer Steve immediately noticed that so was the newspaper. There was a sudden jerk in one direction that nearly knocked the man off balance, then another from a different direction, several more times.

After less than twenty seconds, Sans dropped his hand at the paper stopped glowing. Beads of sweat seemed to have formed on his skull, despite the obvious lack of skin.

“Okay... wasn't too hard to hold onto, right?”

“Yeah.”

“If this was a real fight and I was trying to stop you from hitting me, then we'd both be putting a lot more effort into it. Thing is, the more energy I'm putting into trying to move something, the more light gets generated.”

“...okay. And the magic and the light are a package deal?”

“Yeah. The specifics vary according to the color and the use, but the light intensity is a linear function of energy expended. If you stop by when Papyrus and Undyne are sparring, you'll see exactly what I mean.”

Officer Steve nodded and put the paper back on the table.

“Okay, that's good to know. Okay, here's the other awkward question. Can magic be used to manipulate a person's mind or senses?”

“Alphys, I think this one's more you.”

Alphys sputtered and glared at the skeleton, then turned to face the policeman with a nervous expression.

“Uh. Red and Magenta magic, for communications and pattern analysis, allow for sending somebody information and figuring out how to best express that information. At least in theory. In practice, people would notice. It's not as obvious as with blue magic, but it's there. Monsters would know right away what was going on, and even humans would know something was wrong, even if they didn't know what exactly was going on. And if it kept happening they would eventually notice the light effects, too!”

“What she said. Monsters didn't tamper with the election, if that's what you're worried about.”

Officer Steve shook his head. “No, no, that wasn't what had me worried, although that's good to know. I was just wondering if that was something magic could do. I mean, there's stories about hypnosis and mind control technology and all that stuff, and it occurred to me that maybe magic could make those stories real.”

“Nope. If magic could do that, we wouldn't have had a war with humanity in the first place. Could have convinced everyone to just go home and... I guess do whatever people did for fun back then.”

“Right. Makes sense. There is one more thing.” Officer Steve looked around to make sure that the lobby was empty, and lowered his voice so that the woman at the front desk couldn't hear him. “The... the fallen ones. The coroner can't tell when they died. He said there was little to no signs of decay. Why is that?”

“Oh...” Alphys started to fidget with her claws. “The, uh. The sarcophagi all have Energy magic
emitters in them. So did... a lot of the related equipment. We knew that... some humans buried their
dead, but beyond that we didn't know what was involved. So we used Energy magic to slow down t-
time for the... the fallen. So if... when we got out... they would still be... whatever it was you all did,
you would b-be able to... you know. Uhm. Was that not something we should have done?”

Officer Steve scratched his chin.

“I honestly don't know. It's complicated stuff on our end, that's for sure. Also, one of... them is still
frozen solid, and another is very hot. Is that a side effect of the Energy thingamajigs?”

The stone, the water, the air... the snow, the lava... guess there were side effects.”

“Hell of a side effect.”

“Yup.”

The bell attached to the lobby door rang as it was opened, and Officer Steve turned to see Frisk and
Toriel walking in.

“Hello, Officer Steve. How are you doing?”

“Just... making inquiries. How about you two?”

“We have spent a rather peculiar day perusing books, taking in the sights of the town, and talking to
passersby,” Toriel replied. “I shall be making preparations for dinner soon, will you be able to join us
tonight?”

“I... have a small pile of paperwork that is rapidly taking over my desk, so I'm afraid not. Thank you
for the offer, though. If you'll excuse me.”

The policeman walked past the queen and out of the hotel, and Frisk placed the book in their hands
on a table and ran for the door with a hastily muttered “Be right back.”

Outside, Officer Steve was opening the door to his cruiser when Frisk ran up to him.

“Excuse me Officer Steve, but can I talk to you for a minute?”

“I guess I can spare a minute before heading back to the station. What is it?”

“I... I know you've been shown the tapes now. Everyone's careful not to tell me anything, or act like
it's different, but... I got really good at noticing when something is different, because... of reasons.
And you are definitely different.”

Officer Steve stared at the child. “Yes. They showed me. And earlier this morning... at the station-”

“You saw them. You saw what happened to them.”

“...yeah.”

Frisk took a deep breathe.

“There were seven caskets.”

Officer Steve blinked. “What.”
"The seventh one was empty. I figured out that after... the first fallen human died. Chara. That was theirs. Until Toriel took them to the Ruins, and buried them there."

"...oh." Officer Steve relaxed slightly. "I thought you meant that there was another-"

"I wasn't finished."

The policeman stopped talking, and Frisk leaned their head towards the hotel.

"To break the Barrier required seven human Souls. I was lucky number seven. When... I met Asgore. Toriel showed up to stop us from fighting. And then so did everyone else. And Asgore was happy to have an excuse not to fight. If... if things had turned out differently. They would have let me live down there, with them."

Frisk's expression... changed. Their face remained the same, but the set of their jaw, the focus of their eyes, and many other details that only a professional cold reader could identify by name all added up into something that made Officer Steve's stomach lurch in surprise.

"Officer Steve, do you have someone you would sacrifice everything for?"

"...yeah. Yes, I do."

"Good. Then maybe you can understand this. If Toriel and everyone else hadn't shown up. I would have let Asgore do... what he thought he had to. I'm glad things turned out this way, but... they had every reason to see me as a means to an end. And they didn't. They were there for me, when I had nobody else. So I'm always going to be there for them, Officer Steve. No matter what."

Officer Steve stared at the child, then nodded slowly.

"I can respect that."

"Okay. Thank you for your time." Frisk broke eye contact and headed back into the hotel, and Officer Steve climbed inside the police cruiser and started the engine... or tried to.

It took him a moment to realize that the reason the engine would not turn over when he turned the key was because of his hands shaking.
Officer Steve's breath immediately condensed from vapor to water, and then to ice crystals, slowing falling to join countless other snowflakes on the forest floor.

“Well... I see why you c-call it Snowdin Forest.”

“yeah.” Sans raised a gloved hand and pointed at the edge of the ice field. “These branches are a recent development, so everybody moving from the Ruins can get through without worrying to much about slipping.”

“Why is it called the Ruins?”

“Back when the Barrier was created, monsters built a city as far from the Barrier as possible, in case humans invaded the underground trying to finish what the war started. Most monsters lived there until Chara fell. Since humans forgot monsters were real, it was safe to move to where the Barrier was, and everybody was sure we would figure out a way to break it soon. Only a handful of monsters stuck around in the Ruins of Home. Even if there had been enough people to keep everything clean and maintained, there was no reason to.”

“...the city was called Home?”

“Yeah. Home, Snowdin Forest and Snowdin Town, Waterfall, Hotland, and New Home. People give Asgore a lot of grief for not being too imaginative when it comes to names, but I kinda like to think of it as the guy being practical and direct.”

“Alright then. The... the girl. The child who was frozen. Where did you find her?”

“Right here.” Sans pointed at a spot on the outside edge of the ice field, next to some trees. “After what happened to Asriel, most of the Royal Guard was stationed near the Castle, in case humans followed him back to the Barrier. Snowdin Road was mostly handled by the Canine Unit, and Undyne put me here to keep them on task. The kid was just there one morning, when they hadn't been the night before. And... well, that was when we realized we needed cameras.”

“...out here all night, kid never had a chance. Even without a wind chill it's cold as fuck out here.”

“I'll take your word for it. But you're right. The door to the Ruins had been shut for a while, and nobody thought anyone was actually still living there. But in hindsight we realized humans could get in the same way Chara did, and this door... it's designed to only be opened from the inside.”

“Right, in case humans invaded after that War.”

“Exactly.”

The human and the skeleton stared at the trees for a few minutes, until the air was filled with the sound of footsteps and creaking wheels. Officer Steve turned to see a wooden cart covered in a tarp, being pushed by a hooded figure with an ax strapped to its back.

“Hey Sans. Who's your friend?”
“Dogamy, meet Officer Steve from the Surface. Officer Steve, this is Dogamy, of the Royal Guard’s Canine Unit.”

Officer Steve raised a hand and waved, before realizing that the hood probably kept the monster from seeing him. “Hello.”

“Hello Officer Steve. Glad to smell you.”

“Hey, where's your better half?”

“She's about half a minute behind me with another cart of spiders. Oh, speaking of which, I gotta run before the heaters run out of power. Talk to you later.”

“Sure thing.”

The hooded dog monster ran off again, pushing the cart, and Officer Steve turned to Sans in confusion.

“Spiders?”

“Yeah. There's a lot of spider monsters in the Ruins. They don't handle cold very well.”

“...Joe and Mike are going to lose their fucking minds.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Just thinking out loud. Let's keep moving.”

“Oh dear. I do believe that I blinked when the camera flash occurred.”

The clerk behind the desk narrowed his eyes at the computer screen.

“Nope, looks good here. I'll get that printed out and laminated for you.”

Simon Paulson pulled out a pen and made another check mark on the list in his hands. “Non-driver's license photo-identification, along with the paperwork at the bank, should get your foot in the door as far as real estate is concerned. If something does come up, be sure to call me obviously, but I would like to think we've covered enough bases that a lawyer need not be mandatory at every stage of the process.”

“Uh... Doctor... is it Al-Feez? Or Al-Fiss, or something else?”

“Uh. Al-Feeze is fine.”

“Okay. You're up.”

“Ok-kay.” The scientist took the place in front of the camera that had previously been occupied by the queen, and the clerk adjusted the camera for the large difference in height between the two monsters.

“So what's next for you guys? Starting a business? Heading to DC to talk to the federal government?”

“Actually, our immediate plans involve the purchasing or renting of living space on the surface.”
Toriel nodded towards the side of the room, where a child in a striped shirt was sitting in one of the chairs for people waiting for paperwork to be processed, their head hanging down so their chin was resting on their chest. “While the accommodations at the Roll-On-In Traveler’s Hotel are comfortable, they are ultimately temporary in nature until we can establish a more permanent foothold. And certainly Frisk could stand to benefit from more stable living conditions—”

“I’m not asleep,” Frisk mumbled as their head shot up and glazed eyes looked out over the room. “Just resting my eyes.”

“I know Frisk. It is alright.”

“Well... I wasn’t going to say anything, but... my family rented for a long time. And some landlords are great, and some are absolutely the opposite. If you really want to aim for stability, you should probably skip the renting phase and go straight to home ownership.” The clerk shrugged. “I mean, if it's an option.”

“I see. That is good advice, and I shall consider it carefully.”

“Happy to help.” The clerk turned back to the computer. “Okay, Doctor Alphys. Hold still, and...”

Officer Steve coughed and took off his hat, running one hand over the sweat that had accumulated on his forehead.

“Ugh. I think I'm going to be sick.”

“you want to bail?”

“Yeah. This heat is...”

“say no more.”

There was a flash of blue light, and Officer Steve found himself staring at a town enjoying mid-morning sunlight from the relative comfort of a dark cave entrance shaded by the mountain above. It was a far cry from the scene of liquid magma, hot rock, and air wavering in the oppressive heat.

“...right now, I'm amazed that any kid managed to make it through Hotland.”

Sans nodded.

“It's not quite as bad on the upper levels, but it's still pretty hot. Also, we jumped right from Snowdin to Waterfall to Hotland. Anybody traveling through the Underground would have time to acclimate gradually, even if they took the underground river.”

“I'll take your word for it.” Officer Steve sighed. “Think you can get us back to the hotel?”

“easy peasy, one two threesy. you sure you're up for another jump? you don't look like you're doing too good.”

“That's mostly the heat. I think I'm getting used to the teleportation.”

“okey dokey.”

With another flash of blue light, the scenic vista was replaced with a more urban view; a parking lot next to a small hotel. Officer Steve breathed in and out a few times, shaking his head.
"I may be getting used to it, but it's still trippy."

"taking trips is definitely something it helps with," Sans replied, and Officer Steve stared at the skeleton; it was hard to tell given that smiling seemed to be Sans' default expression, but he somehow seemed to be smiling even more than usual, if that was possible.

"...was that a joke?"

Sans just grinned back at the policeman, who shook his head and walked towards the hotel door.

"I'm going to go write up what I saw and pass that along to the rest of the department. I'm also going to recommend that human travel to the Underground be restricted on grounds of safety. Especially the part with all the liquid hot magma involved."

"that sounds like a good idea."

Officer Steve reached out for the door, but paused at the last moment.

"something on your mind?"

"Those security cameras you had. Did they record Frisk in the Underground too?"

"yeah."

"...why were they not included on those tapes you showed me?"

Sans shrugged.

"Because the tapes were Frisk's idea. They grabbed Alphys and me and put the whole plan into action. You could ask them next time you see them."

"...perhaps."

"...it also has a half bath on the ground floor with a full bath on the upper level. The windows are double glazed and the..."

The man trailed off as he realized that nobody present was listening to him; the human child had immediately headed for the kitchen, and the sound of the taps running could be heard. After a few seconds, the sound ended and the child walked back out.

"No signs of leaks in the pipes, or mildew or staining from leaks in the past, but there is some corrosion. Some of that is an issue with the water here, so it's not something we can avoid, but it is going to require some work. I'll check the upstairs bathroom next. Oh, and the stove is electric."

"Thank you, Frisk." Toriel turned to face the real estate agent as the child ran up the stairs to the second floor. "Mr. Colton, I see that this dwelling has a fireplace."

"Ah, yes, that is a late twentieth century reconstruction of an early nineteenth century fireplace and mantelpiece."

"A reconstruction? Does that mean that it is not original, or that it is not, in fact, a fireplace?"

"Uh... I would say the latter. The house has central heat and air conditioning, so an actual fireplace isn't needed for heat."
“So it is purely decorative.”

“Yes.”

“I see. Tell me more of this central heat and air conditioning that you mentioned.”

“Well, the inside of the house is filled with air ducts, under the floors and in some interior walls. All of these ducts are connected to a central machine, located outside in the backyard, that functions as a heater in winter and an air conditioner in the summer.”

“I understand the obvious functionality of a heater, and I infer from your statement that an air conditioner exerts a cooling effect upon the interior of the house.”

“Oh. Yes. In so many words.”

Toriel turned at the sounds of footsteps coming down the staircase, where Frisk was descending while looking at a small list in one hand.

“Hot water tap handle in the bathroom sink is a little loose. Might need to look at that in the future.” Frisk turned to look at Mr. Colton as they reached the ground floor. “What is the heat source for the hot water supply, is it electric or natural gas?”

“Oh. Electric.”

“What about the clothes dryer, if there is one?”

“The clothing dryer is also electric.”

“Alright. Have there been any issues with pests? Termites, cockroaches, bedbugs, anything of that sort?”

“No. There are no records of insect problems.”

“What about rodents?”

“No.”

“Last question. Why did the previous owners leave?”

Mr. Colton waved a hand in a vague gesture. “They didn't specify, but considering that they sold the house at a loss, I would guess that they did not want to be living so close to a cult that rumor said was kidnapping people in the night. Fortunately, that's no longer an issue.”

“Alright.” Frisk turned and walked over to Toriel, handing the boss monster the list in their hand. “That's everything that my personal knowledge covers. We are going to want to call in a professional electrician or building inspector to go over the lights and wiring, and possibly check the foundation. I'm not certified for that kind of work, obviously, but we'll also want to establish a paper trail and records. Also I got a text from Alphys while I was checking upstairs, they're ready for us in the park whenever we're done here.”

Toriel pulled out a pair of glasses from one pocket of her robes, balanced them upon her muzzle, and peered at the list. After about twenty seconds, the queen smiled and looked up at Mr. Colton, and the real estate agent swallowed. Fur or not, maroon colored eyes or not, horns or not, that was the expression of somebody who knew their way around the bargaining table.

“I think we can do business, Mr. Colton, just so long as a few issues can be resolved first...”
Asgore Dreemurr did not look up at the sound of the knocking on the door.

“Come in. The door is unlocked.”

The door latch clicked, and in the threshold a man in a blue uniform appeared.

“King Dreemurr.”

“...Officer Ward.”

“...Sans took me to the Underground, or at least parts of it.”

There was no response from the King.

“...between that trip, and what I saw on those tapes... I find myself wondering just how Frisk survived.”

Asgore sighed.

“Frisk is very determined.”

“Yeah... I noticed.”

The hotel room was silent for a few moments.

“King Dreemurr... the coroner's report, the VHS tapes, all of it supports the claims made by the other monsters and the ambassador, that every human death in the Underground was accidental. You could have just left it at that. Why did you try to take responsibility personally?”

“...as I said before, Officer Ward. My authority was absolute, and so was my responsibility. One cannot have either one without the other.”

Officer Steve stared at the king, then turned and stared at the television; it was off, but it still had a tangle of cables used to connect it to a VCR.

“...we're going to try to find the families of the children, but it's going to be complicated. The Sages had everyone running around in a blind panic for so long...”

Asgore did not respond, and Officer Steve sighed.

“I've been doing this job for too damned long, and it's been less than a decade. I've been talking to everyone, trying to figure out what the angle was, why you were telling me what you were telling me. It never occurred to me that you didn't have an angle. I've gotten so used to having to hunt down the truth that the idea that somebody would just tell it to me... it feels alien now.”

“...it was not our intention to deceive, even indirectly-”

“I arrested a teacher earlier this month.”

Asgore stopped talking, and Officer Steve shook his head. “She had confiscated a student's insulin. The kid needed that to survive. And the kid ended up going into a diabetic coma. And the school board still stood by the teacher's decision. I almost arrested every single member. We... we have lost so many people in the last year. Not just the six that fell into the Underground. People I have known all my life. People whose families knew my family long before I was born. And the Sages just...”
Officer Steve stopped talking, and after a few seconds, the police officer turned to face Asgore again.

“King Dreemurr. I want to apologize for what I said before. I have been... I have been very angry for some time, and I have not been able to separate my personal issues from my professional responsibilities. That is impacting my ability to serve the people of this town and to be an impartial enforcer of the law. It ends now.”

Asgore blinked, and Officer Steve turned towards the door to the hotel room.

“I don't know what the department as a whole will come back with as far as official statements, but I will keep you and everyone else up to date on everything, to the best of my ability.”

“...thank you, Officer Ward.”

“Okay,” Frisk tried to muffle another yawn. “Thank you all for your patience and patience related activities. One of the biggest questions related to monsters is magic, and everyone wants to see it in action, so meet our volunteers for today.”

A tall skeleton began to wave vigorously, while the fish woman nearby started to laugh.

“A lot of you probably recognize Papyrus from our spaghetti demonstration Wednesday. And Undyne is the Captain of the Royal Guard. You guys ready?”

“THE GREAT PAPYRUS IS ALWAYS READY TO SPAR! ANY TIME, DAY OR NIGHT, ANY DAY OF THE WEEK! EXCEPT WHEN METTATON IS ON TV.”

Undyne laughed even harder, and a spear formed in her hands. A few humans made noises of concern or alarm, but Frisk turned to see Papyrus hold out his arms and bones rise up from the ground.

“Okay, so the first thing to keep in mind is what I said on Monday when we showed up. Magic is a function of will and intent. Undyne and Papyrus are pretty good friends so they don't actually want to hurt each other. If you have a friend and you punch them in the arm or something as a token of affection, it's the same principle at work. The difference is that just punching a friend is pretty simple and subtle.”

Frisk turned to their friends again, and raised both thumbs. Undyne immediately released a series of spears from the ether, which collapsed as they collided with bones shooting up out of the ground in perfect sync. The exchange lasted almost twelve seconds before Undyne stopped and Papyrus let the bones vanish again.

The Ambassador turned back to the humans, some of whom had stepped away very quickly at the sights and sounds of magic bullets forming and colliding in rapid succession.

“As you might have noticed, magic is not subtle.” Frisk grinned. “And Undyne and Papyrus are definitely not subtle.”

“And monsters can just do that, at any time?” someone in the crowd asked.

“While the specifics are as complex and nuanced as in any human culture, there are specific rules for sparring-”

“Why didn't you tell us that they could attack people before the election?! What the hell are you
trying to pull?!"

Frisk rolled their eyes and turned towards Papyrus.

“Hey, Papyrus! Can you do that Really Cool Regular Attack again?”

“WITH EASE AND EXPEDIENCY AND SOMETHING ELSE THAT STARTS WITH AN E!”

“Exuberance?”

“YES! THAT MEETS THE DEFINING CRITERIA!”

Papyrus waved his arms and bone shaped magical bullets appeared, some diving into the earth and some following along the surface, culminating in a series of bones flying through the air spelling out the words “COOL” and “DUDE” and a bone wearing sunglasses riding a skateboard and jumping over another set of bones.

“Thanks Papyrus. That one was a little different than I remember.”

“YES, BECAUSE THIS TIME I DID NOT HAVE TO IMPROVISE AFTER THAT ANNOYING DOG STOLE MY SPECIAL ATTACK!”

“I guess that would do it.” Frisk turned back to the crowd again, and noticed that the agitated person in the crowd had been stunned into silence with everyone else. “You are probably concerned about the capabilities of monsters to hurt you. That is understandable, but it is unfounded. The reason it is unfounded is because you are in more danger from the other humans standing right next to you, right now. Are you worried about the person on your right stabbing you in the heart? Probably not, and that's okay, because the vast majority of people are not going to kill another person.”

“But some humans do kill others, and that-”

“And that is why you need to stop looking at monsters as threats exclusively,” Frisk interrupted. “Otherwise you'll completely miss the human threats around you. Do you still have your wallet, sir?” The child pointed towards the man who had been protesting the loudest over the revelations about what monsters could do, who reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet.

“That's a stupid point you're trying to make. Nobody stole my wallet.”

“Actually you made my point for me, sir.” Frisk pointed at the wallet. “While you focused on the monsters, another human could have-”

“Another human didn't. All your talk about what might have happened and what could happen doesn’t matter compared to what actually is. And the monsters pose a threat. That is real.”

Frisk narrowed their eyes at the man, then turned to Undyne.

“Undyne. Tag me in. Let's go.”

“Undyne you will do no such-”

“Somebody needs a demonstration, your majesty,” Frisk interrupted Toriel. “I'm the Ambassador, and I'm Ambassadorizing right now.”

“Alright then!! Let's get this party started!” One spear formed out of the ether and Undyne tossed it at Frisk, who caught it easily. “You ready, punk?”
"I'm ready. Don't hold anything back. I'm trying to prove a point here."

"Okay!!" Spears coalesced into being and rocketed toward the child, rapid fire. The spear in Frisk's hands flashed left and right, knocking back the magical attacks, even a pair that spun over the child's head and reversed course. Another salvo appeared, and were deflected just as easily.

"Undyne, I said *don't* hold anything back."

"Why you little..." Undyne gritted her teeth and unleashed yet another storm of spears, which were blocked just as easily.

"That's more like it." The next salvo, Frisk blocked some spears, dodged others, and as the final spear homed on in them, stood up straight and slammed their spear into the ground to one side, making no defensive or evasive action whatsoever.

Undyne's last bullet struck through the child's chest, then evaporated. There was a cry of alarm from Toriel, a panicked squeak from Dr. Alphys, and similar noises from the various humans who had seen the child struck, but otherwise the park was silent. Undyne's massive, almost feral grin had vanished in an instant, and the captain simply stared at the child in befuddlement.

Frisk turned back to the crowd and pointed at the man that had been interrupting them before.

"You. What's your name?"

"...Riley. Dwayne Riley."

"Okay Mr. Riley. You're up."

"...what?"

"I mean, it's your turn to fight Undyne. It's obvious you have opinions about monsters, so they should at least be *informed* opinions."

"...I'm not doing that."

"You don't have to let the last attack hit you like I did, I was just making a point. I'm only eight years old. If I can block, dodge, and simply survive attacks like that, then fully grown adults have nothing to worry about."

"You think I'm some kind of idiot? I'm not putting myself in harm's way just to try to prove your setup isn't a setup."

"Then by that same logic, you cannot conclusively demonstrate any claims regarding what is going on here, since you won't take actions that could prove or disprove your claims." Frisk returned their attention to the rest of the crowd. "In case you're wondering if that hurt, yes. It did. But that's life. We all do things we don't necessarily want to do, or which are unpleasant, because we need to. Doesn't matter if it's getting up early for school or work, or getting a shot at the doctor's office. And that's about as much as it hurt when I let that last spear hit me, a little stabbing pain and then it was over."

Frisk grinned again.

"I hope that I've made my *point.*"

Frisk let go of the spear, which evaporated in seconds, and pulled out their cell phone. After thumbing through some menus, the phone generated a flash of blue light, leaving behind what
looked like an apple with pincer shaped protrusions growing out of one side. The child bit into the Crab Apple and swallowed.

“Now, the most important thing in all this is to remember that when Undyne and Papyrus were sparring, they were each using magic. And each one of them was using it in a way that was most comfortable for them. That's because, for monsters, magic is a form of expression. Of course, when I was sparring with Undyne, she had to make a spear for me to use, for it to be fair. And when I was in the Underground, a lot of monsters didn't bother with that because they didn't realize that I couldn't respond in the same way. The Barrier being destroyed is changing a lot of things for humans, but monsters will be changing too. We'll get everyone to understand that an invitation to trade magical bullets is *not* how we say hello up here before they head out and set up shop... alright, so does anyone have any questions? Now seems like a good time for them.”

The wall mounted display froze, pausing on a frame of a young child with messy hair eating an oddly shaped fruit. The various figures seated at the table turned away from the screen, and looked at each other.

“Well... if Frisk set out to make a point, they certainly succeeded.”

“Is Frisk a boy or a girl? I can't tell.”

“No idea. And I suppose, in the big picture, it doesn't really matter.”

The table was silent for a few moments, until one man in a uniform sat up straight.

“This is not public knowledge yet, but the police report does not find the monsters at fault for the deaths of the other humans that fell into the Underground. No further criminal investigations will be opened at this time, unless of course new evidence comes to light.”

“Not a lot of people are going to be happy about that.”

“True. And you all saw the video. That child was willing to just... let that magic hit them. Not a lot of people are going to make the distinction between a demonstration and an act of abuse. That stunt was a double edged sword at best.”

The room was silent again, and Officer Steve turned to another man wearing olive coveralls covered in grease stains and oily patches.

“Hal, you've been quiet for a while now, and that's making me nervous.”

Hal leaned forward and held up his hand.

“After I went to that food court open house thing in the park on Wednesday, I bought an ice cream from that rabbit guy. Before I was finished eating it, I could feel my thumb again.”

The room was silent, but every face at the table seemed surprised or confused.

“So monster food can repair severed nerves?”

“That's what it seems like.” Hal wiggled his fingers again. “I'm not willing to cut it off and see if it happens every time, but the fact that it happened even once is important. I'm not saying we write them a blank check. But considering what we stand to gain, I say we keep an eye on them.”
The room became silent again, and then one very large figure leaned forward. “Frisk has been checking out books at the Librarby. Political science, economics... hell, they got a book on adoption on Saturday. Whatever they are looking for seems to be a barometer for what the monsters are trying to do, at least so far. I can keep tabs on what they're looking for.”

Officer Steve frowned. “Wait, Saturday? I thought you were at that press conference thing Saturday.”

Van Garrett blinked, then pulled out his phone. “I think I was. What day is today again?”

“Monday.”

“...god dammit, I did it again. Fucking figures.”

Hal grinned. “Hey, don't worry about it. As long as you're just mixing up your dates and not losing whole days, it's all good. The calendar is just a social construct anyway. Having said that, perhaps it is time for you to admit that I am the King Of All-Nighters.”

The librarian did not seem to hear Hal's commentary.

“I'm surprised nobody called me out on it.”

Next to the librarian, a much skinnier man with pronounced spectacles grinned. “It couldn't possibly have something to do with the fact that you weigh three hundred pounds and can bend a crowbar into a pretzel with your bare hands.”

“Naw, too obvious.”

There were a few chuckles around the table, but they quickly died down, and the bespectacled man spoke again.

“That yellow lizard monster, I saw in some YouTube video that she's trying to set up some sort of magic science lab. Whatever they're working on, we probably need to know about... and it would be nice to get my money's worth out of that degree.”

Officer Steve nodded. “I'm already associated with the monsters, and I expect that assignment to continue for the foreseeable future. I suppose it would be the easiest way to keep my ear to the ground as far as any evidence or proof of monster violence or criminal activities.”

There was a scraping sound as boots were removed from the table surface, and the man wearing them rested one arm on the table.

“You know... that video. That showed Frisk talking to that guy who does that newsletter thing. Something Riley. I doubt he's the only one getting agitated about these recent developments. If the rest of you guys are watching the monsters, I'll keep an eye on the human angle. That way we have both sides covered. Also, something tells me Hal is going to volunteer to do long term testing for the safety of humans eating monster food.”

“Ah, you know me so well. It must be twu wuv.”

“God dammit.”

“Mawwiage. Mawwiage is what bwings us togeth-”

“I will slap you silly if you make one more Princess Bride reference today.”
Officer Steve sighed. “Guess this is going about as well as can be expected. Eli, you got anything to add?”

The one figure at the table who hadn't spoken yet stared at his phone, then looked up at Officer Steve.

“...I can hire a monster to tend bar easily enough, if one applies to work here. But frankly I'm more concerned about the internet response. Outside of the county lines we're looking at a lot of outright disbelief, and everyone's shrugging it off as some elaborate hoax or meme that got out of control. When the critical mass of evidence ticks over and people realize this is actually happening... I don't know how they're going to react. This is definitely one of those watershed moments in human history, and even trying to extrapolate how different human cultures reacted to contacting each other is just a best guess. We're flying blind right now.”

The room became silent once more, before Officer Steve shook his head.

“As if we've ever been anything else.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, sorry about the delay. Getting this chapter written has been like pulling teeth.

I mean that almost literally; I was at the dentist earlier this week, and it turns out having somebody rummage around inside my mouth with power tools really messes with my creative process.
Making Moves

Toriel’s eyes oscillated back and forth, scanning every line of text on the document, and then finally looked up.

“This looks acceptable.”

“Excellent. Sign on the bottom line, and we can have Mr. Forsythe witness it.”

“I'm what now?”

Frisk sighed and pinched the bridge of their nose. “I think Mr. Paulson means witnessing in a legal capacity, not a criminal one.”

“No, I understood, I just... kinda felt like you were volunteering me there.”

“Oh. I'm sorry, that was not intentional.”

“I mean, I'll do it if it'll help but you could have asked first.”

“Of course. I apologize, Mr. Forsythe. I can only attribute it to fatigue and stress. This last week has been very unlike all the weeks that came before, and the Exchange Trust and Monster Citizenship cases have been textbook definitions of rush jobs.” Mr. Paulson shook his head. “It's almost as bad as the first day at law school. Almost.”

“Right, right.” Quentin accepted the pen that the lawyer held out and added his own name to the legal document. “There you go.”

“Thank you, Mr. Forsythe. I had best get to city hall before they close and get the rest of the documentation filed, but you should be able to close that real estate deal whenever they're ready.”

“Thank you, Mr. Paulson, and have a good afternoon!” Toriel said with a wave as the lawyer walked out of the hotel lobby. Turning to Frisk, she noticed the child making notes on a sheet of paper. “I must confess that this is going much faster and smoother than I ever expected.”

“The phone beeped a few times before it registered to Dwayne’s conscious mind, and he dropped the marker he was holding in his scramble to answer.

“Dwayne Riley speaking.”

“Dwayne, it's Miles.”

“What's up?”

“I just got back from Gemini Roads and I heard something through the grapevine. You know how you were talking about monster gold? Well, the guy who owns Pith Jewelers apparently took a trip to Ebott's Wake today, totally out of the blue.”

“Hmm... could be coincidence but we can't rule anything out. Thanks Miles. Keep me posted.”
“Will do.”

The call ended, and Dwayne returned his attention to the complex diagram he was still compiling, which had spread between two large whiteboards and one old fashioned cork board, the non-marker connections made using string held in place by magnets or push pins. Newspaper articles, magazine clippings, photographs and scribbled notes all competed for space and attention, most of them converging on (or diverging from, it was hard to tell exactly) a single sheet of newspaper.

That particular sheet of newsprint happened to be the front page of the Ebott's Wake Herald from Tuesday the previous week, and it displayed a picture with two massive horned monsters, two skeletons, a fishy-looking woman with an eye patch and long red hair, and a short yellow lizard in a lab coat... and in the center, a human child in a striped shirt. Beneath the picture, a bombastic headline read “LEGENDS COME TO LIFE” with a tagline that also dispensed with subtlety; “Mythical Creatures Emerge From Mt. Ebott, Human Child Leads Diplomatic Envoy.”

Not for the first time, Dwayne scowled thinking of the child, especially their antics and play acting in the park. Whatever reasons they had for doing what they were doing, be they threats, blackmail, or brainwashing, they were attracting not only a lot of attention but making a lot of waves as well. The special election had happened within a week's time, and second hand stories from all over town indicated that processes that would normally take weeks or even months were being expedited to finish in the same day, yet somehow the internet still hadn't really caught fire. The prevailing consensus was that the monsters were an elaborate prank or memetic mutation or some sort of bizarre stunt, like planking or that thing that involved pouring gallons of milk onto people’s heads.

When people actually realized that what was happening in the town was real...

Dwayne sighed. Government was acting fast and the internet was slow to respond to new events. It was like the monsters showing up had literally turned reality on its head.

“These plates are five for a dollar. Probably to make sure people buy them; they can't charge more for used plates than Wal-Mart does for new plates, unless they're rare collectibles or antiques or something.”

“I see. And the utensils?”

“Probably the same thing.” Frisk looked down the aisle. “I was hoping that we could grab that small slow cooker, but I guess somebody got it since the last time we were here. And it would just make human food anyway, so there's that.”

“Very well then. Let us move on.”

Frisk trailed behind as the queen navigated through the store, eventually stopping at the furniture section. The queen peered at the prices on the small beds and frowned.

“Hmm... I suspect that our resources have been stretched to the breaking point. At least, for the time being.”

“Yeah, furniture is pretty expensive.” Frisk tapped the wood with one finger. “I think it's the weight involved. The heavier something is, the harder it is to transport. Also mattresses have gotten really complicated in the last couple of decades. I saw that on How It's Made.”

“How what is made?”
“What? Oh,” Frisk’s eyebrows shot up. “I mean, How It's Made is the name of a show on the Science Channel. They go through three or four different items in every episode, showing how they get manufactured. One day it could be pocket watches, radios, and socks, and the next it could be cars, jet engines, surf boards and cheese.”

“Ah. I believe I understand now. I think I would very much like to see this show.”

Frisk grinned.

“Yeah, it's pretty great. So we'll need to get a TV set at some point.” The child's smile faded as they looked at the assorted beds, tables, chairs and desks. “Of course, that's going to be expensive too, even used.”

“Then we will add it to the end of the list.”

“Will do.” Frisk pulled out a pencil and a sheet of paper.

“I was speaking metaphorically, but I suppose a written reminder would not hurt... hmmm.” Toriel looked around, then moved along the furniture section until she got to a set of shelves that stacked blankets, pillows, sheets, and other related articles. “Frisk, what are your thoughts on our first night in the new house being a camp out?”

“...there's an idea.”

“Hmmm... this comforter looks well made, if well worn... there pillows also look promising... Frisk, by all means, if you see something that appeals to you, let me know-”

“How about this?” Toriel turned to see Frisk holding up a green sleeping bag, and the child was pointing out features with one hand. “The overlapping layers means the seams from one layer are covered by the other one so there's less heat loss, the zipper is in decent condition, and it's flexible, so I could... you know. Take it with me in the future to do, like, sleep overs and hangouts and stuff. Also good for outdoor use if we ever go camping. It covers a lot of bases all at the same time.”

“Your sales pitch is so well thought out, perhaps you should apply to work here when you are older,” Toriel said, but she was smiling as she said it. Frisk grinned in response and rolled up the sleeping bag as Toriel finished making her own selection, and parent and child proceeded towards the checkout kiosk.

At some point, Toriel was aware that she could no longer hear Frisk’s footsteps, and turned around. Frisk was standing at the start of an aisle that was filled with bookshelves, which were themselves filled with all manner of books. After a few seconds, Toriel coughed, and Frisk jumped, their face flushing in embarrassment.

“Oh. Right.” The child half-ran up to where the queen was waiting. “I know the Librarby's not that far away, and it wouldn't make sense to buy something I could check out for free. I just like books is all.”

“I do remember that you were especially interested in my bookshelf in Home when you first arrived,” Toriel nodded.

“Yeah. I'm ready to go when you are.”

“Very well then.” Toriel turned and began walking again, but slowed to a stop after a few moments.

“Actually, one moment Frisk.” The queen reached inside her robes to find the pocket where the
human money had been deposited, and pulled out some of the assorted bills. A five dollar bill was
selected, and Toriel handed it to a child with a confused expression on their face.

“I believe that under the circumstances, we should feel free to indulge in a few frivolities. You may
purchase whatever book, or combination of books, that this amount of money will cover.”

Frisk looked at Toriel's face, then the outstretched paw, and then Toriel's face again.

“...really??”

“Yes, really.” Toriel smiled. “I will wait for you at the checkout.”

Frisk slowly reached for the currency and took it from the queen, blinking perhaps more than was
strictly normal.

“Uhm. Thank you. Thank you very much. I. Uh. I'll be right back.”

Toriel nodded in acknowledgment, and made her way to the kiosk where a woman was standing
behind the cash register.

“Uh... did you find everything you were looking for?”

“I believe we did, and thank you. We are likely to return in the future to make additional purchases,
but for the moment these will suffice.”

“Okay then.” The human woman swallowed and began to look through the tags on various items,
tapping the appropriate keys on the cash register, and doing her best to avoid eye contact with the
monster in front of her. Considering that she had to look down to check the price tags, and the
monster was easily taller than six feet, this didn't pose any real difficulty.

A few seconds after the final total had been calculated, and Toriel handed over the required amount,
a human child walked up to the counter and placed a thick volume on it. Toriel tilted her head to
examine the title.

“Machinery's Handbook?”

“Yeah.” Frisk nodded, not looking up. “It's a few editions out of date, but I think a lot of the
information in there is still useful.”

“...I see. Well, if that is your selection, then let us finish up here and proceed to Wal-Mart for the
ingredients we require for tonight.”

There was a rattling noise as lock tumblers slid into place, and the door opened; inside, the lights
turned on automatically. Sans looked around, double checking that nothing had changed; by and
large, the folks in Snowdin Town were gregarious, trusting, and friendly, and not many people
bothered to lock their doors, but those people probably didn't have the same amount of baggage.

The tarp was pulled back from the machine, revealing an old keyboard and monitor, which had a
manufacturers label on it that might have once said something along the lines of “Commodore 64” in
the distant past. One switch was flipped, and power returned to the cathode-ray tube display; there
was the sound of static electricity as the screen was pelted with electrons and slowly started to glow.

Nothing new, which was either very good, or very, very bad.
Sans reached inside his jacket, pulling out the clipping he had cut from the human newspaper a few days prior, and slid it into the tray of a mechanism that probably started its life as a fax machine. Gloved fingers typed a few commands, and the photograph was reeled into the machine and fell out again. An overlay of the scanned image appeared on the monitor, and Sans typed some more.

And then it was done. Or had been done. Or would have already been done. Or something.

“Whatever,” Sans muttered to himself, and cut the power to the monitor again. The newspaper clipping was picked up and Sans turned to a set of drawers underneath the chalkboard. The machine was too cumbersome to move even if he could successfully transport it without losing the narrow window of signal clarity he had managed to find after months of constant experiments and testing, and he wasn't terribly confident about that. And if he felt confident about not needing the machine in the future, well, he wouldn't have bothered to send the picture back to a previous version of himself in the first place.

Still. Nothing in the transmissions from other alternate Sans had ever indicated that they escaped from the Underground before. So it was possible that this was entirely new. And even if it wasn't, it was still new to Sans. Even if everyone did end up back in the Underground again without remembering anything, that was no reason not to enjoy things while they lasted...

“just give up. i did...”

Everything was dark.

Not merely the absence of light, but its opposite, a claustrophobic shadow that spread into every nook and cranny, made it impossible to see, impossible to breathe, impossible to even think...

“Sans. I remember what you told me.”

Sans lifted his skull to look at the person who was speaking, but even that seemed like too much effort for too little reason; the figure was blurry and indistinct, half-there.

“I screwed everything up the last time. Because I was selfish. Because I was a coward. But I won't let that happen again. You told me that you believed I could do the right thing. I know what that is now. If you believed in me then... please, believe in me now.”

...flecks of memory tugged at his mind. A corridor of stone pillars and stained glass windows, lit by orange light.

Sans nodded solemnly. There had been something beyond this darkness, once. Something worth believing in, whether or not he knew for sure. He just needed to remember it...

Sans shivered, causing a rattling noise as some bones collided with each other, and resumed packing up the files in the drawers. Experimental evidence was the foundation of all knowledge; even the most elegant and simple theory was just science fiction if the senses and instruments didn't back it up. And yet, despite not having any evidence to support it, Sans was seized by an iron-clad certainty that there would never be another surge of anti-photons detected by his sensor network, ever again. That events would never again be reset back to some arbitrary starting point. This was it: The Final Timeline, where causality finally reasserted itself over the timespace anomaly he, and countless other iterations of him, had been tracking and studying.

He could feel it in his bones.

The skeleton chuckled and shook his skull, then left the drawers of papers and blueprints behind for a moment. The machine's monitor was powered back on, and some more keys were typed.
Somewhere else, a noisy printer began grinding out a hard copy of information, and Sans carefully crawled back underneath the tarp to retrieve it.

The virtual map didn't tell him anything he didn't already know, but it would be interesting to come back and get another readout in a few months and compare the two. And maybe a few months after that. It was something to look forward to, and if his irrational conviction turned out to be unfounded, well, he'd never know, so why not?

A ringing cell phone interrupted Sans' introspection, and Sans pulled it out of his pocket.

“ay, Sans here.”

“SANS WHERE ARE YOU? WE NEED TO LEAVE NOW IF WE ARE TO MAKE IT TO THE QUEEN AND AMBASSADOR'S HOUSEWARMING PARTY ON TIME!”

“hey Papyrus. just getting stuff packed for the big move. i'll meet you wherever you are and we'll take a shortcut.”

“I AM PRESENTLY IN YOUR ROOM, WHICH IS WHY I KNOW THAT YOUR CLAIMS OF PACKING ARE AN OUTRIGHT FABRICATION!”

“what, you think all these hot dogs and hot cats are going to move themselves?”

“I THINK THAT IF THERE WAS A WAY TO MAKE THEM DO SO, YOU WOULD HAVE DISCOVERED IT ALREADY.”

“welp, can't argue with that.” Sans dropped the sheet of paper onto the file box he had been sorting through, walked out of the workshop, and locked the door behind him. “on my way now.”

“This place is AWESOME!!! You could make ANYTHING in this kitchen!!”

“IT IS INDEED A PLACE WHERE UNPARALLELED CULINARY CREATIONS ARE CRAFTED!”

“Ahem...” Toriel interrupted, a smile tugging at her mouth. “There are other rooms to explore.”

The kitchen gradually became empty, and the monsters crowded into the living room; fortunately a combination of high ceilings and an open plan layout, combined with the lack of furniture, meant that movement was not impaired in any way.

“This fireplace looks... ornate, but it looks incomplete for some reason.”

“Right.” Frisk nodded at Asgore's commentary. “That's because it's not a real fireplace, just a really good recreation of one. It would take a lot of time, effort, and money to refit the house with a classical fireplace, but it wouldn't be too hard to just put a heater here, either gas fired or electric. Then again, with magic involved we may not even need to do that, but it's nice to have options.”

“Ah, of course.”

Frisk turned to look at Toriel, then looked up at Asgore.

“I found a couple of issues with this place that we were able to use to get the real estate agent to come down on the price a little bit, and I'll be fixing those that I can fix. Of course, the main reason we did this now was to force the issue of monster integration into the surface economy, and all the
legal stuff that comes with it. Everyone else will likely end up moving up here at their own pace, but I'll do the same thing for anyone that needs it. Maybe knock down the price a few thousand. Every little bit helps, and we really don't want human businesses getting the idea that monster customers and clients can be easily exploited.”

“I see. Thank you for the offer, Frisk.” Asgore looked up as two skeletons walked over.

“So, what's your next trick Frisk? starting a business, opening a museum, getting Mettaton a movie deal?”

“I LIKE THAT THIRD OPTION, YOU SHOULD OPEN WITH THAT!”

Frisk shrugged awkwardly.

“Actually, we've kind of painted ourselves into a corner here. We've done everything we can on the legal and economic fronts, and to be honest everything has gone better than I expected so my original plans are all out of sync. But to do anything more we need to wait for the Exchange Trust to start doing its thing. Identification costs money because of processing fees, business licenses are also an expense, and this house cost a lot even after Toriel talked the guy down. I mean, we needed to do this with somebody at some point to get our foot in the door anyway, but...” Frisk shrugged again and sighed. “Maybe more question and answer sessions? I don't want to just sit on our hands and lose all the momentum we've built up.”

Sans winked at the child.

“Well, if you don't mind a suggestion from the studio audience, maybe tomorrow you could work on getting this place some furniture.”

Frisk looked around at the empty living room, and into the doorway to the equally empty dining room.

“...you know, that's actually not a bad idea.”

“FORTUNATELY A HOUSEWARMING PARTY NEEDS NO FURNITURE! IT SIMPLY REQUIRES GOOD FOOD AND GOOD FRIENDS, TWO AREAS IN WHICH THE GREAT PAPYRUS EXCELS!”

“Ahh, Frisk, speaking of which, why don't you take your friends on a tour of the house while I get dinner started?”

“Okay. I can do that. You've all seen the kitchen, living room and dining room, so I guess we can finish the ground floor pretty quick and then head upstairs.” The human child walked over to a doorway behind the staircase. “This little hallway leads to the utility and laundry room and the half bath, and the room at the end will probably end up being Toriel's office or study. I think it was originally intended as a master bedroom or something, it's the only room in the house with an integrated closet.”

“THAT DOES NOT SEEM CONVENIENT, HAVING TO STORE EVERYONE'S CLOTHING IN ONE LOCATION!”

Sans snorted, and Frisk shrugged.

“Well, you're technically right. For every other room, we'll have to store clothing in furniture. Wardrobes, chests of drawers, foot lockers, and so on. The thing about built in closets is that they trade flexibility for convenience.” The child pointed at the closet doors. “Unless that closet space is
just not going to be used, we can't arrange any furniture we put in this room along this wall. Also the closet itself changes the usable floor space of the whole house. I'm actually a little confused why it's even here when the living and dining rooms have that open floor plan. Probably somebody did a remodeling thing in the past. Anyway, let's move on.”

Frisk retraced their steps to the living room and clambered up the stairs, and was followed by a number of monsters.

“That door goes to the full bath. All the other rooms seem mostly the same, so when Toriel asked what room I wanted I had to put a pencil on the floor and spin it to decide. So it looks like this one is mine. I don't remember which one she chose. It's been a very busy day.”

“no kidding.”

“Yeah. The other room will probably end up as storage or something. Also the windows for some of these rooms will open out onto the roof, which will make it easier to make repairs or install solar panels and stuff like that. So... yeah, that's the end of the tour, unless you want to go out to the backyard and listen to me go 'That's a tree' or something like that.”

“That sounds like fun,” the King said, prompting a nervous high pitched giggle and a boisterous cackle. Papyrus turned to stare at Undyne and Alphys.

“I GET THE DISTINCT IMPRESSION THAT THERE WAS SOME SORT OF PUN INVOLVED JUST NOW, AND I CAN'T TELL IF I SHOULD BE HAPPY THAT IT WENT OVER MY HEAD OR NOT.”

The house was suddenly filled with the sound of descending notes on a brass horn instrument, and Papyrus began to stamp one foot on the floor.

“SANS WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT PLAGUING MY LIFE WITH INCIDENTAL MUSIC?!”

“i dunno, i couldn't hear you over the sound of this trombone.” Sans turned to face Frisk, whose mouth seemed to be hanging half open. “hey, what's with that expression?”

Frisk pointed at the trombone with one finger.

“Just... where were you keeping that?”

“Well, my child. I would say that our first night in our new home has been most successful.”

Frisk yawned and turned away from the magical flame burning in the fireplace.

“Yeah. Papyrus was absolutely right. Good food and good friends are all we need, and furniture can wait.”

“Yes, though it should probably wait no longer than tomorrow. I was hoping that we could return to Home Castle and begin packing.”

“That makes sense, since we have a place to put everything now.”

“Then it is settled. Tomorrow we will begin the move in process in earnest.”

Boss Monster and human child stared at the fireplace for a few minutes, until Toriel saw something
change in Frisk's posture.

“Uhm.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Uh. Toriel...”

“Yes?”

“Is it... alright if I call you Mom?”

Toriel blinked and stared at Frisk, who returned their gaze to the fireplace, with a redness to their face that probably had nothing to do with the glare from the fire.

“Sorry. That was. A pretty weird question. And it made everything else weird. I mean. We were already looking for the adoption paperwork, but. I was calling you by your name for so long. And. I didn't want to assume. So. Never mind.”

“Actually... I seem to remember that you already did. And that after plying me with some of the most hilarious complimentary small talk I have heard in the last thousand years or so.”

Toriel giggled as Frisk's shoulders hunched up.

“Ugh. I'm never gonna live that down am I.”

“It is not likely.” Toriel's smile slowly faded away, and the queen stared at the fire once more. “Frisk, I... it has been a long time since I have had children to care for. I know that... you know about... Asriel and Chara. And before you fell, many of the other humans... I tried to protect and care for them, but...”

Toriel sighed.

“Thank you, Frisk, for asking to stay with me, when we were all watching the sunset.”

Frisk did not seem to hear Toriel, but the queen noticed that child's hands clenched tightly, with tremors in their arms. When they did speak again, their voice sounded somewhat hoarse.

“Thank you for saying yes.”

Yellow petals covered the ground as far as the eye could see, right up to the foothills of the looming shape of Mt. Ebott. A few loose petals drifted on the breeze, drawing Frisk's attention... towards a lone splash of white in the middle of the yellow. Before they realized it they were running, trampling the flowers with abandon, until...

“Frisk...”

“Asriel.”

The monster child was sitting on the ground, legs pulled up to their chest, chin resting on their knees.

“I can't come back, Frisk.”

“...maybe not yet. But one day... I think there's a way.” Frisk stepped forward and dropped down on
their knees, looking Asriel in the eyes. “This isn't like the Underground. Everything is different. Everything. And the people that... the ones that hurt you and Chara. They're gone. Everything is new, and....”

Frisk trailed off as Asriel looked away.

“Asriel... if nothing else, please don’t stay in the Underground. There's so much to do and see up here, and everything is different, and... you made it all happen.”

Frisk reached inside their pockets, and pulled out one of the tiny stars.

“Look at this, Asriel. You didn’t just destroy the Barrier. You did something else. I had these after our fight. They can change things. I know it. I knew it the instant I saw them.”

Asriel looked at the star, and then up at Frisk.

“Even if those could bring me back, they can't undo what I did.”

“...mistakes are not forever, Asriel. All the times I died... we died, and came back. That proves it. Second chances are real. We can try again. Both of us.”

Asriel looked away from Frisk again, and the human child put the tiny star back in their pocket.

“I won't give up, Asriel. If it takes me the rest of my life. I will bring you back. And you can... you and Toriel... and Asgore... you can be a family again. I promise.”

The human child and the monster child sat together, in the field of golden flowers...

Frisk's eyes slowly opened, peering at the world carefully behind mostly closed eyelids. The fire in the fireplace had burned down to small orange glow; not quite embers, but it was unclear if a magical fire would eventually be reduced to embers or if there was an equivalent.

Beyond their line of sight, they could hear Toriel snoring softly, the hum of the compressor motor in the refrigerator in the kitchen, and if they really strained, the sounds of night in a small town outside of the house.

Around them, they felt the texture of the fabric of the sleeping bag that they had gotten at Joe’s House of Stuff, during the same excursion where they secured ingredients and paper plates for the get-together at the new house.

That was all.

No Asriel.

'Not yet.'

But one day...

Frisk clenched their hands into fists and breathed in and out, slowly. It took the power of seven souls united to restore Asriel to his original form. That form faded with the loss of the souls... but it wasn't like turning off a light, or taking the batteries out of a flashlight, or Asriel would have disappeared the instant the Barrier was destroyed and all the souls were released. So there was some sort of element of persistence, or inertia. If seven souls brought that form back, then a fraction of that power, in the form of the stars, might be enough to sustain that form again, if it could be restored a second time.
It was the restoration part that was tricky.

Frisk’s hand reached for a pencil and paper that they did not have, and they had to suppress the impulse to make an annoyed sound, lest Toriel awaken. They would just have to try to remember everything in the morning. Alphys would be the person to talk about Souls and how magic interacted with them. And with more resources on the Surface, to say nothing of more humans and human Souls, actually learning more about how they worked wouldn’t pose any problem.

Or at least it would be easier than it was in the Underground. Whatever the results of Alphys’ research, Frisk needed to have access to them at some point. If it was made public, all well and good. If not, then subterfuge might be needed. Either way, understanding the results might end up requiring some sort of background knowledge concerning magic... something monsters would be very reluctant to let any human get their hands on for obvious reasons. So subterfuge would be inevitable at that point.

Between knowing how souls interacted with the body, how magic interacted with the world, and most of all how souls and magic interacted with each other, it was at least theoretically possible to build some sort of machine that could allow Asriel to form his old body again, provided it was given enough power. Then maybe the stars could do the rest.

Or maybe everything they had just thought of was completely ridiculous and Frisk lacked the background knowledge to recognize that fact. Still, it was a plan. And if that particular plan did not work, they could come up with another. And another. As many as it took to find one that would work and make it happen.

And Frisk would make it happen.

*No matter what.*
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“Gooooood morning, Ebott's Wake! This is Brett 'The Brett' Brinkmann here with the hottest early morning news that everyone's been dying to hear since last week when the story broke; Wesley Reed will be stepping down as chairman of the Lost Eagle County False Mustache Enthusiast Society. The official press release states that Mr. Reed is resigning his position in order to spend more time with his family, but of course rumors are flying back and forth regarding the scandal that everyone is... for some reason... calling 'Folliclegate' after the expose published in the Lone Point Forecaster that declared to all and sundry that Mr. Reed's facial hair was completely real. Now this is a hot button issue, so KEBT is not officially taking sides here, but as a personal thought? Folliclegate doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. Come on, people. I know we can do better than that. In other news, the Ebott's Wake Police Department has issued a report and made a public statement regarding the fates of multiple humans that had disappeared on Mt. Ebott. Turns out at least some of them fell into the Underground and the monsters have returned their remains as... I guess some sort of good faith gesture, or something? Jeff can we play that sound bite?”

“...examinations of the recovered bodies indicates a variety of causes of death, including hypothermia, illness, asphyxiatiion as a result of drowning, and heatstroke. These examinations have been corroborated by video evidence provided by the monsters. The Ebott's Wake Police Department is aware of the rumors that have spread regarding these events, and is declaring emphatically and unambiguously that no evidence of fault, criminal negligence, or premeditated harm has been found...”

“That's some heavy stuff and you can listen to the full statement on our website. Before we call up Gary and get the traffic report, though, here's the third most talked about story in the county, Kyle Zimmerman's interview with Vernon Forsythe. This is the first interview that the disgraced Assemblyman has agreed to give since his incarceration in the Rabbit Rock Penitentiary some two decades ago, following the protracted legal battle with the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi that exposed his network of criminal activity and financial influence throughout the county. Recent events have shifted the popular opinion of Vernon Forsythe from corrupt politician seeking to crush all dissent to something of a vigilante folk hero operating outside the law, not unlike The Green Hornet or The Count Of Monte Cristo. So this interview has been much anticipated, and we'll get that playing for you right away...”

“Oh my gawd it's so bright! How do people even see anything up here?”

“Like, maybe that's where all those sunglasses came from that we kept finding in the dump?”

“Oh yeah! That totally makes sense! Like, we should go back and get some!”

“Like, there's no time Catty. Alphys said she'd meet us up here.” The alligator monster looked around at the sparsely populated park, filled with golden flowers and a handful of people early in the morning, most of whom were staring at the two monsters with undisguised curiosity. “I wonder if
we're too early?"

“We should ask anyone if they’ve seen her yet.” Catty walked over to one of the few humans who wasn't staring at her and her friend, if only because his eyes were directed towards some sort of wheeled machine, and cleared her throat.

“Hey, excuse me? Like, can you help us?”

“Just a second... there we go.” The human looked up from his work, and did not seem at all surprised to be looking at a large purple cat monster wearing denim cutoffs. “Whatcha need?”

“Like, we wondering if you saw our friend? About this high,” Catty held up a paw to demonstrate, "yellow, scaly, has a fringe, thick glasses, lab coat, stutters a lot? She was supposed to meet us here this morning.”

“Uh... that sounds like that lizard scientist that's been on the news a lot lately. Haven't seen anybody like that personally, though. I could keep an eye out when I'm not working.”

“That would be great! Thank you soooo much! Oh. I'm Catty, and this,” Catty pointed to her taller companion, “is Bratty!”

“Nice to meet you both. Hal Greene. I'm the mechanic here in town.” The man held up a hand in a half wave, then pointed to his work with one hand while another hand opened up a container that was either made of plastic or fiberglass and reached inside. “And this is my bike. There are many like it, but this one is mine. Actually after what I've done, there are no other bikes like it. My mistake.”

“Ooh, what's it do?”

There was a sound of metal scraping against ice, and Hal pulled a slender metal beverage can out of the container, snapping it open with one hand and taking a long drink.

“Ah, that's the stuff. Sorry. Needed a pick me up just now. Like most bicycles, it rolls along the ground from place to place. That is where the similarities end. In my youth I attempted to achieve unheard of speed by mounting a rocket engine on my bike. That didn't work out. Today, though...” Hal grinned and pointed to a tube of iron piping with several smaller pipes and tubes feeding into it, mounted over the real wheel and right behind the saddle, “Today... will be different!”

The whole world was ending.

'Don't cry. Whatever you do don't cry. It'll just make things worse.'

All of the grand plans. Showing everyone all the historical sites and scenic vistas of Lost Eagle County. Making dinner for everyone to enjoy when the skeleton brothers got their own place or places, and Alphys and Undyne did the same. Helping Toriel inspect the old high school building. Going to other towns in the county to promote monster and human coexistence. Building a machine to restore Asriel's body.

'You're always sorry! You say you're sorry but this shit keeps happening!'

All for nothing.

'This is me. This is what I do. This is what I am.'
Shaking fingers reached for the shards of broken ceramic. The fracture lines were clear and the exposed surfaces would probably accept some sort of adhesive or cement, but they had never thought to purchase any. The possibility that they might need to mend something that was broken never occurred to them.

'what else did I miss what else did I forget WHAT ELSE DID I FORGET'

It should have. History and pattern recognition and memory alone should have sufficed. But there was no glue, there were no tools.

'why can't I do anything right what's wrong with me what's WRONG with me why do I BREAK everything my fingers touch'

There was nothing but the shards of the vase, scattered on the floor. There was no way to fix it. No way forward. It was all over.

'stupid stupid stupid stupid STUPID STUPID'

“Frisk?? Frisk, I heard a crashing sound, are you all right?!”

Even if they had the strength in their legs to run, and the endurance to make it all the way out of the Underground, Frisk didn't know where they could run to.

“Frisk!”

The human child flinched and braced themselves for impact, before remembering that Toriel was a monster and that she had been holding back the last time she used fire magic and Frisk would not be so lucky this-

“Frisk, are you injured? Were you cut?”

Frisk shook their head automatically, and heard Toriel sigh.

“That is fortunate. Can you explain to me what happened?”

“...I had.” Frisk paused, trying to swallow the lump in their throat. “I had. A box. In my hands. I didn't look. I didn't think. About where it was going. I turned. When I left the room. It bumped into. The. The. I don't even know what it is and I broke it, I broke it and I can't fix it, I...”

Frisk managed to stop talking before they broke down into tears completely. They heard Toriel moving, felt the vibrations of her footsteps, and then all the fragments of the broken object began to glow with a blue light and the child stepped back in surprise. But the shards simply gravitated together into a single hovering mass, and Toriel walked away, the blue light cupped in the fingers of one massive paw. Frisk turned to watch the queen walk down the hallway, heard the crashing, tinkling noise as the fragments were deposited in a trash container, and Toriel walked back down the hallway.

The child opened their mouth, but no words would come out.

“...Frisk? Are you...?”

'This seems like a good time to apologize.'

'even if I said the words it wouldn't mean anything I'll just break something else I always break something no matter what I do this keeps happening'
“...perhaps it is time to take a break. Frisk, will you please join me in the courtyard?”

Toriel slowly began to walk back toward the entryway, looking back at Frisk to make sure they were following. The child rubbed at their eyes and followed behind the queen. Out in the relative open space of the courtyard, Toriel carefully sat down near the tree. After a short wait, and Toriel prompting them by patting the ground, Frisk joined her.

“...I suppose that after the previous week, this is only to be expected. We are all running around, trying to do too much without enough time. Mistakes and accidents are inevitable under such conditions.”

“...yes. Toriel. I. I'm s-” Frisk's mouth and throat seemed to lock up, as if the words themselves refused to be spoken aloud. “I didn't... I didn't want this to happen,” Frisk finished awkwardly.

Toriel sighed, and looked up at the cavern roof.

“Long ago, when we were first constructing Home and Home Castle, it was tiring to try to maintain a magical light while also doing other work. So some of our artisans devised these lamps, infusing the clay with magic. A fireball, or a lightning bolt, or some other glowing bullet, would be deposited within, and the material would slow the magic from dissipating. A moment's effort would provide light for hours.” Toriel smiled. “They did not see as much use once we managed to create an electrical grid. You may have already noticed that I mostly used them as vases for plants.”

Frisk nodded, slowly.

“...that lamp had no particular significance to me, Frisk. If it ever did, it has long since been forgotten. And even if it did... accidents happen, Frisk. If I had wanted to be absolutely certain that an object was safely transported, it would be my responsibility to deal with it myself. In any event, it is one less thing to pack up and move now.”

“...it's still my fault. I should have been more careful.”

Toriel turned to look at the child, who was staring at the many dried leaves and had their hands clenched so tightly that their nails were likely leaving indentations in their skin.

“Frisk... my child, I am not angry. I am not upset with you. When I heard the crash, I was concerned for your safety. That is the sole reason I raised the volume of my voice. I did not mean to alarm you at any point.”

A massive paw rested on the ground next to Frisk's own hand, in an almost comical comparison. Toriel opened her mouth to speak again-

A flash of blue light illuminated the courtyard, and both the queen and Ambassador immediately looked up at Sans.

“Tori, Frisk! We gotta- oh. You're here. Good.”

“What is it, Sans? What is wrong?”

“The human police released a report about the fallen humans. They're not blaming us, but some humans are still getting up in arms about it. Papyrus is trying to keep Undyne from making things worse but I don't know how long that's gonna last. We need to get out in front of this.”

“Of course.” Toriel quickly got to her feet. “I am sorry Frisk, but it appears our break has been cut short.”
“Yeah.” Frisk scrambled upright as well, rubbing their face with one hand. “Duty calls.”

There was a flash of blue light, and the courtyard was empty.

The camera complained as its operator fumbled with the focus, until it finally centered on the face of the woman with the microphone.

“You got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Too bad we can't go live right now.”

The cameraman shook his head while doing his best to keep the camera still. “Even if we could I wouldn't want to with all that swearing.”

“Right. Rolling?”

“Rolling. Go ahead.”

The reporter schooled her face into an expression of detached interest.

“This is Kathy Greenfield, reporting from Ebott's Wake, Oregon. The recent appearance of monsters has thrown this community, already recovering from years of fear and uncertainty from the local religious extremists, into complete disarray. This morning, the Ebott's Wake Police Department released a statement regarding-”

“MURDERERS!”

“GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM!”

Both cameraman and reporter turned automatically towards the source of the yelling, a crowd that seemed to be getting bigger and bigger, not to mention moving closer all the time. Kathy turned to face the camera once again.

“As I was saying a statement was released this morning by the Ebott's Wake Police Department. Monsters had turned over the bodies of multiple humans that had fallen into the Underground. The police report stated they did not find any evidence of-”

“NGAAAAAH! COME OVER HERE AND SAY THAT TO MY FACE YOU COWARDS! I'LL FIGHT ALL OF YOU AT THE SAME TIME!”

The camera swung to see a tall skeleton monster holding back an angry fish woman, but just barely.

“UNDYNE I KNOW YOU WANT TO HELP BUT THE AMOUNT OF GOOD THIS IS DOING IS ACTUALLY RATHER SMALL I THINK!”

“The, uh, the report found no evidence of criminal activity and no warrants have been issued or arrests made, but a certain section of the population has taken this as a sign to protest-” The reporter flinched at the sound of broken glass, and the camera moved past her to where bottles, rocks, and rotten fruit were being thrown. After taking a moment to adjust the zoom and focus, the image resolved into the massive shapes of the monster king and queen, and the much smaller shape of a human child.
“What the- uh. It appears that. The people assembled to protest. Have started throwing debris at the monster royal family, and the ambassador. Uh. At this point, we would see if anyone would be willing to give us a statement but that does not appear to be safe to do, let's, yes, let's move somewhere safer...”

Frisk couldn't breathe.

Toriel's arms, wrapped around the child to try to shield them from the debris earlier, were probably not responsible, considering the grip was not as tight as it had been. On the other hand, seeing the mass of people throwing objects, hearing their anger, had done something. Thoughts seemed to fade out or end abruptly before Frisk could finish thinking them, every time the child tried to come up with a solution. They knew that the people wanted to fight, and that they would win an outright battle, so they had to do something or say something to stop them or distract them, and that was as far as they ever got.

Several times, their thoughts were drawn back to one of the half empty glass bottles that had been thrown their way. If it had been a few inches to one side....

Somebody was speaking, but it was a struggle to parse the words. It didn't sound like Toriel's voice... it was deeper, and it alternated with another voice, one much less familiar...

“It is true. Multiple humans have fallen into the Underground, and out of all of them only Frisk has survived. As ruler of the Underground during the time these events took place, I accept full responsibility for their fates.”

“But the police report stated that they did not find any monsters at fault.”

“I trust that the human police have done their due diligence in finding evidence of wrongdoing under human legal codes. But those humans died in my Kingdom. The responsibility is still mine. And as such, so is the responsibility to make things right.”

“I'm sorry, could you clarify... sir? Your majesty?”

'...he's going to sacrifice himself.'

Frisk lunged forward, pulling away from Toriel, sliding between the queen's paws before she could close them again.

“Frisk what are you doing?!”

The child sprinted, almost tripping over some of the flowers, until they crossed in front of Asgore's path and stopped, holding up their arms. The king looked down at Frisk, a confused expression on his face.

'Whatever happened before. You can't screw this up. You can't let him do this. You have to protect him. You have to protect everyone.'

“I can't let you do this Dad.”

Asgore's eyes widened in surprise, and Frisk could see behind him where Toriel's own expression looked surprised and confused, even as she was trying to close the distance. And beyond that, the human news reporters recording everything, but that was a side issue.
“Frisk... it is alright. This is something that I have to-”

“No it's not, and it won't help anything. These people aren't angry because of the other humans. They're angry because that's all they have. Anger and too much free time. If you...” Frisk swallowed. “It won't stop with you. They'll keep going. Mom and Sans and Papyrus and Undyne and Alphys and everyone else, until there's nobody left to kill, nobody left to hate. And they won't stick to monsters, either. I told you, there are terrible humans up here, and you'll have to protect monsters from them. But you can't protect them if you're dead.”

Asgore stared at Frisk, and the child swallowed.

“You can make things right, but this isn't the way.”

Frisk tried to tune out the angry yelling, the chanted slogans, the conviction that at any second some blunt object would collide with the back of their skull and start everything over again... and Asgore's shoulders sagged, and he nodded.

“Very well, Frisk.”

One paw reached out, and Frisk grabbed it immediately, the pair walking back away from the angry crowd, back towards the other monsters and the humans that weren't protesting and the reporters.

“DON'T YOU WALK AWAY! DON'T YOU FUCKING WALK AWAY!”

“COWARD! COME BACK AND FIGHT LIKE A MAN!”

“YOU LET THAT KID GO RIGHT NOW YOU FUCKER!”

“So,” Asgore spoke up in a conversational tone, probably to drown out the sound of humans swearing behind him, “did my ears deceive me, or did you call me 'Dad' earlier?”


“I do not mind, Frisk. Though... I must admit. I am a bit out of practice. And I doubt Toriel will be enthused about you being around me, and certainly not the same household.”

“We'll figure something out. Lots of human families separate too. Because of stuff that happened, or work life balance, or religious reasons, or other things.” Frisk shrugged. “We'll work out the details later.”

“Honestly, this whole thing is absolutely absurd. The monsters came to us with all these people that climbed the mountain and didn't make it back after only a week. They didn't have to. Nobody was pressuring them to do it. Nobody was even asking about it. This was a gesture of good will, made in good faith, and personally I think it serves as a good benchmark of their character and intentions. They want an open dialog. They're not playing political games. I'm looking forward to working with them in the future and I think all those people need to calm the- they need to calm down.”

“Thank you, Mr. Van Garrett.” The reporter turned to the camera again. “We still have not been able to reach any of the protesters safely to ask for their side of the story, but just now the Ambassador was speaking to King Dreemurr, we don't know what they were discussing but-”

A loud noise tore through the air, and the reporter, not to mention everyone else, turned towards the source of the sound; the crowd parted as the camera struggled to zoom in and focus on... a bicycle
producing a plume of smoke. The human sitting on the bike accepted a helmet from a purple cat monster nearby, and then the cat monster and what looked like an alligator monster stepped away quickly as the bicycle made another roaring sound, like a rocket taking off.

Despite the distance and the roar of the rocket engine, it was possible to hear the rider's jubilant scream.

“AND HIS NAME IS JOHN CENAAAAAAAAA!”

The bicycle shot forward. The crowd instantly began to disperse; protesters and bystanders alike fled as the rocket-powered cyclist made his way through the park in dizzying patterns that implied either a complete mastery of the vehicle or that the rider was just barely keeping control of the forces he had unleashed. Yellow petals from the ubiquitous flowers and dirt from beneath them filled the air, mixing with the smoke from the bike's propulsion system.

“...Ian, tell me you got that.”

The cameraman turned back to the reporter. “I got it.”

“Let's get this back to Matt right away. If this doesn't put us on the map, nothing will.”

Chapter End Notes

I didn't have time or room for a dramatic reveal / unreveal or anything like that for April Fool's this year, so have an old meme instead. :D
"an event unprecedented in human history, contact with another intelligent race beyond our own. Even more startling, they did not come from the stars, from another world under another sun, but they were right here all this time, trapped in the earth beneath our feet. They call themselves monsters, and claim to have been sealed underground ages ago."

"we have that up on screen? Thank you. As you can see, these monsters come in a variety of shapes, sizes and forms. Some of them appear to resemble anthropomorphic animals, but others, such as these two resembling human skeletons."

"-claim to be able to use magic, and this video demonstrates that they can use it offensively."

"to know is, why now? What changed? The monsters, they mentioned something called a Barrier. What was it, how was it created, and I think I'm not alone in asking how do we create another one if these creatures prove to be a threat to humanity? They have mentioned a war lead to them being trapped and there was probably a reason for that."

"the phenomenon spreading across the world like wildfire, the existence of real, living and breathing creatures straight out of mythology. On the internet we see hashtags like #realmonsters and #ebott and #teratophilia trending and many video streaming services are unable to keep up with the demand of countless people worldwide watching and watching again."

"have mentioned magic early and often. They claim to be made out of it, and video evidence of their demonstrations, while not conclusive, is still persuasive. Which raises a very important question, which leads to many more questions of equal importance; what exactly is magic? How does it work? Is it exclusive to monsters or can humans use it too? Some videos of the monsters speaking mention a Barrier that trapped them, that was created by humans using magic ages ago. How did we lose it? Can we get it back? What is it used for? Can we use it to address."

"And you shall not lie with an animal and make yourself unclean with it! Neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it, is is PERVERSION."

"attempt to secure an interview with what, or who rather, has been described as the Underground's sole celebrity, the entertainment robot Mettaton, shown here."

"seeing a big fluctuation in the precious metals markets, but crude petroleum, uh, has actually dropped a little overall since this started, this mirrors the larger stock market activity as assets were, that were abandoned and then immediately purchased by speculators, resulting in a minor drop, we, uh, we might have seen a pattern like this anyway but the circumstances have exaggerated the ups and downs a little bit."

"religious and spiritual leaders so far mostly fall into two camps, the 'end times' camp and the 'wait and see' camp."

"Tobacco and Firearms just left, this has to be a deliberate timed invasion, waiting until our defenses were lowest and then infiltrating."

"this video that appears to be the moment of first contact and you can see the police officer faint after shaking hands with the tall skeleton."

"talking about the fact that nobody was trying to hide this, this information, these videos and pictures were being put on the internet and for every person that believed it was happening there
were eight others who dismissed it as a hoax or special effects, and while that's not unjustified considering these events are unlike anything that has ever happened before, it definitely speaks to our skepticism both online and in general—" 

"-human child claiming to represent the monsters as ambassador, shown here making spaghetti and meatballs of all things—" 

"-hope to have eyes on the scene some time later today, and we will bring you more on this story as it breaks."

Frisk stared at the concrete sidewalk. The angles involved meant that they couldn't possibly see Toriel's expression. But they didn't need to look at it to know what that expression would be. 

"Frisk... this is..." Toriel paused, perhaps to compose herself. "You should not have kept this from me."

"Mom, I asked them not to."

Asriel's voice, coming from their right hand side. The urge to look up and see his face was overwhelming, but Frisk knew better. 

"...I see." Toriel sighed. "Asriel, I... it has been a long time. Please, come here."

There was the shuffling sound of movement, and the edges of Asriel's bare feet could be seen walking up to the house. Frisk could ignore the temptation no longer and looked up; Toriel had knelt down, and her arms were wrapped around Asriel. Her face even seemed... happy. 

And then she opened her eyes, and the expression on that face hardened. Frisk quickly returned their gaze to the sidewalk underfoot. 

"Frisk... what you have done... keeping this from me, all this time... still. You have brought back my son."

Toriel's breathing became ragged for a moment. 

"My anger, my disappointment... for what you have done. I will put it aside. Please wait here. I will get your things."

Frisk shook their head. 

"You don't have to. You bought them. Your money. Your things. That's how it works."

"Wait, what's happening? Mom, you can't kick them out just because—"

"Silence, Asriel. We will discuss this later."

"But Frisk—"

"It's okay Asriel. I knew this was coming." Frisk tried to keep their voice steady. "This was always waiting for me. I should leave."

Frisk turned toward the street, and heard the door to the house shut behind them. Their feet seemed to move without any input from their conscious mind, but they already knew where they were going.
Looming above the town, the silhouette of Mt. Ebott called out like a beacon, once again.

Legends said that those who climbed the mountain never returned...

Eyes opened carefully, slowly looking around. A mostly empty bedroom, with only a sleeping bag and a few boxes presently taking up any space. Frisk wriggled out of the sleeping bag and shook their head, pulling a shoe box over and opening the lid. Still seven of those miniature stars.

The child sighed.

'Don't get comfortable. This is just until he gets back.'

The lid to the shoe box was replaced, and Frisk opened up a larger box and pulled out some clean clothes.

A few minutes later, a more presentable and better dressed Frisk opened the bedroom door and immediately heard indistinct voices from the stairwell.

“...any ulterior motive at all, and I don’t even know what that would be, then I wouldn't bring up chasing Frisk down to try to kill them in the first place.”

“That is hardly a valid argument in favor of having you responsible for their safety.”

Frisk slowly made their way down the stairs, stepping near the edges of the steps in an attempt to minimize any squeaking that would give their presence away. The living room below was sparsely furnished, as the accumulated furniture and possessions that Sans had managed to teleport to the house before and after the park protest were unevenly spread across multiple rooms.

“You're right. The valid argument in favor of me being Frisk's bodyguard is the hundred odd humans that were throwing random crap at all of us yesterday.”

The memory of the events at the park made Frisk feel very, very cold inside, almost as cold as remembering the disaster with the breaking of the vase... or the lamp, as Toriel called it. Frisk peered around the railing of the staircase and looked down and back at the dining room; Toriel and Undyne were both sitting on opposite sides of the table, with tense expressions on what could be seen of their faces. Undyne moved her hands for emphasis as she continued to speak.

“You saw what Frisk did, jumping in front of Asgore like that, to stop him. You saw what they did when we were demonstrating magic for the humans, too. But you didn't see what they did in Waterfall. That kid that showed up for dinner last week, Poncho? He was following them around in Waterfall. He had no idea they were human until I told him. And he fell off one of the bridges when I showed up.” A webbed finger tapped the table for emphasis. “I thought if I tried to grab him, they would attack me. It didn't occur to me until it was all over that I could have taken them out with one hit when they were distracted. And I don't think it occurred to them, either, because they immediately ran over and pulled him up. Frisk wasn't even looking at me. That kid has zero sense of self-preservation and that's going to be a problem really fast.”

Frisk sighed and started walking down the stairs again. “Hey, that's a half-truth at best.”

Toriel and Undyne immediately looked towards the child in surprise.

“Oh, I did not realize you were up, Frisk.”
“I heard you guys talking about stuff I was doing. What's going on?”

Toriel frowned. “Well... Undyne is attempting to persuade me to make her your official bodyguard as ambassador. Apparently, you get into quite a lot of dangerous antics without supervision.”

“Well... you're not wrong.” Frisk rubbed their hands together. “In my defense... actually I don't think finishing that sentence will help so I'm just going to trail off awkwardly if that's alright.”

“...Frisk, I... I will be speaking with Asgore later today. I have remembered what you said, about presenting a united front. I do not believe that I can pretend that everything is alright. At the same time... when the subject of the fallen humans came up, my anger boiled up inside me again, and it clouded my judgment. I would have let Asgore sacrifice himself, either to the authorities, or to that mob. Even after everything I said in the Underground, about everyone deserving mercy. You should not have placed yourself in danger like that, but....”

Toriel sighed and brought her paws together, resting her chin on her fingertips for a moment, and Frisk got the distinct impression that the queen was remembering a certain battle behind a door that led to Snowdin Forest.

“...very well Undyne. I accept your offer. Frisk, Undyne is now your official bodyguard whenever you are acting in your official capacity as ambassador.”

Frisk nodded. “Okay.”

Undyne jumped out of her seat, landing next to Frisk and picking them up in one arm.

“Alright, punk! From now on when you do your political junk, we're gonna be a package deal! Speeches, negotiations, press conferences, the whole nine yards!” Undyne's knuckles came down on the child's head in a noogie. “And if you ever put yourself in danger on purpose again I'm gonna kick your butt!!!”

“That kind of defeats the purpose of having a bodyguard but okay,” Frisk forced out through clenched teeth. “Also my head really hurts now.”

“...oh. Right. Sorry.”

“-can see Mt. Ebott in the distance behind me-”

“-also word that another town, called Lone Point, is dealing with its own influx of monsters-”

“-called themselves the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, while the inhabitants of the town and the rest of the county referred to them as the Sages. As you can see, almost nothing remains of the cult's compound here at Bastion Circle; recovery and cleanup work has been ongoing since-”

“-still trying to secure an interview with one of the monsters but the locals have had plenty to-”

“-enough problems before they showed up! Drive em back down underground, that's what I say-”

“-there's like this one lady, blue scales and long red hair and she's ripped like you wouldn't believe, and all I could think was Thank you, God' cuz like it was Christmas and my Birthday and Halloween all rolled together into one-”

“-swear I had like one bottle of that Monster Soda on Wednesday and all my back problems,
problems I've had for over a decade, they are *gone*. And I don't know if they're going to stay gone but it's been really nice being able to get through the day without having to take Tylenol every couple of hours—"

"-wants to talk about it, but if the Sages were right about the monsters being real, what if they were right about the monsters being evil, and what do we do about-"

"-says she wants to start a school and I don't want my kids being indoctrinated or fattened up to be eaten or sacrificed or-"

"-love to talk to you at any other time but I have to be in Gemini Roads in like ten minutes so we can hold a quorum and nominate a replacement for that lying bastard Reed-"

Frisk tapped a fallen ceiling tile with their shoe, collapsing the careful balance of forces that had held it together and causing it to snap in half.

"Looking on the bright side, we should be able to get a good price for it."

"I am sorry Frisk, what was that?"

Frisk sighed. "Looking on the bright side, we should be able to get a good price for the place," they said, slightly louder to make sure their words could be heard past the cloth they were holding over their mouth and nose.

"Aha. Yes, I suspect you are correct about that. Although I also suspect that all of the labor and time needed to clean up the building will make up the difference."

"That too." Frisk turned at the sound of a crackling noise to see that another set of ceiling tiles had fallen down after being poked by one of Undyne's spears.

"Ok-kay, I did some checking, and I have good news and bad news." Alphys held up a clipboard covered in her standard chicken scratch writing. "The good news is that almost all of the damage and decay is purely cosmetic. Structurally the building is perfectly sound except for two spots on the southeast corner and I can probably fix that. Everything else, the floors, the ceilings, walls, windows, that can be replaced easily enough and we might even be able to salvage a lot of it. The b-bad news is that I can't isolate what this asbestos stuff is supposed to be so I can't figure out how pervasive it is, or find a way to magically tag it for removal."

"Hmmm..." Frisk scratched their head, then shook their hand to get rid of the dust that had accumulated. "If we started from scratch with a new building, how long would that take?"

"Well, I suppose if we used j-just a simple open floor plan at first and then subdivide it later with p-p-partitions-"

"Hold on guys, I need to make a phone call."

Frisk and Alphys looked back as Undyne walked away from the group and pulled out her cell phone, then turned to catch up with Toriel, who had raised one foot and was staring at the substance she had stepped in with an expression of disgust.

"Egads. Why would they leave such a place left to its own devices for so long?"

"Like I said, it's the asbestos. It's a fiber and it breaks down and starts floating in the air, that's why I
need this,” Frisk pointed at the improvised dust mask, “and if it's not cleaned up carefully, it just spreads it around where it can cause even more damage. That means the cleanup job is expensive, and they probably didn't have it in the budget. I don't know for sure but I think that's why they just built an all new high school on the other side of town.”

“But simply leaving the building to rot will eventually cause this asbestos material to leave the wreckage and spread into the surrounding area.”

“Yeah. It's not a perfect solution. It's barely a solution at all. But maybe we can make it work for us in the end.”

The shaking of the floor and the collapse of a few more acoustic tiles announced Undyne's return.

“Hey, sorry about that. I called up a friend and asked for a favor. Also I need to head back to Waterfall some time soon. Are you guys going to be okay?”

“Y-yeah? I mean. When we're done here, I was g-gonna go meet the people at the human recycling p-place, see what they do, maybe offer my... my... the stuff that I know?”

“We may as well do that now. I have seen, and stepped in, enough for one day, and I suspect we could all use a shower.” Toriel shook her head and slowly made her way towards the entrance to the building, with Undyne, Alphys, and Frisk following... until Undyne stopped and stared at her beeping phone.

“Well, that was fast.”

Toriel pushed the door open and, standing on the cracked sidewalk that bifurcated the overgrown lawn of dead or dying grass, were two skeletons and a monster that resembled an old fashioned washing machine on legs.

“Oh, hello Sans! I was under the impression you and Papyrus were still packing for the move today.”

“we were, and then somebody called in a favor.”

Undyne ran out of the building, stopping short next to the washtub monster.

“Hey Woshua! What do you think of the Surface so far?”

“It's... ugh. There's dust and dirt everywhere, there's human trash lying around all over the place, it's disgusting!”

“You ain't seen nothing yet, buddy!”

“They haven't seen anything yet, Undyne,” Toriel corrected as if by reflex.

“What the queen said! This is the building we're thinking about getting for her new school, but it's a real mess inside. And apparently there's some sort of stuff that makes humans sick, so we have to be absolutely sure to clean it all out!”

Woshua stared at Undyne, then looked past her at the school building, then at the queen, and finally back at Undyne.

“Is this, like, a job, or something we need to do before monsters can move to the surface, or what?”

“It's the ultimate challenge in cleaning magic! Even humans have trouble with this stuff! Right, Frisk?”
The human child nodded and held up the cloth they were using to filter their air. “That's why I have to breathe through this. Asbestos causes health problems we can't fix with medical science and it's too soon to tell if healing magic can do anything.”

“So if you can clean this up, the humans have to stand up and take notice! There's gonna be all sorts of magical stuff they're going to want to pay monsters for because they can't! Cleaning! Food! Healing! Stuff we haven't even thought of yet! If they realize we can make a whole bunch of their problems go away with a couple bullets, they'll fall over themselves helping us move everybody up here!! You get it?!”

“What I'm getting is scared, you're a very loud person, but I did understand the part where this helps us out. I'll give it a shot.”

“YEAH!!” Undyne yelled. “I'm feeling it! NOW GET IN THERE AND SHOW ALL THAT CRAP WHO'S BOSS!”

“Okay, okay!” Woshua ran down the sidewalk, causing the bird resting on the lip of the monster's wash basin to tweet in alarm. “Just stop yelling at me! Wosh u mouth with soap!”

The monster passed through the doorway, and in less than a second, there was a shout of disgust, fear, and outrage all mixed into one. Undyne looked around at her friends, her massive grin slowly fading away.

“...too much?”

“NOT AT ALL, I THOUGHT IT WAS EXACTLY THE RIGHT AMOUNT!”

“Surprisingly absolutely nobody.” Frisk ran their hand through their hair. “Well, either Woshua is going to manage the most impressive cleanup in history or he's going to run out of there screaming in a minute. Either way, we do have some stuff further on down the to-do list to work on.”

“That is true. As I recall, we have a considerable amount of paperwork to fill out.”

Undyne turned to the queen. “Wait, I thought you already got the house stuff squared away?”

“Indeed we did. The paperwork we are set to tackle next is related to Frisk’s adoption. In order to do this in the human legal system, there are numerous documents that must be signed and many forms to fill out. Considering the responsibility inherent in caring for children, such an in-depth process is entirely appropriate, but it will take us the rest of today and possibly...”

Toriel trailed off, frowning, then raised one ear with her paw.

“What a peculiar sound.”

“What sound, I don't...” Undyne's eye opened in surprise and she turned to face the street, where a number of humans with cameras and microphones had turned the corner and made a beeline straight for the monsters. Scant seconds later, several vans with assorted antennae and satellite dishes followed.

Frisk sighed and walked up to Undyne, patting her on the arm, probably in an attempt to stave off a spear-related defensive reaction.

“Well, it took a little longer than I thought but the Media Circus is finally in town. Come on everybody, let's get this over with.”
Son of a Beach!

“-managed to secure an interview with Queen Toriel Dreemurr, regarding the plans of monsters in the near future-”

“-not sure if it's ironic or appropriate that this should happen so close to Halloween-”

“-after the break on our new segment, Monsters And Magic: What You Need To Know-”

“-official spokesman for the anti-monster movement, Dwayne Riley-”

“-no response from the White House at this time-”

“-big question on everyone's mind, what happens next?”

“I am sorry, truly, but our time is limited today and we must be off very quickly. By all means, please contact us again some time tomorrow and I will do my best to address all of your questions.”

As Toriel lowered her paws, the reporters began all asking questions again, talking and even shouting over each other in order to be heard above the cacophony, which of course simply increased the level of noise while conveying no information content whatsoever. The queen's eyes narrowed and mouth twisted in an expression of annoyance.

“Was I not being clear just now, or could you simply not hear me over the noise?”

“HEY!” An amazonian fish woman stepped in front of the queen, arms outstretched and teeth bared. “The queen has told you that she's done answering your questions! And if you punks had actually been paying attention and been here sooner you would have gotten answers to ALL of them a couple days ago! We had a press conference and everything!! All you're doing is asking stuff we've already answered! You're like loud people coming in the middle of the movie and asking what's going on when everyone else is trying to enjoy themselves!!! CUT IT OUT!”

One or two reporters in the crowd actually flinched and stopped speaking, but the rest simply turned their attention and questions to Undyne.

“What's your name?”

“Why are you speaking for the queen, do you work for her?”

“What is your opinion on the so-called Anti-Monster League?”

Toriel's paw was grasped by a small hand, and she looked down at Frisk.

“I think Undyne is taking this one for the team, so we might be able to sneak away if you wanted.”

Before Toriel could respond, Undyne's eye twitched, and they grinned, showing even more teeth than they had before.

“So that's the way you want to play it? Okay then. Remember, you brought this on yourself.”

Undyne turned and waved at the skeletons, who for some reason had not been approached by the reporters or camera crews. “PAPYRUS! It's your time to shine! All of your training has been for this moment!”
“THEN THE GREAT PAPYRUS SHALL ANSWER THE CALL OF DESTINY!” The taller skeleton slid over as if the ground he stood upon was ice, until he was next to Undyne. “WHAT IS IT YOU NEED ME TO DO, UNDYNE?”

Undyne pointed at the reporters. “These humans are going to ask you questions. You will give them answers, in the way only you can!! Now make us proud!!”

“OKAY! WHO HAS THE FIRST QUESTION?”

What neither royal bearing nor angry fish noises could quell, finally stalled in the face of skeleton exuberance.

“...IT'S OKAY! TAKE YOUR TIME! I KNOW MY PRESENCE IS QUITE OVERWHELMING! IT HAPPENS TO A LOT OF PEOPLE!”

“Uh... what is your name?”

“I AM THE GREAT PAPYRUS! ONCE, AN ASPIRING ROYAL GUARD AND UNPARALLELED PASTA ENTHUSIAST, NOW MERELY AN UNPARALLELED PASTA ENTHUSIAST!”

“What's the Royal Guard?”

“ALAS, THE ROYAL GUARD WAS DISBANDED FOLLOWING THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BARRIER, AS INTEGRATION WITH THE SURFACE MEANS WE NO LONGER NEED SUCH AN ORGANIZATION. AND IT WAS MY LIFE LONG DREAM, TOO! DESIGNING PUZZLES, PUSHING BLOCKS, COMMUTING TO WORK ON CONVEYOR BELTS, ASKING ANCIENT RIDDLES! BUT THE WORLD MOVES ON, AND I SUPPOSE THAT'S A SMALL PRICE TO PAY FOR THE END OF CENTURIES OF IMPRISONMENT. LET IT NEVER BE SAID THAT THE GREAT PAPYRUS IS UNWILLING TO TAKE ONE FOR THE TEAM!”

As reporters continued to ply Papyrus with questions, with predictable (or perhaps not) results, Undyne stepped away from the crowd to where Toriel, Frisk, Alphys and Sans had gathered.

“Well, that bought us some time.”

“You are pure evil and it's so hot.” Alphys clapped both claws over her mouth as she realized what she had said. Undyne's eye opened wide in surprise, and a certain amount of red began to show up on a predominantly blue face.

“Actually, it feels rather cool to me, though I suppose with a fur coat and an affinity towards fire, my experiences would be... oh,” Toriel trailed off, and her paws came up to cover Frisk's ears. “In the future I will thank you to curtail such talk in front of any children.”

“Uh, mom. I can still hear things. Also I was there when Alphys and Undyne did their anguished declarations of love for each other. So none of this is actually news to me.”

“Still.” Toriel frowned as she removed her paws. “You are only eight years old, and-”

“THERE REALLY ISN'T A SNOWBALL TAX ON THE SURFACE?! FRISK TOLD ME THIS, BUT IT SOUNDED TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE!”

Sans chuckled, and Frisk began to giggle in response, until all sound was suddenly overwhelmed by a rumbling from the old school building. Eyes, eye sockets and cameras all turned towards the
structure as different colors of light surged in and out of windows, over stone and brickwork, resembling various ocean waves breaking along the shore and carrying along dirt and debris as they did so.

Eventually, the magic subsided, and the doors burst open; a monster ran forward, water spilling out the tub on its back, and it reared up on its hind legs with a little bird circling it, tweeting in alarm.

“I AM A CLEANING GOD!”

“Look, nobody else is going to say it, so I will. Why don't we just shoot them? We've got guns, they don't. Seems pretty straightforward to me.”

“They have magic, Greg. They may not need guns. Think about it.”

“I was thinking about it, dammit! Why do you think I said anything in the first place?”

“No, think about more than what's right in front of you.” The man who shot down Greg's suggestion tapped the table in front of him, apparently without any sense of irony. “The monsters all say they were trapped under some sort of Barrier, made by magic. And that was after some sort of war. If that's how the war ended then there had to be a reason that they couldn't be wiped out back whenever. I mean, assuming anything they said is true at all.”

“And how do we know that?” Greg got up from the table and started walking around, his footsteps stomping on the concrete. “Everything they told us could have just been ripped off from a fantasy novel or a video game or comic book. We don't have proof. What if there was no Barrier, or there was, but it was made by the monsters to protect themselves, and that's why they show up now because they realized they can-”

“Martin is right.”

Greg stopped in his tracks, turning to face Dwayne. “How in the hell do you know that? How does anybody?”

“Not about the specifics, about the central point. We don't have enough information about what monsters and magic can do to start a war right now. We could stumble right into an ambush with our opening strike and they could crush any rebellion instantly.” Dwayne pushed away from the table and stood up. “But Greg, you are right about us taking direct action. We just need a way to do so indirectly.”

“So we need to indirectly act directly. Easy. Want me to run to the store and pick up some dry water?” Martin quipped.

Dwayne didn't respond for a moment then walked over to the chart he had placed on the wall, pointing at the figure in the center of the newspaper photograph.

“The kid. Frisk. He, or she, or whatever they are, they speak for the monsters. Why? Bribes, threats, Stockholm Syndrome, Turkish Delight? And where are the kid's parents in all this?”

Dwayne looked back to the news clipping, and then turned to face Martin.

“Okay. I've got a plan. Greg, you and me are going to meet with those reporters in about forty minutes. Try to make some headway against this media shit storm. Martin, while we're doing that, you call the Lost Eagle County Child Protective Services. Not the locals, they're already swamped
after the Sages thing. The big department in Quarterhorse Fields.”

“Right, like they're not gonna be swamped too. Jesus... what the hell am I supposed to tell them? Just say I'm worried about this kid hanging around monsters? Not sure if you noticed but we seem to be in the minority when it comes to caring about what those things can do.”

“Just say you're worried about a child that may be neglected. Provide a description. If CPS doesn't show up soon, we'll get somebody else to make the same call. Rinse and repeat until we get results. Okay, I need to organize my notes for the interview thing, so we need to get going. Any questions?”

“Yeah.” Greg raised his hand. “What's Turkish Delight?”

“I was wondering that too but I forgot about it when you started talking about child services.”

Dwayne rolled his eyes.

“Ugh. Would it kill you guys to read a book once in a while?”

Undyne stared at Frisk, arms crossed, with her eye narrowed in suspicion.

“So... Halloween doesn't have anything to do with monsters?”

The human child stopped unloading a box filled with pots and pans to give Undyne their full attention.

“Not originally. If there was ever a date of significance regarding humans and monster interacting for real, it's been lost to time and translation and other stuff. Halloween started as a way of dealing with the fear of death, and speculation on the afterlife. That's why a lot of the decorations involve skeletons and ghosts, they're not referring to specific monsters, but the remains of the human body and the possibility of the spirit lingering after death.”

“Human Souls do linger after death, Frisk. Everybody knows that.”

“Every monster knows that, Undyne. I didn't even know Souls actually existed until I fell down into the Underground. Up here it's all speculation and theology debates.”

“Oh! I c-could write up a white paper on the known properties of Souls for humans to read up on! That could help with the integration p-process!”

Frisk shrugged. “Probably couldn't hurt. I was talking about something else... right. Over time Halloween became less about death and more about what was frightening, and deliberately getting involved with that. Scary movies, pranks, trick or treating, elaborate costumes, it all comes back to taking something that used to be scary and making it more approachable. That's why I wanted to get ready to make some treats to give out for Halloween, so we could get all the monsters involved and by next Halloween that's exactly what will happen. What was once scary and strange will become ordinary and normal.”

Toriel walked up behind Frisk and tousled their hair.

“And here I was thinking that this was an attempt to bribe the human children into changing their parents’ minds by using baked-”

A knock at the door interrupted Toriel, and Undyne backed out of the entryway to the kitchen,
forming a spear in one hand and opening the door a crack... and then wide open.

“Hey Officer Steve. Sorry about the spear, those reporters have been making a real nuisance of themselves.”

“Tell me about it. It's not just Ebott's Wake, either, they're swarming over every town in the county. Actually that's why I'm here. There's been an incident in Lone Point and based on what little I understood of the call we got, it involves the monsters over there and it probably is going to require the Ambassador or the King and Queen or both to fix.”

“Huh. Well. Asgore's in New Home, helping wrap up the paperwork to decommission all of the Royal organizations. Census, Treasury, Conflict Arbitration, Weights and Measures, Puzzle Standardization...” Undyne rolled her eye in exasperation. “But Toriel and Frisk are-”

“Right here.” Frisk pushed past Undyne. “So what's the nature of the problem?”

“We don't know the details yet, which wouldn't make me nervous except for all the reporters running around, poking and prodding and agitating the locals, who were already agitated with monsters showing up in the ocean.”

“...well... I guess we better head over there and talk things out before things go bad. Or get worse for that matter.”

“Appreciate it. I doubt any of you have a license to drive... or a car for that matter. So I can give you a lift over there.”

“Sounds good. I'll go grab mom.”

Frisk disappeared back into the house, and Undyne looked up and down the street.

“Anything dangerous at this Lone Point place?”

“Well, you underestimate the ocean at your own peril, I guess. But you probably don't need to be that worried.”

“Actually I do. I'm Frisk's bodyguard while they're Ambassadoring, so it's my job to be worried.”

“...oh. Guess that makes sense. Wait, when did this happen?”

“This morning.”

“...man, I just cannot keep up with all of this shit changing... alright. Cruiser seats four. You can ride shotgun. Just try not break my windows with those magic spear things. Department's budget is thin enough after all the damage from the stand-off.”

“-all we really want here is an open dialog about what's going on. Less than a week after the monsters show up, the City Council organizes a vote to recognize monsters as US citizens. Less than a week! Where the- where did all that speed come from when we were dealing with other problems, huh? And since when does one small town council get to decide something that needs to be done at the Federal level? Something is going on and we need to know what it is.”

“Alright, thank you for your insight Mr. Riley. Now, to provide a counterpoint, we have several monsters right here, could you please repeat your names for the viewers at home?”
“Wait you what-?!”

“OH MY GOD BRATTY WE'RE FAMOUS! WE'RE ON TV NOW!”

“Like, I know Catty. The cameras were kind of a hint.”

“Uh... seems like that giggling is going to take a while to resolve itself, can I get your name sir?”

“Tra la la. I am the riverman. Or am I the riverwoman? It doesn't really matter.”

“I. Uh. I see. Well, Mr. Riverman, how do you like the Surface so far?”

“A vast expanse of possibilities, in it's own way a claustrophobic prison of indecision. Nice breeze today, though. Tra la la.”

“Uh... do you mean that you don't know what to do now that you're out of the mountain?”

“The Barrier is destroyed. Peace and Prosperity will reign across the land. There is nothing left to worry about. For that, I do not regret waiting.”

“What they said! Now that we're out of the cavern, I can finally get a pet cat! Oh, how do I do that up here?”

“Seriously?! You ask me social and political questions and you're all 'oh what's your favorite color' with them?!”

“Uh, I suppose Mr. Riley has a valid point. What is your opinion on all the polarizing statements being made on the news these days?”

“Oh, like, we haven't seen a lot of that?”

“Yes, like, Alphys found a way so we could watch human TV on the UnderNet and stuff, but everybody's been so busy packing and shutting down puzzles-”

“And fixing the bridges in Waterfall! Don't forget that!”

“Yes, that too. So we saw, like the news reports on the vote everybody had up here, and part of a gardening show? And that's it.”

“Oh! Oh! Bratty! We should get a garden too!”

“And, uh, you sir, Mr. Riverman? Do you have anything to say to counter Mr. Riley's statements?”

“Tra la la. The man with his heart in the right place and his head in the sand. So are we all, sooner or later. I must be off, I have a schedule to keep. Perhaps we will speak again. Or perhaps not. It doesn't really matter.”

“What the... what just happened?”

“Oh, like, the riverperson's always saying stuff like that.”

“...and the wooden boat with legs that ran away?”

“Like, we didn't have a lot of options for public transportation in the Underground.”
Undyne stared at the sea.

The vast expanse of blue, ever changing, breaking on the sand below, receding again.

There were footsteps as somebody walked up to her, but Undyne barely noticed.

“...hey Undyne.”

“...hey, Frisk.”

“...we got everything fixed. It was just something about Aaron not respecting personal boundaries. That might or might not be an issue in the future, too soon to tell, but I gave the town manager and municipal assayer my new address just in case anything else comes up. Also talked to a few folks about magical food and the upsides, which might work in our favor down the line.”

Undyne didn't respond right away.

“...I need to show this to Alphys.”

“...yeah. She needs to see this.” Frisk sighed. “Everyone needs to see this.”

Undyne felt a warm hand grasp hers, and looked down at Frisk.

“Undyne... it's going to take a while. There's... there's a limit to what we can do today. But there's always tomorrow. And all of the days after that. But the Underground is going to be empty. Everyone is going to be up here. I promise.”

Undyne looked down at Frisk's face, saw the child smiling, and smiled back.

“We really lucked out when you fell into the Underground.”

“Yeah.” Frisk looked at the ocean. “Everything's different now. And this time we'll get it right.”

“That's the spirit! C'mere ya little punk!”

Undyne hoisted Frisk up in her arms, and ran her knuckles over the child's head. Frisk's giggling mixed with Undyne's cackling and echoed across the shore, back into the town, and out over the waves.
“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW HARD IT WAS TO SORT THAT??!”

Alphys tried to wipe some of the sweat from her head and face, with limited results. The battle of wills and words between Woshua and the human that had shown up at the school building had started out angry and had only gotten worse with time, and wherever Undyne and Frisk and the queen had gone with the human police officer, they seemed to be out of range of the UnderNet Relay set up in town, so nobody had replied to her increasingly frantic texts.

“This is an illegal dumping ground and so help me I will see you put behind bars for the rest of your life, however long that is!”

“I didn't dump anything! You humans left this place to rot! I cleaned it up! Even sorted it for you AND YOU'RE MESSING EVERYTHING UP AGAIN!”

“Hey Alphys.”

“Gah!” Alphys jumped in the air, then partially relaxed as she turned to see Sans behind her.

“Where have you been?”

“House hunting with Papyrus. Ran over as soon as I saw your group text. What's up?”

“That... that human there, he's getting on our cases about the cleanup of the old school building and he's making a mess of it and Woshua is totally freaking out and

Oh thank God,” Alphys relaxed as a police cruiser rolled up to the school and the Queen, Ambassador, and Undyne all climbed out along with Officer Steve.

“What's all this then, what's all this then?” Officer Steve said in a loud voice and a strange accent, ending with a grin. “I've been wanting to say that for a while now.”

“Aha! Officer Steve!” The human ran over, almost tripping over a stack of broken glass shards that spread out over the grass with a tinkling sound.

“Are you KIDDING ME?!” Woshua began spraying the grass with what looked like water-shaped light, the currents and waves pushing and pulling the glass back into an evenly stacked symmetrical pile like it had been moments before.

“Officer Steve, I wish to file a formal criminal complaint in the form of illegal dumping! These monsters have removed all of the toxic substances from this condemned building and just left them in piles on the ground where they could contaminate anything and anyone!”

“It was fine before you started poking at it! Wosh u hands!”

Officer Steve blinked, then walked past the irate human over to the piles that the four legged monster
was still sorting.

“So... this is your work?”

“Yeah, don't TOUCH anything like the last guy!”

“...okay. So... this is glass, obviously. That looks like old wood. This looks to be plastic... rubber... old papers?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. What's the rest of it?”

Woshua started walking down the line of carefully stacked and organized trash. “These piles are metal, I put copper, zinc, steel and iron in different layers of this one. I can't recognize the different grades of steel though. The stuff on the very end used to be organics and organic byproducts. And this pile is this weird fiber stuff that kept trying to get away from me so I just pulled a water hammer on it and compressed it down. And it was a really wonderful cube, perfectly symmetrical, until that guy broke off a corner like an insensitive jerk!”

“That is asbestos fiber and you are not handling it properly! You are putting the safety of every person on this street in danger!”

Woshua reared up on his hand legs, face contorted in anger and water splashing out of the back of his tank.

“IF YOU KNEW IT WAS DANGEROUS WHY DID YOU TOUCH IT WITH YOUR BARE HANDS?!”

Officer Steve sighed and stepped in between the human and the monster, pulling out a notepad and pen from one pocket.

“Okay, before this goes any further. I need names from both of you.”

“Hans Therrick.”

“Therrick... Dr. Therrick's husband, right?”

“That's right.”

“How's she doing?”

“Oh, you know. Busier than she liked after the standoff thing, but not nearly as busy as everyone at Rita Belle.”

“I'll bet. You work at city hall, don't you?”

“Yes, I work with the health department.”

“Thought so.” Officer Steve scribbled down some notes. “And you, sir?”

“I'm Woshua. Of Waterfall. Well, from Waterfall, I guess.”

“Alright. So... what I'm taking away from all this is that a bunch of asbestos fiber was dumped here without proper procedures.”
“I don't know, this... this guy was too busy yelling and making a mess of my careful piles for me to figure out what he wanted.”

“...okay then. Woshua. What were your plans for disposing of all this stuff?”

“Oh... I didn't have plans for disposal. My job was to clean out the building. I assumed that Undyne or somebody else would take it from there.”

“Which we are.”

Officer Steve managed not to jump in surprise at the sound of Frisk’s voice, turning around and looking down at the child. “...how did you sneak up on me like that?”

“I don't know, that wasn't on purpose.” Frisk shrugged. “Anyway, I figured anything that we could recycle, we'd take to the recycling center, and Alphys could touch base with the recycling people here, share her knowledge. Anything that can't be recycled, or is just too dangerous like the asbestos, I thought it would be safer to transport it to Hotland and put it in the lava. The heat would destroy it, and if any survived it would be in a spot where no humans should really be anyway.”

“I'm not an ecologist or a doctor, so, Mr. Therrick, how is Asbestos usually disposed of?”

“It's either sealed multiple times and buried underground, or it's exposed to high temperatures to decompose it into silicate glass- wait, lava? Mt. Ebott is a volcano?!”

“Yeah. Stay focused buddy. And how is Asbestos usually detected?”

“Well, the older, easier, slower way is chemical sampling. There's a more modern way using lasers to pick up the fibers, but we don't have the gear for it.”

“In that case, I would recommend that you get whatever testing supplies you need and start taking samples inside the building to see if there's any left in there.”

“There's not. I was very thorough,” Woshua quipped.

“But what about the hazardous waste that was just left outside?”

Officer Steve sighed and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

“Okay. There are two ways we can do this. We can either follow the spirit of the law, which is the prevention of harm. Or we can follow the letter of the law, which means fines and jail time for everyone who started putting asbestos fibers in the air. Now, it's a first time offense for both of you, so I think-”

“Wait, what do you mean both of us?”

Officer Steve stared at Mr. Therrick. “As I understand it, Woshua had all the asbestos fibers piled up and compressed into that cube over there. The one with the corner torn off.”

Mr. Therrick turned around, looking at the cube, then at one of his hands.

“...oh shit.”

“Wosh u mouth!”

“So...” Officer Steve grinned. “How are we going to tackle this, gentlemen?”
“not the biggest concern but we've been hearing a lot of stories about what magic can do as far as
healing, and we don't have actual evidence for any of it—”

“many monsters are we talking about here? So far only a handful have been seen coming out of Mt.
Ebott, but there are a lot more in Lone Point, the small town on the coast—”

“inside of the mountain might actually be a volcano—”

“SHALT NOT SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE.”

“answered by a skeleton that called itself the Great Papyrus, and we'll have that video coming up for
you after the break—”

“refugee crisis on our hands if this isn't handled properly—”

“didn't pay taxes, they're not citizens, they aren't even human, they have no right to go around
taking jobs from—”

“picture of Catty, the purple cat monster, and I'm trying really hard to try to see how she could
actually be a threat and I'm just not seeing it—”

“want to see what this Underground looks like—”

“accusations of killing and eating travelers and hikers that disappeared on the mountain over the
years—”

“cult that terrorized the town of Ebott's Wake—”

“exactly is an apostrophe dog, anyway?”

“Really? Just set this stuff on fire??”

“Uh. Melt it, actually. It turns out with the heat being drawn out of the magma p-pool by the CORE
the lava isn't quite hot enough to melt asbestos by itself, but I think you could manage it. Just wait
until, until I get to the minimum safe distance, first.”

The monster made a gesture that would probably be a shrug, if its body had shoulders instead of coils
of flaming rope. “Okay then.”

Alphys sprinted across the rock bridge to where a number of monsters and humans were waiting,
panting by the time she slowed and stopped, and raised one claw in a thumbs-up gesture. On the
opposite end of the rock, there was a brilliant orange light, and everyone had to avert their gaze.
Frisk looked up at Undyne, who was panting as much as Alphys but without doing any running
 whatsoever.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Already missing that town on the coast... I mean... I'm fine! I eat rocks for breakfast and wash them
down with a tall glass of nails!!”

With the fading of the orange light, Alphys beckoned to Mr. Therrick and started walking towards
the Pyrope monster. After a minute of deliberation, the pair walked back to where everyone else was
waiting, with the flaming monster tossing bits of something into the lava. Mr. Therrick tried to wipe the sweat from his forehead, but just managed to spread the sweat to the rest of his face instead.

“It looks like it's completely decomposed into silicate glass, but for safety’s sake I felt it was best to submerge it in the lava. Even if that won’t cause further chemical changes, it will either bond with the molten rock or form a shell around it to keep it from breaking off into the air.”

“Alright then.” Officer Steve nodded to Sans. “Our work here is done, Go Planet, The Power Is Yours, let's get back to the surface before my hair catches fire.”

There was a flash of blue light, and the monsters and humans vanished from Hotland, reappearing outside the school building. Undyne immediately stumbled over to Woshua, who hit the fish monster with a high pressure jet of water.

“Thanks, buddy. I owe you one.”

“Actually I've been keeping track, you owe me two now.”

“Right...” Undyne flopped over on the overgrown grass, prompting Frisk and Alphys to walk over next to the fallen warrior.

“Undyne? Are you... are you okay?”

“I live here now,” Undyne mumbled.

Eli looked up from the sketchbook in his hands. The number of monsters that had started showing up in town had suddenly surged; in addition to the King and Queen, the two skeletons, the fish and lizard women, and the cat and alligator monster, Eli could see the robot that looked like a calculator, another cat monster, a dragon, a bear, some sort of slime or mold, and what had to be a ghost or spirit of some sort. And that was without turning his head or moving from his vantage point in any way.

“OOOH YES! I AM ABSOLUTELY LOOKING FORWARD TO A LONG AND SENSATIONAL CAREER ON THE SURFACE!” Behind the robot, the tawny cat monster rolled his eyes. Elijah smirked and started sketching again; another set of reporters was interviewing the royal family and Frisk, and yet another reporter was interviewing Hans Therrick, close enough for Eli to overhear.

“-completely decomposed into silicate glass, and this is, it's normally a very energy intensive process because the temperature required is over twelve hundred degrees Celsius, but one monster managed it with no problems. I was also talking to Dr. Alphys on the way to the park and she's probably forgotten more about recycling than all of humanity knows about it combined. When I heard that monsters were tearing out parts of the old high school I was extremely worried but everything I've seen and learned has turned what I know on its head. The appearance of monsters has the potential to revolutionize science, industry, ecology and even medicine if what I keep hearing about that ice cream is true.”

“Excuse me sir, can I get your thoughts on the presence of monsters in this town?”

Eli looked up and recoiled away from a microphone being held less than an inch from his face.

“Well, they're a lot better at respecting personal space than you are.”

“Any concerns, worries, fears?”
“Not as such. Nothing the monsters have done has been threatening. Actually mostly it’s confusing, but that’s culture shock for you.” Eli turned the page on his sketchbook and his pencil began to cross the blank paper.

“But isn’t it true that the monsters have killed six people?”

“Way I heard it, the Underground did that. Turns out Mt. Ebott is a volcano. There’s been speculation about that for ages but obviously nobody’s been sure, at least till now.”

“Even so, with all of this happening so suddenly and swiftly, surely you have to be at least a little—”

“Ma’am, I just finished spending over a year afraid of some crazy cult kidnapping people in the night and killing them. I am fresh out of being scared and the store doesn’t know when they’ll be getting more in stock. Are you picking up what I’m laying down? The only monster that even remotely concerns me is the red headed fish woman and even then I spend more time thinking about how hot she is. Hey, camera guy.” Eli turned to the cameraman standing behind the reporter, and turned his sketchbook around to reveal a hasty caricature of the reporter with a scattering of spit drops emerging from over-sized lips. “What do you think? Close enough for government work?”

Quentin Forsythe tapped his fingers nervously on the front desk as he watched the lobby television; so many reporters and cameras, so many obvious attempts to control the narrative. He didn't have any proof... he never did, really... but he could almost feel countless eyes on the town now, some of them attached to hands moving people around like pawns in an elaborate game of chess. First it would be the reporters, casting the monsters as evil and dangerous, then communications would be shut down, then the National Guard would show up and martial law would be declared... he could almost hear the black helicopters flying in, which was ridiculous, black helicopters made no noise, they were whisper quiet in addition to being radar transparent-

Quentin flinched as he recognized the face of Hal Greene on the television set.

“Hello sir, what can you tell me about your experiences since the appearance of—”

“I’m sorry, no hard feelings, but you’re way too high right now. You need to be outside the city limits before sunset. Here.” Hal reached into a bag that was slung over one shoulder and handed a lime to the reporter.

“Sir? What is... excuse me, what is the meaning of this lime?”

Hal had already moved on, but turned and called back over his shoulder. “It prevents scurvy, obviously! You think somebody would go around giving people limes for no reason?! Use some common sense!”

Quentin groaned and let his face drop to the desk with a thud.

Five seconds later, the door jingled and Quentin sat up again, quickly pulling away the paper that stuck to his forehead and seeing some familiar, if distinctly non-human, faces.

“Welcome back everyone. Looked like you had a busy day.”

“Tell me about it.” Undyne grumbled, pulling at her shirt. Quentin's eyes opened wide, and he redirected them towards another part of the room.

“Uh. Just so you know. A few people came by asking questions. I told them I couldn't violate the
privacy of guests. Some of them were more understanding than others.”

“I'll bet... why are you twisted around like that?”

“Oh, I'm. Uh. Looking at this lamp over here.” Quentin pointed at a standing lamp in the corner of the lobby that provided more ambient mood lighting than actual illumination.

“i can see why, it's really cool.”

“Yeah, well, you nerds stare at whatever you want. I need to take a shower like you would not believe.”

“Oh, I might believe it. Actually people in this town say I'll believe anything. That's not entirely true, but... eh.”

There was the sound of stomping feet and then a slamming door as Undyne returned to her hotel room, and Quentin returned to face the rest of the lobby... only to see both skeletons, the king, and the lizard scientist staring at the lamp in the corner, and all of them save Sans wearing confused expressions.

“I DON'T SEE THE APPEAL, MYSELF.”

“eh, it's a niche hobby.”
Every step through the knee high snow drifts was a struggle, and Frisk was panting with exhaustion, their breath instantly crystallizing in the air, but they didn't slow down. They couldn't slow down. They had to find Asriel; the Machine in their backpack would bring him back all the way, body and Soul, but they couldn't find him, they barely even had the strength to call out his name and he might not even answer anyway, so Frisk kept slogging through the snow even as they lost feeling in their face and fingers and toes and stumbled and collapsed in the snow and tried to push themselves up but their arms wouldn't move-

Light burned away the snow, burned away the Underground, revealing a very under furnished bedroom. The exhaustion and soreness, on the other hand, stuck around, and Frisk winced as they climbed out of their sleeping bag. As if by reflex, one arm reached out and grabbed the shoe box, pulling back the lid to check that the contents were unchanged, then replacing the lid after making sure all seven stars were accounted for. Concerns addressed, Frisk managed to shrug out of their pajamas and into more presentable clothing before opening the door and heading down the stairs.

The kitchen, or at least somebody inside it, was producing a certain amount of noise; the scraping of utensils against pots, the clinking of dishes, the crackle of fire, and what sounded like humming. Frisk carefully looked around the corner of the doorway to see Toriel stirring a pot over a glowing flame and humming some sort of song. The Boss Monster looked up and turned, and Frisk felt a stab of panic, as if they had been discovered doing something inappropriate or completely forbidden.

“Oh, good morning Frisk!”

“Uh. Morning. Mom.”

“...is something wrong?”

“Uhm. No. I guess I'm still... a lot happened yesterday. The school, the cleanup, Lone Point, all the reporters, the thing with Mr. Therrick and the asbestos, and so on.”

“You are correct. We did fit quite a lot of activity in a single day. Unfortunately I do not expect this to change any time soon.”

“Yeah, that doesn't seem likely.”

“In fact, you mentioned the asbestos situation. Dr. Alphys texted me about something pertaining to that, although I am not sure I understand all of the details. The essential matter is that the human government of this town wants to know more about what was done to remove the asbestos material, and if it can be repeated.”

“Well... I suppose that's up to Woshua and whoever it was that melted it in Hotland.”

“Indeed. We will need to talk to them first, or otherwise bring them to the meeting that is planned later this morning.”

“A meeting? What time is it?”

“Not quite seven- oh, you meant the time the meeting is scheduled. The text said...” Toriel paused in her cooking and pulled out her cell phone to check the screen. “It said ten fifteen AM, so we have
slightly more than three hours.”

“Enough time to eat breakfast, then.”

“Yes,” Toriel replied with a smile, pulling the saucepan off of the flame and ladling some of the contents into bowls on the counter top. “While we will have ample time in the future to experiment, I think that while everything is so chaotic and uncertain during these early days we had best stick to simple fare. Oatmeal, toast, perhaps fried eggs.”

“That makes sense.” Frisk accepted a bowl from Toriel and lifted a spoonful of the hot cereal to smell. It had the fragrance of cinnamon, and for a moment, Frisk felt another surge of emotion. Only instead of fear, they felt a disturbing mixture of sorrow and guilt.

“...is something wrong, my child?”

“No. No. Nothing’s wrong. I just. It's been a while, I guess.” Frisk swallowed the spoonful of oatmeal, feeling it start to dissolve and vanish even while it was still in their mouth. “It's good.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Toriel began eating from her own bowl of oatmeal, looking around the kitchen. “It occurs to me, that there would be sufficient room in this kitchen to include a small table and some chairs, if we were so inclined. Breakfast would not get cold transporting it all the way to the dining room, and there would be no risk of spilling it on the way. Actually, I find it curious that the dining room and kitchen are not adjacent to each other.”

“Mmm.” Frisk swallowed and then tried to speak again. “I don't know for sure, and I don't know how we'd find out without looking at the building plans, if we could find them, but I think that was a function of remodeling.Originally the kitchen might have been in a different part of the house, or what is now the living room was the original dining room so all that had to be done was cross over. There might also have been a hallway, but one of the dividing walls was removed. I remember reading that there was a huge push for open floor plans at one point, until energy costs started going up and people realized how hard it was to keep big rooms heated.”

“You are a veritable font of information, Frisk.”

“I know. Sorry.”

Toriel blinked.

“...that was... that was not intended as a rebuke, my child.”

Frisk froze for a second. “Oh.”

“...Frisk? Are you alright?”

Frisk shrugged. “I spent, well, a lot of time at the Librarby. And whenever people ask me a question. Sometimes the answers to that question, and everything related to the question, it's like it's waiting for that moment to escape, or something.”

“I see, or at least, I think that I see. Speaking of knowledge, once we have achieved a more manageable level of chaos, I would like to sit down with you and ascertain your exact academic abilities.” Toriel's smile became somewhat wry. “In my haste to live out my dreams of being a teacher, back when we first met, I entirely neglected to figure out what you already knew and therefore where to start.”

“Okay. What do I have to do, fill out a written exam?”
“Not necessarily, although I suppose if you favor visual and written formats, I could devise one. My original plan was simply to ask you various questions and then, from your answers, I would know what you already understood, and then we could start with what you had not yet learned.”

“That works too.”

“Very well then. But as long as you brought up the subject of written answers, I suppose it would make sense to use the time after breakfast, and before we leave for the meeting, to finish up that adoption paperwork.”

Frisk nodded. “Yeah. Can't let that get away from us.”

City Hall was a storm of activity, with humans and monsters moving around with papers, talking and moving and occasionally obstructing each other. And if the building itself was a storm, then the eye of the storm was the door to a meeting room, with two police officers and Walter Metzinger's assistant standing outside. Frisk walked up to the woman, who stood with the unconcerned expression of somebody who was absolutely indispensable and knew it.

“Hello. Ambassador Frisk, King Asgore, Queen Toriel, Dr. Alphys and Captain Undyne here to see Mr. Metzinger.”

“Right, everyone's ready for you.” The assistant turned and opened the door to the meeting room, and Frisk could see several men sitting at the table inside; while they had been talking to each other, they instantly stopped and looked up as the door opened.

“Ah, welcome everyone! Ambassador, your majesties, Doctor, Captain.” Mr. Metzinger smiled a smile that was rather more natural than most politicians could manage. “By all means, have a seat.”

Monsters filed into the room and sat down at the table, and Frisk took a seat between the king and queen. Not everyone at the table was familiar, but Frisk definitely recognized Mr. Therrick.

“Uhm. Uh.” Dr. Alphys spoke up. “I. Uh. I don't want to b-break protocol or something like that. B-but. I have to be in Waterfall in a few hours t-to do the load bearing tests on the new c-catwalk and bridge network.”

“Well, that's a convenient coincidence because in about an hour and forty five minutes I have to be in the courtroom for the defamation suit filed against Simon Abernathy. I'm perfectly happy with skipping right to the heart of the matter.”

“And that, I assume, is pertaining to the clean up that was done yesterday,” Toriel prompted.

Mr. Metzinger nodded, and opened a manila folder on the table in front of him.

“It's a bit of a long story, but I think I can condense it a bit. First, some background. A few decades ago, the Ebott's Wake Memorial Auditorium was closed for renovations. We had the wiring, the plumbing, the air conditioning all redone. Not that the last really stuck. But we also had to remove asbestos fiber from the structure. The whole operation went well above the original target bid and timetable, and threw the town's budget out of whack for that year and the next. And that was just one old building that needed that treatment.” Mr. Metzinger rubbed the bridge of his noise, as if he was trying to deal with some sort of headache or possibly sinus pain. “Because of the financial burden involved, bringing up anything related to asbestos disposal in the City Council, Arts Council, or Chamber of Commerce meetings is an instant deal breaker.”
“That's why you managing to do in a day what previously took months is such a big deal. The original city hall, an old hotel, and a couple of old warehouses all were built with asbestos in them for fireproofing. All three are ticking time bombs we can't afford to hire anyone to disarm.” Mr. Therrick grinned. “But if you can repeat what happened yesterday with the school, then that's a different story.”

“In exchange for services rendered, the City of Ebott's Wake is willing to sell each of these properties to either individual monsters or organizations established by monsters, for a single United States Dollar each. Also, each property will have full building code exemptions filed for you to work on construction in any way you deem necessary, in order to build whatever you see fit.”

“Wait what?!” Undyne barked. “We do all the work and we still have to-”

“Deal,” Frisk replied. Undyne stared at the child until they turned to address her. “It establishes a legal record of ownership and allows us to get land to build on and buildings to move people into, at a massive discount.”

“B-basically, it's free real estate,” Alphys spoke up.

Undyne blinked, then turned towards the King and Queen, who both nodded. The fish woman sat down in her seat again.

“Huh.”

Toriel leaned forward in her seat.

“Your terms are acceptable, provided that we can contact Woshua and Pyromero and they are also agreeable.”

“Yeah, guess I better get on that.” Undyne pulled out her cell phone, and after starting a call, Alphys belatedly scrambled to pull out her own cell phone and make her own call.

“Hey, Woshua. You up yet? ...right... funny you should ask. I'm sitting here with the King and Queen and the human politicians, and they want to know if you can pull that trick again, like, four more times... hah! I knew it! ...no, I don't know where yet. Uh. Just meet us at the school, and we'll go from there. Right. Catch you later, buddy!” Undyne hung up the phone and grinned as only an amazonian fish woman could.

“Woshua's okay with it.”

Eyes in the room started to gravitate towards Dr. Alphys... which just caused her claws to shake more as she attempted to make a call.

“Uhm... uh... they're. Uh... it's still... ringing?”

“Knock knock.”

A bedraggled looking man with a bedraggled looking mustache looked up from a desk piled high with paperwork and more than a few empty coffee cups.

“Yeah?”

“John, before I say anything else, promise me you won't blow up.”
“I promise nothing. What is it?”

“We got another call from Ebott's Wake—”

“God-Fucking-Dammit!”

“See, this is why I asked you not to—”

“Stop. Just... just tell me what the call was about.”

“Somebody else said there was a child being neglected.”

“I'll just bet. I'd sell my fucking soul for three more people working here.”

“So...” the man knocking on the cubicle wall trailed off awkwardly.

“So we already have over seventy five children and teenagers dumped on us because of that stupid cult, every one of which is now freaking out because the fairy tales their parents told them to scare them into obedience have come to life. I know this is better than those fuckers just pulling a Jonestown or Heaven's Gate and killing everybody but we don't have the time, we don't have the people...” John sighed. “Did the call say how the child was being neglected?”

“The caller just said they were acting strangely.”

The two men stared at each other for a moment.

“You came over here... to tell me... somebody was worried that somebody... in Ebott's Wake... the town that make fucking Portland look sane and rational... was acting strangely.”

“Well of course it's going to sound stupid when you put it like—”

“Either grab a chair and help me sort through these papers or get out of my face, Patrick!”

The old hotel had seen better days. And better weeks, months, years... better decades, really. Some walls had started to collapse, the roof had caved in, and the smell of animal droppings was fairly strong if anyone happened to get close to it. Not many did.

The monster with the tub of water on its back... or maybe it had a tank of water for a body, Walter Metzinger couldn't really tell from a distance... reared up on its hind legs, put its front legs together like it dusting off its hands, and then shot a stream of water towards the building. Only, instead of behaving like the water from a fire hose, it simply spread over the entire building, shifting through multiple colors as it did. Parts of the structure began to come apart, falling down and stacking into neat and tidy piles of brick, lumber and metal.

More than a few of the humans that had come to watch the spectacle started to cheer at the display, while the reporters looked on and occasionally added commentary as their cameras recorded the event for posterity and broadcasting.

“Mr. Metzinger?”

“Yes?” Metzinger turned away from the scene to see a man walking up to him.

“I was hoping to talk to you about what's happening here today.”
“Well, I thought the press release was pretty thorough but I'll be happy to answer anything that wasn't in there. What do you need?”

“For starters, why are you cooperating with the monsters?”

“...cooperating? That's an interesting choice of words.”

“Well, what would you call it?”


“So it is true. You gave the monsters the old high school.”

“Gave? No. Sold. For a very reasonable price, factoring in the money they saved us for dealing with the asbestos. It was the textbook definition of a perfect trade. Everybody walked away with something that they wanted.”

“So you let a short term gain blind you to long term dangers.”

Metzinger blinked. “First things first, that's also an interesting, and confrontational, choice of words. Second, the asbestos issue was a long term danger by itself, not only for health reasons but for legal liability as well.”

“And what about the danger the monsters pose?”

Metzinger turned towards the old hotel, now somewhat reduced in size and composition.

“'Took me a bit, but I finally placed your face and your voice. You're Dwayne Riley. You've been making a lot of noise about the monsters, haven't you.”

“That wasn't really a question, was it?”

“No, I suppose not.” Metzinger pointed at the monsters standing by, waiting for the cleaning to be finished. “I don't know those monsters very well. Some of them I only met last week. Others I haven't met at all. But I do know you, Mr. Riley. Your reputation precedes you, and by reputation I mean newsletter. Stocks and Commodities and Bonds and Treasury Bills and how it all fits together. Also plenty of commentary on the sources of economic ills. Some of them even sound plausible. The rest of them sound like they came from Forsythe, only that would be a slur on the man. Who's stealing American jobs this week, by the way? Mexicans? Koreans? Freemasons? Dungeons and Dragons players?”

Riley raised an eyebrow. “Is this a trick question? Monsters are clearly taking jobs now.”

“And what would you charge to remove asbestos from a condemned building?”

“What?”

Metzinger turned to face the man, and his politician's smile had been discarded at some point. His face now reflected an annoyed state of mind more than anything else.

“I'll spot you a point on this. So far the monsters have had a closed bid. No real competition. That's fine, let's open up the bidding to more contractors. What would you charge for the next building on the list? It's that old icehouse on East West Road, built way back before mechanical refrigeration was all the rage. How much for you to remove the asbestos from that building, and how long will it take?”
“I wasn't speaking about me specifically-”

“And that's the problem, Mr. Riley. Whether or not some hypothetical individual can do the job economically and safely in the future, Woshua I think his name was, he can do it now, safely and quickly and for a very reasonable price. For somebody with a Master's degree in economics you really don't get the whole Supply and Demand thing. Also your marketing campaign needs work. But on the other hand, you're not Hal Greene. So you got that going for you.”

Dwayne rolled his eyes. “Jesus Christ. Somebody needs to lock the two of you in a room or something until you work out your shit.”

“Attention! Attention!”

Both men turned to see that Hans Therrick was down next to the piles of trash that had been stacked up; neither man had noticed that at some point in the discussion, the entire building had essentially collapsed under its own weight and been broken down into its component materials. The man was wearing dark goggles and shouting into a megaphone, and a monster that looked like it had a body made of burning coiled rope was bouncing next to him.

“In order to destroy asbestos and make the remains safe, it must be heated to high temperatures! Please do not look directly at the, uh...” The man turned to the monster and said something that the megaphone did not pick up. The monster seemed to reply, and Therrick held up the megaphone again. “Please do not look directly at the focal point of the magic! The light may damage your eyes!”

The megaphone was lowered, a respirator mask raised, and the man and the monster headed over to where Woshua was standing by a cube of compressed fibrous matter. Metzinger turned away from the spectacle and glanced at Riley.

“Well, looks like we'll be paying the monsters for cleaning up the hotel in a minute. If you act really fast you might be able to get in a bid for the warehouses, or the old city hall.”

“Hah hah hah.” Riley started to walk away. “Mark my words, you'll live to regret the decisions you made today.”

“Was that like an actual threat, or are you trying to act all cool and tough, or is this like a scary thing that's going to come back to bite me because it's Halloween?”

“Hey everybody, welcome back to the last bit of the last installment of Clutch McGee's Lunch Hour of Power! We're about to hand things off to Beanpole's Request Line, just got some news items to keep everybody up to date and on the ball and... diagonal to the gallbladder or something? And before we get to that, quick reminder that in place of the Lunch Hour of Power, starting next Monday, you will get to hear me, Beanpole, and the one and only Lazy Lindsay in our new midday segment, Lazy Lindsay and the Coffee Grinders! We're all looking forward to that. Except Lindsey obviously. We'll be taking over right after Brett Brinkmann's morning show, the Brink of Dawn, and take care of all your musical and news related radio needs for the lunch hour and beyond! And with that out of the way, our top story! It's about the monsters, Yeah, surprise surprise, who could have seen this coming, and so on. Turns out, there's this guy named... Woshua? Is that right Jeff? ...right. Woshua. He's been cleaning up the older buildings in town with the asbestos in them, and in return, the city is selling the property to the monsters, so they can... do... monster stuff. I guess. Not really sure. I mean, I don't know if any monsters are listening, but if you're taking suggestions, starting up an ice cream parlor sounds like a great idea to me! That stuff was absolutely amazing. What else, what else, right! Later tonight we'll have the last segment of Kyle Zimmerman's interview with
Vernon Forsythe, so if you've been following along you won't want to miss this...

Undyne looked around at the crowd with an appraising eye.

“This is a lot of fanfare to go for just for cleaning up a bunch of trash.”

“Asbestos is just that big a deal.” Frisk shrugged. “Works in our favor though, so there's that.”

“Yeah... still trying to wrap my head around the fact that you can tank my spears just fine but a little bit of stuff that looks like bits of string or hair can kill you.”

“Think of it like this; it sneaks past our defenses and gets inside where we can't see it or fight back, and does it slowly over a long period of time. Like a battle of attrition.”

Undyne's eyebrows shot up, and she nodded.

“Huh. That does make sense.”

Up on the steps of the City Hall, a few politicians were saying as little as possible in as many words as they could manage, and Frisk looked up at Undyne.

“So...”

“Yeah?”

“Uh. Nothing. Just... how are things going with Alphys?”


“...interesting way to put it, but okay. So everything's fine then?”

“Uh. Yeah.”

“Have you smooched her yet?”

Undyne looked down and glared at Frisk through a narrowed eye, even as red started to overtake the blue scales on her face.

“I don't see how that's any business of yours, punk.”

Frisk grinned.

“So is that a yes, no, maybe so-”

“If I hadn't sworn to defend your life with my own, I swear-”

Frisk giggled.

“Allright, alright. I'll stop bothering you about it.”

“Good.”

“After this ceremony, what's on your list?”

“Well, I'm heading back to Waterfall to meet Alphys and...”
Slowly, Undyne sighed.

“This is not going away is it.”

“Actually that wasn't an attempt to trap you with trick questions or anything. I know I'm meeting up with mom and we're heading to Wal-Mart to get some ingredients to make Halloween treats, but so much changed today I don't know who is doing what.”

“Right... well, like I said, heading to Waterfall. After Alphys tests the new bridges, we're going to dig through my house and get my stuff.”

Frisk looked up at Undyne in confusion. “It didn't look like much would survive that fire to me.”

“Oh, that's no big deal. I had everything fire infused so it wouldn't burn up. Well, not everything, but most things. The important stuff.”

“...fire infused?”

“Yeah, it's a magic thing. You infuse magic into stuff a certain way and that changes how it responds to stuff. I think. I started skipping that class when I realized we weren't going to learn how to forge our own weapons and stuff like that.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Let that be a lesson, Frisk! Study hard, or you'll end up like me.”

“...free of a thousand year prison and dating a cute, funny, and smart lizard?”

Undyne rolled her eye, but one corner of her mouth twitched.

“I was going to say unemployed, but when you put it like that it kind of puts things in perspective.”

“Yeah...” Frisk sighed, then straightened up. “Hey. Why don't you talk to mom about working at the school?”


“Come on, Undyne. This is going to be an Elementary School. You and I both know Dramatic Speeches is a college level elective course.”

“...actually, I didn't know that. And I'm sort of surprised that you do.”

“I, uh. I didn't really. I was just trying to make a joke.”

“Oh.”

“Seriously though what about physical education? Running and jumping and exercise? That's important stuff.”

“...huh.” Undyne tapped her chin with one webbed finger. “You know... that does sound like a good idea. I think I'd be really good at that!”

“Yeah, me too. After this thing is done, whenever that is, let's find mom and you can bring it up before you head to Waterfall.”
“Sounds good... oh, speaking of which....”

The duo lapsed into silence as one politician walked away from the podium, and Walter Metzinger filled the gap.

“Mr. Woshua, Mr. Pyromero, you have done the city of Ebott's Wake a tremendous service, and in light of what you have done for us, we would like to present you with a token of our appreciation.”

The man opened a box, pulling out two shiny objects suspended on ribbons of cloth.

“Woshua, for saving the citizens of Ebott's Wake from the risk of lung cancer and related medical complication in the future, removing a tremendous health and financial burden from the city, and restoring all of buildings and lots to an absolutely pristine condition in the process, it is my great privilege and honor to award you the title of *Legendary Janitor.*”

Metzinger carefully placed the medal around the closest anatomical similarity that Woshua had to a neck, and then picked up the other medal.

“Pyromero, for destroying the asbestos fiber and making it harmless, and in so doing also protecting the people of this fair city, it is likewise my privilege and honor to award you the title of *Incinerator Extraordinaire.*”

Metzinger carefully draped the second medal over Pyromero's fiery head, so that the ribbon rested on coils of rope that served roughly the same function as shoulders. Frisk could hear some of the other humans in the crowd discreetly speculating as to why the ribbon was not catching fire or smoking, but it was drowned out as Metzinger started to applaud and the rest of the crowd joined in.
Many houses on the street were illuminated by jack o' lanterns, some artificial plastic and others carved from a pumpkin in the more traditional manner. Other assorted decorations of a holiday nature could also be seen that might imply, to the careful observer, that it was Halloween. It was the presence of roving bands of children, and the occasional chaperoning adult, that served as indisputable proof.

“Hurry up Douglas!”

“I'm moving as fast as I can.” A short figure wearing a vest and a Nintendo Light gun in a holster tried to catch up to another short figure wearing a fedora and had half of a jump rope coiled up on their belt like a whip, which was pointing at the houses along the street.

“We're burning daylight, so we better go down this side, cross at the end, then come back on the other side. We can do that for the whole residential area and come out the other side in less than an hour.”

“What daylight? The sun set ten minutes ago at least.”

Mary reached out and flicked Douglas's ear.

“Ow! What was that for?!”

“For taking my metaphor literally. Come on, the more time we spend talking the less time we have to get candy.” Mary ran ahead, prompting Douglas to run after her, wheezing with exertion.

“Whose fault is that?!”

Mary ran down the street, only slowing down as she saw a few other trick-or-treaters milling around in some sort of huddle, some of whom she recognized even through their costumes.

“Hey, what are you guys doing? The clock is ticking, there's treats to grab!”

“Yeah, we know,” retorted a figure in a business suit and tie that was scaled for a figure much smaller and younger than the average executive. “We've hit up everyone else already. Where were you?”

“Oh, that's his fault,” Mary pointed at Douglas as he finally caught up with her.

“If I'm slowing you down that much why not just go on without me?”

“No Han gets left behind.”

Douglas rolled his eyes. “You are such a jerk.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Mary turned back to the small group. “So if you got every other house, why haven't you moved on yet?!”

Another child dressed up in a superhero costume, complete with cape, pointed at one house on the opposite side of the street.

“There's a monster in that house.”
“...what, that's it?”

“Yeah.”

Mary stared at the group, then looked at the house. After a few moments, there was some movement in one of the windows, and the child's heart skipped a beat; it was one thing to see the monsters on television, but another to see them in person. And part of that shock was a matter of scale and frame of reference. Even from a distance, Mary could tell that the monster was big.

Seconds passed as options were weighed, and then Mary took a step out into the street.

“What are you doing? You're not going over there, are you?!?”

Mary looked back without slowing down. “This is Halloween, and there's a jack o' lantern in front of the house. That's good enough for me.”

“Well what if the monster doesn't have any candy?”

“We'll never know if we don't ask.” Mary crossed the street, marched up the sidewalk, and only hesitated for a split second when she saw that the jack o’ lantern was illuminated not by a candle or light bulb, but a glowing sphere of flame that had no obvious source. Hearing Douglas pant and wheeze behind her as he caught up reminded Mary of her mission, and she walked up and knocked on the door.

It only took a few seconds for the door to open, but it was long enough for Mary to second guess herself multiple times, and then triple guess herself at least once.

“Hello? May I help you, little ones?”

Mary tried to open her mouth to respond, and managed to get that part done, but ran out of steam before she was able to enunciate even the first syllable of 'Trick' never mind the entire phrase. The monster was at least six feet tall and probably taller, covered head to toe in white fur, which Mary could see was quite literally true because the monster was not wearing shoes, and claws poked out of the ends of those toes as well as the fingers on its... hands? Paws? It was hard to tell. A muzzle protruded out from the monster's head, with fangs that would have been obvious even if the monster had not been smiling. Maroon eyes looked at the children, and horns jutted out from the top of the head not far from where long floppy ears hung down; it was that final detail that seemed to shake Mary out of her stupor somewhat.

“T...trick or... treat.”

Next to her, Douglas made a sound that might have been an attempt at the word Trick.

“What? Oh. Yes. The Trick Or Treat custom. Frisk told me of this. Please wait here for a few moments.”

The monster vanished back into the building, leaving the front door open. Some irrational part of Mary's mind entertained the thought of sneaking inside and learning what she could from snooping inside the house, but survival instincts quickly crushed that impulse. Besides, she could safely see a considerable part of the inside of the ground floor already; there was some furniture in the form of tables and chairs, and one cushioned chair close to the fireplace... which despite being fake itself, had a real fire in it.

Mary was unable to gather any more information, as the monster returned with a large bowl in its hands, and they had company. The child, the one that appeared on TV as much as the monsters had,
was also carrying a bowl, and handing some of the contents to Douglas at the same time that the
monster was reaching down to Mary.

“Here you are. Ah, I believe it is customary to wish trick-or-treaters 'Happy Halloween' at this time,
is this not correct? Well, then, Happy Halloween!.”

“Uh. Yes.” Mary blinked and tried desperately to get her brain into gear, rather than have it spinning
at a thousand RPM in neutral like it was doing. “Thank you, uhm…”

“Oh, dear, where are my manners? I am Toriel, and this is Frisk.”

Frisk reached up with one hand and waved. “Hello.”

“Uhm. Hello. I'm... I'm Mary. And this is Douglas.”

“It is nice to meet you, Mary and Douglas. Will your friends be joining us? I could not help but
notice that they were milling about for some time.”

“Uh. Not sure yet. The night's still young.”

“Well, let them know that there are plenty of cookies left for them and anyone else who is inclined to
stop by. We made quite a large number, there was some uncertainty as to how many visitors we
would get tonight.”

Mary finally recognized that the object in her hand that Toriel had given her was a cookie,
specifically a peanut butter cookie with a chocolate candy placed in the center, and it still felt warm
in her fingers.

“Uhm. We will. Uhm. Thank you. Mrs. Toriel.”

“You are quite welcome! Though, if you could indulge an old lady, could you perhaps explain your
costumes? Frisk explained that Halloween is often used as an opportunity to dress up but that is the
extent of my knowledge on the subject.”

“Uhm. Okay. This year. Douglas and I decided to be. Uhm. Characters in movies played by... by
Harrison Ford. The actor. So I'm Indiana Jones. The Archaeologist that goes out and saves the world
from ancient relics being misused.”

“And... and... and I'm Han Solo. Space. Space Pilot.”

“I see. I am unfamiliar with these characters or the actor you speak of, but I appreciate your
explanations. Thank you very much.”

“You're. You're welcome. Well. We uhm. We better go now. Thank you again.”

“You are both quite welcome! And be sure to be safe tonight! It is all too easy to get lost or turned
around in the dark!”

“We will. I mean. We'll be careful. Not the other stuff. That was confusing.”

Toriel covered her mouth with one paw but could not quite smother a giggle. “I understood what you
meant, young one. Good night!”

“Good night. Thanks again.” Mary managed to turn away from the door, then turned back to grab
Douglas by the shoulder when she realized he was still transfixed. The door shut behind her and the
child let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding.
“What... what just happened.”

“We got cookies.” Mary breathed in through her nose and then let it out again. “See? Nothing to worry about.”

The two children crossed the street again to where the rest of the trick-or-treaters were waiting.

“What was it like-”

“What did you say to it-”

“Was that the kid on TV-”

“I can’t answer your questions if you all ask them at once,” Mary snapped, and then held up the cookie in their free hand as if seeing it for the first time. “The monster didn't give out normal candy, but this is definitely a cookie. Peanut butter base with a chocolate on top, but I don't recognize the brand.”

“Is it safe to eat? What if it's poisoned?!”

Mary narrowed her eyes and glared at the child that spoke up, one dressed up in a relatively old Iron Man outfit with the mask pulled down to make it easier to speak and presumably see.

“I don't think these monsters came out of the mountain just to hand out apples with razor blades. There's a lot of problems with that.”

“That's not an apple, that's a-”

“I know what it is, let me finish. That kid that shows up on TV was there... I think the monster would know what they could and couldn't put in food for humans because of that. Also, have you been listening to anything that grown ups are saying about monster food? It's getting super popular.”

“Prove it. Eat the monster cookie.”

“Oh, great,” Douglas muttered as Mary glared at the kid in the Iron Man costume, held up the cookie, and bit into it.

After a moment, the child’s eyes opened wide and they stared at what remained of the cookie in their hands.

“What is it?”

“What's it taste like?”

“What's wrong?”

“Oh. My. God.” Mary opened her mouth again and took another bite, and another, until the cookie was gone.

“...so, is that good, or-”

“My feet don't hurt anymore.” Mary grabbed Douglas's arm with the cookie in it and pushed it toward's the child's face. “Come on, see if it works for you!”

“See if what- what are you doing?! What is wrong with you?”
Mary let go of Douglas and jumped up and down a few times. “My feet stopped hurting when I ate the monster cookie! See if it does the same thing to you!”

“...uh, I don't think this is how you do science.”

“If you're not going to eat it then give it to me-”

Douglas immediately bit off part of the cookie. “No. You steal food off my tray at lunch too much, you're not getting...”

Slowly Douglas stared at what was left of the cookie, then shoved the rest of it in his mouth.

“...my legs aren't sore. Okay. That's weird. Not as weird as the other stuff though.”

“What other stuff?”

“The cookie doesn't act like a cookie when you eat it. It sort of dissolves like cotton candy.” Mary looked confused for a moment. “Super tasty peanut butter and chocolate flavored cotton candy that makes you feel better. Not what I expected, but I'm not complaining.”

An undercurrent of tension shifted through the group, until a child carrying a baseball bat and a messenger bag put into words what everyone was thinking.

“What was the monster like? Was it scary?”

“No, she was really nice. I think it was a she. Actually she kind of sounded and acted like my grandma.”

“Your grandma is a six foot tall goat?”

Mary gave the child that made the joke a look that caused the three children closest to her to back up immediately.

“First, don't ever make fun of my grandma again. I will fight you. Second... her name... her name was Toriel, she said. She talks really old fashioned and formal, and she didn't know anything about our costumes, but some of that might just be from living under a mountain. She was super polite and, and she put the effort into making her own Halloween stuff rather than store bought snacks. Everything about that says 'grandma' to me.”

The group continue to mill about for a few more seconds, until the child dressed like Iron Man spoke up again.

“So, do we go over there and give it a shot, or what?”

“That's up to you. But I am totally coming to this house again next Halloween!”

Officer Steve looked around at the festivities and scratched the top of his head before putting his cap back on. The station had received four or five noise complaints in a span of about an hour, and it certainly sounded like the party was going wild, but they were hardly the first party in the previous couple of weeks to cross that line and were not likely to be the last one, either. Tents and awnings not unlike what had been set up in the park were scattered around, along with a mix of electric lights and what could only be magical counterparts; floating fireballs, over-sized and oversimplified fireflies swarming in a circle, little sparks of ball lightning suspended in midair.
There was obviously dancing, there was likely drinking, and though he couldn't see obvious evidence of it Officer Steve expected there to be plenty of debauchery before the night was through. But if there was ever a night for him to look the other way, this was definitely it.

“...care for a drink?”

Officer Steve turned towards the source of the question, and startled slightly as he saw a flaming orange figure, well dressed with an apron on, polishing a glass. Eyeglasses gave a rough impression of a face despite not having any ears or a nose to rest on, and the figure had no visible mouth.

“Uh... sure. Nothing with alcohol though, or anything that can impair judgement. I'm still technically on duty.”

“...got it. Any preference?”

There had been no indication of the figure speaking, except that the voice came from its direction. No mouth appeared at any point, although the pattern of the flames seemed to change a little bit. Officer Steve immediately regretted his instructions regarding no alcoholic drinks.

“Nope. I'm good for whatever.”

“...one random non-intoxicating drink, coming right up.”

The flaming figure pulled out some containers from beneath the table that was serving as a bar, poured some liquid from different bottles and cans into a cocktail shaker, and before long poured some sort of liquid into a plastic cup before pushing it towards the policeman.

“...here you go.”

“Thanks. What do I owe you for it?”

“...first drink is on the house for everyone tonight.”

“Welp, that's pretty generous. Thanks, uh... sorry, don't think I caught, or ever heard, your name.”

“...Grillby.”

“Nice to meet you, Grillby. Officer Steven Ward, at your serv-”

Officer Steve was interrupted as two figures stumbled up to the outdoor bar, laughing almost to excess. One was the tall and muscular figure of Undyne, and the other the equally tall but far less muscular figure of Papyrus.

“Oh my GOD did you see the look on his FACE?!!”

“YET ANOTHER VICTORY FOR THE GREAT PAPYRUS! NYEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH!!”

“Excuse me, do I want to know what this is about?”

“Hey! Officer Steve! Oh man! Hey, I gotta introduce you to everybody!!!” Officer Steve found his arm in a grip that he was absolutely certain none of his training would allow him to escape and being dragged towards the dance floor, which currently had a robot that resembled David Bowie gyrating impossibly (yet fabulously) in the center. Off to the side of the dance floor were assorted electronic devices used in the playing of music, including but not limited to speakers, turntables, and mixing boards, all of which seemed to have a blue glow going on. Floating in the center of the assembly was
a semi-transparent figure that almost looked like a bed sheet draped over furniture, but with eyes drawn onto the fabric.

“Napstablook! Hey! Meet Officer Steve! He's the human that's been watching our butts up here!”

“.....oh... hi there...”

“Uhm. Hi. How are you doing?”

“......just... playing my mixes... for a new audience...”

“YEAH!” Undyne pumped both arms into the air. “Napstablook is Mettaton's composer and sound mixer! Every single track on Mettaton's show is their work! The game show intro, the news jingles, the cooking show, everything!”

“Oh, composer and musician? I literally know nothing about that, except that I kind of like what you've got playing right now. It's got a beat and you can dance to it.”

“...ohhh... oh gee... thanks... I guess...”

“Hey, I better keep making the rounds but it was nice meeting you. Napstablook, your name was? It's been a pleasure.”

“.....okay... thanks for ... saying hi....”

Officer Steve found himself being pulled, once again, by an excessively strong fish woman, this time towards two armored figures that seemed to be moving strangely in sync, and wondered exactly how long the introductions would go on for.

“Halloween has always been a holiday about ghosts and goblins but for the first time ever-”

“-a literal Monster Mash this Halloween in a small town in Oregon called Ebott's Wake, readers may remember our previous stories about the Bureau of Alcohol, Demolitions, Tobacco and Firearms involved in a standoff with a dangerous cult there-”

“-ghosts, skeletons, and a figure that actually seemed to be on fire that was serving drinks-”

“-calm before the storm, mark my words-”

“-a long and troubled past with this holiday so it seems that-”

“-RISE UP AND DRIVE THEM BACK INTO THE MOUNTAIN FROM WHENCE THEY CAME-”

“-an actual ghost, but not the spirit of the departed. Unfortunately the figure did not appear clearly in our camera, but you can see the distortion here next to the audio equipment-”

“-excuse me, sir! Why are you in a lawn chair of all things?“

“trying to get a tan. that's what the mirror is for.”

“But it's night, there's no sun out at night.”

“yeah, exactly. i spent my whole life underground. If i did this while the sun was up i'd get
“sunburned.”
“...what??”
“hehehehehe-”
“-can't go five minutes without hearing something new from the town of Ebott's Wake in Oregon-”
“-White House has not released an official statement but sources who spoke anonymously have confirmed that the administration is keeping an eye on the events in Oregon-”
“-though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death-”
“-sort of factory where the materials for this housing will be built, and that's in addition to the school already mentioned. We'll bring you more on that, and everything else related to this story, as it breaks.”

“I d-don't even know why you're here, Sans.”
“could say the same thing about you, couldn't help but notice how many drinks you and Undyne had last night.”
“Thanks for reminding me,” Alphys grumbled, rubbing one claw against here forehead. “I'd just as soon sleep it off but we need to get this production line working as soon as possible... okay. Focus... we need to build the tools to b-build more tools. Working back from the infuser, we need... we need-”
“metal shop, injection molding assembly, coil winder and a monster to provide the infused magic.”
“Right... right. Metal shop... start with a foundry, cast the p-parts for a lathe, put it together, use it to build itself and the rest of the machines.”
“or we could just bring some up from the CORE workshops.”
“...right. Got ahead of myself there.”
“you sure you don't want to go back to bed? or at least pull up a chair?”

Alphys turned and glared at the skeleton, lying back in some lawn furniture left over from messing with the human reporters the previous night, before returning her attention to the paperwork in her claws.

“Thousands of years of waiting, and we're finally free. When the history books include this part, I don't want there to be a p-paragraph saying that monsters still had to stay in the Underground because Dr. Alphys was hung over.”

“okay, that sounds bad, but consider this; everyone would remember your name when it came up on a quiz.”
“Thank you for your time, Your Majesty, I know how busy everything has been lately-”

Asgore raised one paw and smiled.

“No trouble at all my friend. We were heading that way anyway.”

“Even so, thank you so much.” The monster with the mass of suckered tentacles sticking out of its head as if they were hair turned to the human child standing near the King, holding a clipboard and a pencil. “And thank you too, Frisk.”

The child waved, but their response ended before it began as their mouth stretched wide in a yawn.

“Sorry. Couldn't sleep last night. Too much sugar.”

“It's perfectly fine. Well, I guess I better check in with everyone in Waterfall. By your leave, Your Majesty.”

“Of course! And let me know if you run into any further problems!”

As the monster vanished into the crowded streets of New Home, Asgore turned to Frisk. “Are you alright, Frisk?”

“Yeah. In hindsight I should not have had more than three of mom's cookies last night.”

“Well... we live and we learn.”

“In theory, yes.” Frisk craned their neck and looked at the city around them. “This place looks a lot different at street level.”

“Cities always do. That's why it's so important to be in them walking around. People, and problems, look different from a distance compared to up close.”

“...yeah. That's true. So where are these aquariums again?”

“Well, let's see... ah. About three blocks in this direction.”

“I'm right behind you.”

Alphys pulled off the goggles and rubbed the condensation off of the inside of the lenses for the fourth time before putting them back on.

“Ugh, what is going on with these things?”

“humidity.”

“It was a rhetorical question, Sans.” With her eyes protected, Alphys walked over to an improvised work bench made of sheets of plywood supported by a pile of bricks on one end and an overturned trash can on the other. On top of the plywood rested a number of loose electronic components, various pieces of scrap metal, yards of loose wire both insulated and exposed, and a number of hand tools, all surrounding one singular device that looked like the end result of unprotected sex between a
paint gun and a telescope.

Alphys hefted the device in one arm and opened a panel on the top, exposing three glass bottles that previously held beer, soda, and fruit juice. The one in the center glowed bright, almost neon yellow from the miniature lightning storm contained within the glass, but the other two seemed completely normal and empty. The panel was closed and Alphys walked away from the workbench towards a stack of reclaimed lumber that Woshua had carefully set aside while cleaning up the wreckage of the original structure.

“Alright. Portable infuser test number one. Lightning magic. If all goes well, I'll find somebody who's good with fire and ice to t-t-top off the other... the other bottles. If it doesn't... guess we'll just have to do this the old fashioned way.”

Alphys pointed the device at the stack of lumber and flipped a switch, and a cone shaped projection of yellow light emerged from the end of it. The cone was waved back and forth, covering the lumber in the light multiple times, accompanied by a sound that almost sounded like static, or the buzz of an electrical transformer. After almost thirty seconds, Alphys flipped the switch and the cone of light vanished.

“Ok-kay. Moment of truth.” Alphys held up one claw and a bolt of lightning arced from her claw tips towards the lumber, but instead of grounding on the wood and leaving black spots of carbonized cellulose fibers, the lightning bounced off in a wave of sparks like an arc welder turned as high as it would go.

“OH SHIT OH SHIT OH SHIT”

Alphys pulled back her claw and the lightning bolt dissipated in midair before it could find another target to ground itself on.

“...nice work, Al.”

“Nice work?! I almost c-caused a fire, or, or a b-b-blackout, or something!”

“and you pulled back just in time, and the only reason that was a concern was because the infuser worked. Not gonna tell you what to do, but maybe consider filing this one under the Success column, ya know?” Sans winked. “so, you wanna wait until we get this stuff triple sealed, or start bringing up the lab now and infuse it for fire and ice later?”

“C-can you wait until... until I... stop hyper... vent... until I catch my... my breath first?!”

“-have some idea of what the cavern beneath Mt. Ebott looks like due to photographs being posted to social media, but we don't yet know if these pictures are from monsters or from humans who have been allowed into the Underground-”

“-has tremendous implications for ecological and materials science-”

“-absolutely no idea if anything that these things say is actually true-”

“-have an expert on folklore and mythology here today to speak on how what we have learned fits or doesn't fit into the legends that have passed down over time, please welcome Doctor Aloysious Bewilderforce Gurston the Sixth. Dr. Gurston, it's a pleasure to have you here today-”

“-trying to get his finger on the pulse of the international community following this turn of events, so
we'll have that for you tonight at six-

"-man attempted to board a plane headed for Oregon, but was randomly selected for screening and TSA agents discovered a number of weapons on his person and in his luggage. This is the second time that-

"-magic, what is it, how does it work, are you and your family safe? Find out tonight on our new segment-

"-statements from Senator's aides-

"-claims that there is no connection between skeleton monsters and human remains-

"-price of gold has been fluctuating a lot more than normal, the highs aren't any higher than normal and the lows aren't any lower than normal, but the shifts between those highs and lows come much faster than they did before the monsters showed up. There's some speculation that, uh, hah, that this is the work of speculators, and this is probably why silver has jumped up so much as well, a lot of myths and legends say silver can hurt monsters like werewolves and the lower price means it's a lot more attainable to a wider number of people, while the high price of gold has-

"-rushed to the hospital after he tripped while walking up the steps on the stage. As this video shows, Dr. Bradley struck his head on the podium as he fell, which then fell on top of him, spilling a glass of water left for him onto the power cord for the microphone and causing severe electrical shock. Dr. Bradley has been listed as stable, meanwhile his supporters and followers are calling this a magical assassination attempt by the monsters in retaliation for his many sermons and rallies where he urged violent action against them-

"-look at this dog. Yes, it's wearing armor and it has a big sword and shield, but look at it! Don't you just want to pet him?!

"Hey-

"Patrick I swear if this is another call about Ebott's Wake this coffee cup is going up your nose."

Patrick nodded and then walked away from his coworker, who continued to struggle with the paperwork overtaking his desk for about thirty more seconds before sighing.

“Okay, never mind what I said. What is it?”

“I don't want a coffee cup up my nose. This is entrapment.”

“...I'm sorry I said that. I am certain, based on your reaction, that this is what's happening here. I just want confirmation.”

“Well, yeah. Apparently that kid hanging around with the monsters, three or four guys all called saying this kid was being neglected.”

“...when you say guys, do you mean guys in the general plural term for people or guys as in men?”

Patrick raised an eyebrow. “I don't ask people about their junk when they call in. Their voices sounded deep, masculine. That's all I got.”

“...huh.”
“Yeah.”
“Different voices?”

“Yeah, but I'm pretty sure one of them was the one that was calling the first time.”

John rubbed his hand on his chin for a few moments.

“...shit. I'd hate to leave somebody stuck in that kind of situation because of the Cry Wolf Effect... tell me if anybody calls about that kid again. Maybe there's some actual fire behind that smoke we're getting.”

Toriel withdrew her paw from the bottle, now glowing from the orange-reddish flames swirling beneath the glass.

“Thank you, your M-Majesty,” Alphys smiled. “I'll get everything sealed up j-just as soon as Gunther c-comes by to help with the ice magic.”

“It is I who should be thanking you, making the school building such a high priority.”

“Well, it's already built and standing and it'll be easy to repair physically when we have the t-time and resources and p-p-people. Sans and I just got a b-basic workshop built this morning. I've b-been walking on eggshells waiting for the science puns. Also we're still trying to get everyone up here who knows heavy construction so they can all tackle the temporary housing at the same time. So at least this way I'm not sitting on my-” Alphys glanced at Frisk standing next to the queen, “-on my claws waiting for something else t-to happen.”

“That is most wise. Please let me know if you encounter any difficulties, or if you discover anything about the building that we will need to address later. We will be at the city government center to file the last of the adoption paperwork.”

“Will d-do! Uh! G-g-good luck!”

“Thanks!” Frisk smiled and waved at Alphys as they followed Toriel down the sidewalk away from the school building.

“So, how was... how was your work in the Underground this morning, Frisk?”

“Complicated, but worth it. The plan is to just transport everyone in the aquariums to Waterfall where they can use the river. But that's where the simple part ends. I'll need to call the Municipal Assayer and give everyone a heads up. Should probably do that when we get to City Hall-”

Frisk's explanation was cut short as a cell phone began to ring.

“Oh, that's mine.” Frisk pulled out their phone and brought it up to their ear. “Hello, Ambassador Frisk speaking.”

“HELLO FRISK!”

“Hey Papyrus! How is the house hunting going?”

“EXCEEDINGLY WELL, BUT THAT IS NOT A TOPIC THAT IS PERTINENT TO THIS PHONE CALL. I AM PRESENTLY AT THE HOTEL AND THERE SEEMS TO BE A... A SITUATION?”
Frisk stopped in their tracks.

“What is it? Are there protesters or something?”

“NO, NOTHING AS SIMPLE AS THAT. UH. PERHAPS I SHOULD JUST HAND THE PHONE TO UNDYNE, SHE MAY BE ABLE TO EXPLAIN THINGS BETTER THAN I CAN.”

There was the muffled sound of movement as the cell phone changed hands.

“Ugh... hey punk.”

“Undyne? Are you okay? Alphys said that you 'partied too hardy' last night, or something.”


“...I'm sorry, I don't understand.”

“After a couple drinks. I started looking at... at the human food and human drinks. And I figured why not? And now I know why not.”

Frisk's eyebrows shot up as they connected the dots.

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I was just... I'm not sure... I can't really tell what's normal and what's being sick or if monsters eating human food is the last mistake I'll ever make in my life at this point-”

“It's alright, it's alright.” Frisk brought their free hand up to rub their forehead, eyes squeezed shut, then held their hand over the receiver of the cell phone. “Mom, I'll be right back.”

“What is the matter?”

“Nothing, I just need to have what is probably going to be the most awkward conversation I will ever have in my life.”

A large bipedal wolf stared at the piles of lumber and other materials, and tried to ignore the many, many humans staring at him.

“Wait, we're not going to infuse them? I was told we would put everything together once it was completely protected.”

“...got the call from Sans. Dr. Alphys is still running tests on the portable infuser. If it passes all of them, she'll bring it by and give the finished building a once-over.”

“Okay. It would be nice to get people up here sooner rather than later. Also, is it weird that I'm having a harder time adjusting to Sans actually doing things than I am with the whole, you know, Sun and Sky thing?”

“...I don't think it's anything to worry about.”

“I guess not.” The wolf picked up some of the boards and balanced them on his shoulder. “So, how you been Grillby? Don't get to talk much, on account of spending all day throwing ice into the river.”
“...doing alright, all things considered. You?”

“Can’t complain. Is there a hammer and nails around here?”

“...think Papyrus was going to bring his tools up, but I haven't seen him yet today. Not sure what's holding him up.”

“Huh... you think I can nail these things together with icicles?”

“...I think that's a solution to one problem that creates more problems.”

A tiny fist banged on the door of the house, paused, then knocked several more times, before the door finally rattled open.

“Yes, hello... oh, hello Mary!”

“Hello Mrs. Carmichael. Is Douglas home?”

“Yes, although he's a bit under the weather. He was a bit too enthusiastic last night in going through his Halloween haul.”

“I kinda figured. That's why I'm here.” Mary pulled off their backpack and reached inside, pulling out a glass bottle with a metal cap. “A lot of monsters set up those stalls and carts like they did in the park, but now they’re where the old hotel was, and one of them was selling this stuff. It's like some sort of fruit soda. I figure it might make him feel better. I don't know exactly what’s in it, but I do know the cookies we got from the queen monster's house last night made everything feel better, so you know. Worth a shot.”

“...well, I suppose that's true. Thank you, Mary. I will go ask Douglas if he wants to make the attempt. Would you like to come inside?”

“I'm sorry, I can't. Dad's been super busy for obvious reasons, and mom needs me to run some errands for her since he can’t.”

“Ah, that is important. Okay then, best of luck, just know that you're always welcome!”

“Thank you Mrs. Carmichael!”

Mary turned and headed down the steps toward the sidewalk, one arm raised in a wave of farewell, and headed down the street. A scrap of paper was pulled out of her pocket, and the child ran her finger down the list written on it.

“...House of Stuff? Ugh, I was just there! I swear she's spreading out these lists just to make me run all over town—”

“Do not fall too far behind, Frisk!”

Mary looked up from her list to see, on the other side of the street, the same large furry monster that had provided her and Douglas with cookies as Halloween treats, and a notable distance behind them, the child ambassador talking on a cell phone.

“Yeah, that's probably not a good idea in the short or the long term. I couldn't tell you the specific details. All I know is what I remember reading at the Library, and that was a while... no, that's how infections happen. I mean, for humans. No idea if that can happen to monsters. That's something that
needs to be tested, like, with science...."

Mary turned and watched as the monster and child walked around a corner and vanished, then turned back to their list.

A shoe with a thick sole and tight laces kicked the flat tire. The tire remained flat, and the owner of the foot inside that shoe began to hop around.

"Ow, fuck, ow, ow, fuck-"

"Feel better?"

"Hah, hah." The man on one foot glared at the other man. One's hair was black and the other man's hair was brown, but in every other way that mattered the two men appeared very similar. "You got any ideas, asshole?"

"Yeah. I'm looking up the road service places around here and calling one of them."

The brown haired man frowned. "You did hear the part where our mission was supposed to be top secret, right?"

"I recognize your concern, so here is my solution. Let's sit here in a car with a flat tire and a bad spare until somebody comes along. And when they ask why we didn't call for a tow truck or just try to hitchhike to town, you can tell them we're on a secret mission. That won't raise any suspicions."

"Yeah, yeah... still, long as you brought it up. Kind of suspicious that we'd have a flat tire and a flat spare."

"It's a rental, dumbass. Okay, I got something." The black haired man tapped his phone. "Greene Machines Garage, Gas Station, and... Minigolf?"

"Let me see that." The brown haired man walked over and looked at the screen his partner raised up. "...what the hell?"

"Yeah, exactly." The phone was raised to the black haired man's ear and after a few rings, there was the sound of the call being answered.

"Greene Machines Garage."

"Hello, I, uh, I just had a breakdown out on, uh... I think it's Polton Road? And I need some automotive assistance."

The voice on the other end of the phone sighed. "Please stand by sir, I will transfer you to the service department." A few moments later, the man could hear a muffled voice.

"Hal! Hal you got a job!"

The cell phone microphone was covered as the black haired man looked up at his partner. "These yokels aren't exactly Triple-"

"HAL STOP FUCKING AROUND WITH THE WINDMILL AND GET IN HERE!"

The man pulled the phone away from his ear; whoever was holding the phone on the other end had opted to stop muffling the microphone. A few moments later, a voice picked up on the other end.
“Hal Greene speaking! How can I help you today?”

“Uh, we had a breakdown, a flat tire and the spare is bad too, so we could use either a spare or a lift.”

“We can do that! About where did you break down?”

“Last sign I saw, it said, uh, Polton Road, but I couldn't tell you exactly where. I know we're due south of some place called Triton?”

“I know the place! I'll be there with the tow truck ASAP! Can I get your name for my records?”

“Uh... Brown. John Brown.”

“Okay, Mr. Brown! I'll see you in thirty minutes or less, or your pizza is free!”

“Pizza-?” The call ended as the black haired man spoke, then looked up at his partner. “I get the feeling this guy isn't firing on all cylinders.”

“...is anyone, anymore? Monsters, man. Ghosts and goblins and skeletons, oh my.”

“Okay, yes, when you put things like that...” The man put away his cell phone. “Okay, remember. You're Mr. Black and I'm Mr. Brown. If we do it the other way, it's too on the nose.”

“...thanks again for the help earlier.” Undyne's face was still flushed with red, contrasting against her blue scales, and it wasn't exactly clear where the blush was coming from in the first place. “That was a bit... well, it caught me off guard.”

Sitting on the bench next to the muscular fish woman, a child in a striped shirt scribbled on a sheet of paper.

“No problem.”

“...so that's just... ordinary? Humans do that every day?”

“Multiple times a day. It's not usually a problem, for most people, although it's not something that gets talked about in polite society.”

“...huh. Guess that's why it wasn't in any of Alphys' video.”

“Uh... probably. Broadcast standards and what not.... actually, Undyne?”

“Yeah?”

“...I'll, uh. I mean... let me know when Alphys isn't running around trying to get that science lab factory thing set up. I want to go over some stuff with her, and you'll probably need to be involved, too. And sooner is better than later.”

“No idea what you're talking about, but that's not really out of the ordinary up here. So sure. I'll let you know.”

“Great. Honestly this is something I should have started working on in the Underground, but in my defense the Barrier hadn't been broken yet so none of, you know, this, none of it was on my radar-”
Frisk stopped speaking abruptly and looked up as Toriel walked over from desk she had been sitting in front of.

“Any problems?”

“Not as such. Much of what we are doing is unusual and unfamiliar, but I have been promised that if any paperwork is missing or needs correction, the city will notify us to that effect.”

“That sounds pretty good.”

Toriel smiled. “Agreed. Well, shall we proceed to the school and see what progress Dr. Alphys has made?”

“I like the sound of that!!” Undyne jumped up to her feet, and Frisk giggled and stood up from the bench as well.

“Yeah, this is a good plan.”

“Then let us be off.”

The door to the office opened and Toriel walked out, papers under her arm; Frisk followed, carrying a number of books in roughly the same position, and Undyne following the child, looking around to scan the environment for potential threats. There were assorted men and women in the main lobby of the building, some of whom stopped what they were doing to stare at the monsters, but just as many continued talking to each other, looking at their cell phones, or filling out paperwork.

After the queen, the ambassador, and the bodyguard walked out of the doors of the building, one of the figures sitting down and filling out paperwork stood up and walked through the same door that the trio had previously walked out of, and stopped in front of one of the desks.

“Sorry sir, I'm kind of in the middle of something but I'm sure somebody else can help you.”

“That's alright. I was just bringing these papers in to file. You were handling the... the monster queen's adoption paperwork, correct? This is for them.” The man placed a manila folder on the desk and opened it up, and the clerk could see stacks of forms and copies of photo ID attached to some of them with staples or paper clips. The man pointed at one slip of paper in particular. “Here's my number if anything is missing.”

The clerk looked at the man, at the paperwork, and then at the piles of paperwork that were already accumulating on her desk, and performed some quick mental arithmetic.

“Alright, you can just leave that here and I'll file it as soon as I can.”

“Excellent. Thank you for your help. Have a good day.” The man stood up from desk and walked away, and the clerk blinked.

“Uh, thanks, you too!”

Outside of the building, Jason Taylor breathed in slowly, and let it out just as slowly, before walking to his vehicle.
Tourist Trap

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a knock on the open door. A quiet, hesitant knock, the kind of knock that, if it was heard at all, telegraphed an extreme reluctance on the part of the one doing the knocking to draw any sort of attention to their presence. It was a knock that was a pure formality.

Unfortunately for Doctor Alphys, somebody heard it anyway.

“Can I help you?”

Alphys jumped a bit as she looked around for the source of the voice and located a human standing by one of the tables inside the building, who seemed to have flinched as Alphys jumped in alarm.

“Uh. Hi. I. Uh. I'm D-D-Doctor Alphys. I, uh. I called somebody about... about seeing how humans recycled stuff.”

“Oh.” The human shrugged. “Well, I haven't heard about that, but you can come on in if you want.”

“Ok-kay. Thanks.”

“...actually hold on one moment. Are you working with those monsters that got rid of all the asbestos?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I helped with some of that.”

“Oh. I think I see why you're here now. Sorry, didn't think to introduce myself. Anna Zimmerman. Professional... volunteer.”

“Nice t-to meet you, Anna.”

“Same. So...what do you want to see? The cardboard press, the metal shredder, the glass crusher, the sorting system?”

“Uh. All of the above, I think.”

“Okay then.” Anna got up from the table and walked out of the room. “If you'll follow me...”

A balding man with a carefully styled mustache stood outside the garage as a tow truck rolled up to the building, stricken vehicle literally in tow behind it. The door opened as the engine stopped and three men hopped out of the cab, two of them more eagerly then the third.

“Last stop! Greene Machine's Garage, Gas Station and Minigolf, for all your automotive and miniature golf needs!”

“Hal mah boy, why don't you introduce me to your new friends?”

The driver of the trick grinned. “Mr. Brown, Mr. Black, this is Dave Greene, owner and sole proprietor of this establishment. Dad, Mr. Brown and Mr. Black. They had a pretty bad puncture out on Polton Road.”
“Stroke of good luck then, for you two to break down on a main road like that!” Dave Greene walked up to the duo and held out a hand, which one man reluctantly took and almost had shaken out of its shoulder socket. “Pleasure to meet you two, we'll do our level best to get you back on the road as soon as possible.”

“Uh. Thanks.”

“You're very welcome!” The Elder Greene smiled and pulled some slips of colorful paper out of his shirt pocket. “Here, have some complementary tickets for the miniature golf course to kill time while we fix up your ride.”

“Actually, uh. While that is generous, we really, uh. Uh-”

“Do you know any good restaurants nearby?” The black haired man spoke up as his companion floundered. “Or just vending machines with cold drinks? We were kinda out there for a while.”

“Why, as luck would have it, right around that corner on that side of the block is a lovely place called the Wanton Wonton Chinese Buffet!”

“That's good to know. Thank you Mr. Greene. You mind if we head that way right now, or should we get all the paperwork and financials out of the way first?”

“Oh, that's no issue! Go ahead, get yourself something to eat and drink!”

“Much appreciated, sir. Thank you.”

As the duo walked down the sidewalk and rounded the corner, Hal and his father walked in towards the garage. The elder Greene rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Nice boys. Pretty polite for federal agents.”

“Oh, you picked up on that too? I knew something was off when they weren't cussing their bad luck all the way back to town. That sure as heck wasn't normal.”

“Yep.” Mr. Greene walked behind a counter and grabbed a tire patch kit as his son grabbed an impact wrench and hooked it up to an air compressor tube. “Oh, by the by, Justin told me to remember to tell you something before he headed off for lunch.”

“What was it?”

The elder Greene shrugged. “I forget.”

11:19 AM LadyDeathwish: YOU LUCKY SONOVABIGOT
11:19 AM LadyDeathwish: TELL ME THE THINGS
11:20 AM: your gonna have to narow things down a bit
11:20 AM LadyDeathwish: AGHJKDLCLD
11:20 AM LadyDeathwish: MONSTERS
11:20 AM LadyDeathwish: YOU HAS THEM
11:20 AM: o
11:20 AM: that
11:21 AM LadyDeathwish: YES
11:21 AM LadyDeathwish: THAT
11:21 AM LadyDeathwish: Spill the beans Mike
11:21 AM LadyDeathwish: Tell me EVERYTHING
11:22 AM: monsters came out of the mountain and they want to sell us ice cream and start a school
11:22 AM: done
11:22 AM LadyDeathwish: AAAAAAAA
11:22 AM LadyDeathwish: Do they need a guide?
11:22 AM LadyDeathwish: I could act as ambassador
11:22 AM LadyDeathwish: Show them the ropes
11:23 AM: that job is taken
11:23 AM: kid named Frisk has been running around town
11:23 AM: talking to politicians and such
11:23 AM LadyDeathwish: There has to be SOMETHINGNSN
11:23 AM LadyDeathwish: Hey that skeleton in the video with you and the cop
11:23 AM LadyDeathwish: Is he single
11:23 AM: r u talking abt papyrus or sans
11:24 AM: papyrus is the tall
11:24 AM: WAIT WAT
11:24 AM LadyDeathwish: DON'T YOU START
11:24 AM LadyDeathwish: Being demi is a chore
11:24 AM LadyDeathwish: Who am I attracted to? and why?!
11:24 AM: fuck I know Matt was an asshole
11:24 AM: but I didn't realize he was bad enough to get you to give up on human men entirely
11:25 AM LadyDeathwish: LOL
11:25 AM LadyDeathwish: OMG
11:25 AM: actually not sure if skeleton monsters used to be human
11:25 AM: or if they just look like human bones
11:25 AM: and its a coincidence or somethign
11:26 AM LadyDeathwish: Every human boyfriend HAS been a disaster, so
11:26 AM LadyDeathwish: Yeah
11:26 AM LadyDeathwish: It's been a year
11:26 AM LadyDeathwish: Time to broaden my horizons
11:26 AM LadyDeathwish: Gonna head down there now
11:27 AM LadyDeathwish: I'm already buying the ticket
11:27 AM: do u even have a passport
11:27 AM LadyDeathwish: STOP RUINING MY PLANS WITH YOUR FACTS
11:27 AM: but facts are all I got going for me
11:27 AM: brb work

Michael Van Garrett looked up from his phone as a man approached with a stack of books.

“Ah, hello again sir. Picking up or dropping off?”

“Dropping off. Got everything I needed. Or I think I did.” The books thudded on the desk and the man scratched his head. “Here you go.”

“...not to complain or anything, but you could have just put those in the box outside.”

“I had some other stuff I needed to look up.”

“Oh. Well, never mind then.” Van Garrett picked up one book with one hand and pulled out the bar code scanner with the other. “Best get these back into the system ASAP. I know at least some people have been wanting to read these.”

“Yeah... I'll bet.”

“Rumor has it that the monster school is about to open, but I don't see how. Just because they cleaned out all the stuff in there doesn't mean they replaced all the stuff that broke down and had to be cleaned up.”

“Actually, Dr. Alphys was doing something at the school called infusion. Basically fireproofing the structure now that the asbestos is gone.”

“How'd you hear about that?
“My sister has been hanging out with her for two hours and going absolutely nuts about all the science and recycling stuff she's learned. Last thing she sent me, she said she was quitting the recycling center and working for Dr. Alphys as soon as she could.”

“...huh. Wonder if I can get her old job at the recycling center then.”

“Do you have six years of experience sorting trash and operating hydraulic presses?”

“...not as such. I did operate a bulldozer while I was in the Army, think they'll meet me halfway?”

“It couldn't hurt to ask. Anyway, I better get back to the station. Thanks for the egg drop soup, Justin.”

“No problem. See you around.”

Two men stood up from one table and headed toward the cashier, passing by a a brown haired man staring at his General Tso's Chicken and toying idly with an egg roll in one hand.

“Hey, you gonna eat that egg roll or just jerk it off?”

The man looked up to see his partner halfway through a plate of pork fried rice.

“Do you have to make remarks like that when I'm eating?”

“If you had been eating, I wouldn't have.”

“...I really don't like this assignment.”

The black haired man shrugged. “I'm not exactly jumping for joy either but it's the job.”

“Yes... based on social media, the monsters are set up in the Roll-On-Inn Traveler's Hotel. What do you think?”

“Too close for comfort.”

“Agreed. Once the car is repaired, we'll find lodgings somewhere else. Then we'll start poking around.”

Outside the restaurant, the two men looked through the glass at the figures still seated, and then at each other.

“So, you gonna tell the radio station that we have federal agents snooping around?”

“Yeah, but I doubt anything will come of it. I mean, most people wouldn't be bothered anyway. Some folks would probably think of it as a follow up on the BADTF rolling in and throwing down.”

“Right. And it would be really weird if there wasn't a government response to the whole monsters showing up thing.”

“Exactly. How about you?”

“Probably gonna text Steve about it, assuming he doesn't know already. Anyway, better run, Hal and his dad are probably wondering where I am.”

“Right. Hey, is Dave Greene ever gonna retire?”
“Hal said something about his parents buying an RV and wandering the back roads of America like a pair of musical cryptids. Having spent Christmas at their house once, I think that's entirely plausible.”

“Hah. I believe it. See you man.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

**NOW HIRING:**

Teachers and Instructors, Elementary Grades

Prior Experience useful but not required

Love of teaching a **must**

Knowledge and experience in the following subjects a plus:

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Also taking applications for: General Maintenance, Grounds Keeping, Records Keeping, Accounting, Secretarial Work

**Must be willing to work with monster children.**

All applications must be made **in person** at Dreemurr Elementary School in Ebott's Wake, Oregon.

Toriel looked over the paper she was writing on, then peered at Frisk.

“Are you quite certain about that last line, Frisk?”

“Absolutely.” Frisk looked up from the papers they were writing and drawing on. “If we put a phone number there, we’re going to get saturated with prank calls and probably more than a few death threats. And while the line is busy, people who legitimately want to teach won’t be able to reach us. Same with a mailing address, we'll get all sorts of hate mail. If people have to come all the way here to insult us, then maybe they won't think it's worth the time and energy. But an aspiring teacher who comes here will definitely be showing commitment.”

“...those are all good points.” Toriel put down the sheet of paper. “You did make a convincing case for Undyne to teach physical education, as well. However, I am... less enthused about your recommendation of Asgore as grounds keeper.”

“He knows gardening. That seems like the most important job requirement there.”

Toriel stared at Frisk and sighed. “My child, you do remember what he was about to do before I interrupted, do you not?”

“I do. And I remember what you said when you interrupted.”

“...I do not follow.”
“...what Asgore did. Wasn't good. There's no arguing that.” Frisk closed their eyes, breathing in slowly and letting out slowly, before opening their eyes again. “But you can't regret bad choices all your life. Yours or those of others.”

As if Frisk's words had flipped a physical switch, memories began playing out in Toriel's mind of a child staring back at her, defiant, as fireballs swirled around them...

'As horrible as he is, even Asgore deserves mercy, too.'

...and Toriel shook herself as she realized that Frisk was speaking again.

“This, uh...” Frisk seemed to shrink in on themselves. “This isn't a... well, I'm not sure what to call it. I was just... the point I want to make is, maybe it's time to, as Papyrus said, let bybones be bybones.”

Toriel sighed and put her head in her paws for a few moments, then dropped her paws to the table again.

“Your point is... well taken, Frisk. I will... I will at least consider the option.”

“Thank you. Actually, I have some stuff I wanted to show you, too.” Frisk pulled a sheet of paper out of the stack and pushed it toward Toriel. Without even turning it right side up, Toriel could see that it was a drawing, made in colored pencils, of a skeleton riding some sort of wheeled platform while wearing sunglasses, with two bones also riding the same platforms and wearing sunglasses jumping above him, and the words “COOL DUDE” spelled out in bones below.

“What do you think? Refrigerator material?”

One corner of Toriel's mouth twitched, then the other, and then she was smiling; several other sheets of paper followed, including one showing an armored Undyne thrusting a spear into a sky illustrated with five pointed stars and a crescent moon, captioned “The Heroine who NEVER gives up” and even an approximation of Toriel herself, complete with robes, horns, and a stack of books, simply captioned “Mom”.

The clincher was a picture that simply consisted of a sign that said “Out To Lunch” and was captioned “The Wild Sans In His Natural Habitat”. Toriel immediately sputtered in laughter, and Frisk smiled and relaxed.

“Hey, John?”

“If you tell me we got another call from Ebott's Wake, I swear...”

“...you swear what?”

John sighed. “I didn't come up with a good enough ultimatum by the time I got to that part of the sentence, so I just trailed off. What is it?”

“Well, we didn't get anymore calls from Ebott's Wake, but... the original call wasn't that long ago. And we are legally obligated to investigate every report, even if it's just driving by to confirm that it's bullshit.”

John looked at his desk, piled high with papers, and then back at Patrick.

“You know what I hate more than you bringing up bullshit?”
“What's that?”

“You bringing up completely valid points.”

“...soooo, is that a-

“I'll head into Ebott's Wake this afternoon, see if there's even a hint of something going on there. You can deal with the paperwork on my desk. And I mean process it, don't just throw it into the trash can.”

Dr. Alphys tapped at the metal beam, then lifted it off of the workbench and handed it to Anna.

“Here. Check this out.”

Anna stared at Alphys with wide, incredulous eyes, before carefully reaching out and placing her hands under what looked, for all intents and purposes, like a massive steel I-beam. Slowly her hands applied more force upward... until she had lifted the beam completely out of Alphys' claws, an event that shocked the human so much that she almost dropped the beam anyway.

“What in the...?! This is magic, right? It's got to be. That's the only logical explanation.”

“Ah. Heh. Some of it is. This looks like solid metal, but it's actually foamed metal. It's much less dense than what you'd normally find up here, and it also lets us make more building materials from less raw materials. But the main reason you can lift that with your bare hands is gravity magic. It'll wear off in a few hours but by the time that happens, it'll already be welded into place.”

“...cooooool. How does that even work?”

“C-come over here, I'll show you.” Alphys took back the metal framing member and passed it to a massive monster with reddish skin and horns, then beckoned Anna to follow her into the small shed where the I-beam had originally come from. Inside, oscillating balls of lightning lit up the structure from inside glass soda bottles inscribed with strange patterns, suspended from the roof's peak by mismatched shoelaces, and made it possible to see a massive bear in a sweater standing by a workbench.

“Hey G-Gunther, how are things going?”

“Oh, hey doc. So far so good. Who's your friend?”

“Oh, right! This is, this is... Anna... oh god that's all I can remember I'm so sorry-”

“That's alright.” Anna grinned and held up one hand in a wave. “Anna Zimmerman, but just Anna is fine. I work at the recycling center in town.”

“Nice to meet you, Anna. The name's Gunther, like the doctor said.”

“Pleased to meet you, Gunther.”

“Gunther used to keep the cooling system for the CORE running, b-back in the Underground. Gunther, do you mind if I take over for a b-bit?”

“Go right ahead, I could use a break anyway.”

The bear monster stepped back from the bench, and Alphys ran up to the workspace, picking up
some of the tools.

“So, there’s a lot of stuff we cribbed from human technology. Conveyor belts, production lines, parts standards. But for magic and technology to work, we had to come up with something all our own.” A claw tapped a set of wire coils surrounding some sort of glowing object that Anna couldn’t easily recognize, but might have been crystal or cut glass. “The Point Source Emitter, or PSE unit. Once it's provided with a magical template, here in the center, it converts electrical energy into the same field produced by the template. So somebody who’s not good with fire magic can still cook with it, somebody who’s not good with electrical magic can still spot weld, somebody who’s not good with gravity magic can lift heavy loads, and so on and so on and so on.”

“...mass produced magic?”

“Almost! The PSE modules themselves, they still have to be made by hand. We still haven’t automated that part. But once they're built, they can last for hundreds or thousands of discharge cycles. Maybe we can make them last even longer now that we can get better materials up here!” Alphys turned away from the workbench and pointed at the shelves on the other side of the shed, stacked with similar devices. “The blue ones are for freezing and cooling, the red ones for cooking, and the green ones are general purpose food preparation and preservation. All of those are going to monsters who make and sell food, so they can step up their production. Frisk said that we’d be seeing a surge in interest in monster food soon, and so far they’ve been right about that. Every time humans had the chance to buy monster food in any form, it was sold out the same day. We need to keep up with demand!”

Anna stared at the shelves holding the glowing devices, each about the size of a toaster.

“...how long have you guys been waiting to set this up?”

“...I, uh. I'm not sure I understand what you're asking. D-do you mean, like, how long we were d-down there?”

“I mean, did you just have these things in a box waiting for when that, uh, that barrier thing was broken?”

“Oh! Oh, no, these were all made this morning. Also the shed, we put that together so we could have a place to move some of these tools from the Underground.”

Anna stared at Alphys.

“You... built all of this... in five hours??”

“Well, the shed was mostly Sans.” Alphys rolled her eyes. “Probably because he wanted to nap in the shade.”

“it's true.”

Anna jumped up and spun around, seeing a skeleton lounging in a worn out reclining chair in a corner of the shed that she had not looked at when walking in, probably because so much else in the structure was demanding her attention. The skeleton waved one hand, and Anna responded in kind.

“...hi.”

“hi.”

Anna turned back to Alphys, then turned back to stare at Sans, and then finally faced Alphys again.
“Okay, even so, that's amazing, being able to produce all of this in a day.”

“I'll, uh. I'll take your word for it. Honestly, we're running way behind b-based on my original estimates and plans. We should have the base structure ready for mass production of infused materials ready by tonight, and all the assembly line systems running tomorrow. After that it's just a problem of getting enough materials to keep them running.”

“What kind of materials? Actually what are you using for raw materials right now?”

Alphys pushed her glasses up closer to her eyes and pulled some papers out of her lab coat, flipping through them until she got to some flowchart diagrams.

“That's actually why I wanted to t-talk to somebody at the recycling center today. For ages we got most of our technology and materials out of the garbage dump in Waterfall, from trash in the river. But we've, uh. We've kinda mined out all the stuff we can use for building materials now. So we need to find new sources of glass, metal, plastic, rubber, and a couple of other things. I was, heh. I was k-kinda hoping to. To strike a deal. In exchange for some recycling technology we used that I don't think is standard up here, we could get some of the materials you get dropped off. Or something.”

Anna stared at Dr. Alphys, then reached up and pushed a bit of hair out of the way... futilely, as it quickly returned to its original location in front of her face.

“I can't actually make that kind of call unilaterally, but I think I can call up whoever does make that call. Couldn't hurt to ask.”

The bell above the door rang, catching the attention of the cashier away from her steamy paperback romance novel.

“Hello sir, can I help you find anything?”

“Oh. Not right now. I'll let you know if I find anything though.”

“Suit yourself.” The cashier returned to her book of flowery and provocative prose, and Mr. Brown started walking down the aisles of the store, slowly. The sheer variety of items, never mind the huge scale, came as a bit of a surprise. Clothing in a variety of styles and sizes, footwear just as varied, books, appliances, children's toys, kitchen utensils, furniture-

A flash of white through the spaces between aisles stopped the man in his tracks, and it took a few moments for Mr. Brown to move in that direction, trying to figure out what he had seen, or thought that he had seen in any case. Following along the aisles back to the front of the store again, he heard a voice start speaking.

“I believe that we will purchase the children's bed with the inventory tag number 349 on it.”

“Okay.” The voice of the cashier responded. “You gonna take it with you, or do you need us to deliver it?”

“I was not aware that delivery was an option.”

“Oh, yeah. We have a truck out back. Just need your address and I'll pass along the delivery order to the boss. A truck that big needs a special license and he's the only one here who's certified.”
“I see. Or I think that I do, in any case.”

“So just the bed, or anything else that needs delivery?”

“Why bother with the delivery truck? I can carry that back to your house easily!”

“Are you quite sure?”

“Just watch me!”

Mr. Brown lost track of the conversation as he passed around the corner and saw it: An actual monster. At least six or seven feet tall, not counting the horns, covered in white fur and wearing a robe in various shades of purple. And next to it was another monster. Blue scales, long red hair in a ponytail, wearing a tank top, with the legs of its pants tucked into boots. And standing in between the two monsters was a human child with unkempt hair... staring at him, with a cell phone in its hands.

There was a beeping noise, and Mr. Brown realized the child had taken a picture of him. Perhaps in response to the sound, the monsters next to the child turned around, and Mr. Brown noticed fangs sticking out of a large, fur covered muzzle, and maroon red eyes looking at him.

“Oh! Hello, I did not see you there. I am not interrupting your shopping, I hope?”

“Uh. No.” Mr. Brown's eyes darted over to the other monster, who's single visible eye was narrowed in suspicion. “I was just... browsing. Actually I'm from out of town and... well, if I'm honest, this is a first for me.”

“Understandable.” The white furry monster smiled. “I am Toriel, and this is Captain Undyne, and this is my child, Frisk.”

The child had placed their cell phone in their pocket and waved back, with a face that actually seemed deliberately neutral. “Hello.”


“Exceedingly well, thank you. In fact, we were just getting ready to purchase some additional furniture.”

“Oh, nice.”

“How about you, Mr. Brown?” The child spoke up. “What brings you to Ebott's Wake?”

“A flat tire, actually. That, uh. That mechanic's shop on this block is working on it. Actually I should head back there soon, see if they've gotten that fixed yet.”

“Okay. Well, it was nice meeting you, Mr. Brown.” The child waved, and turned back to the checkout counter, as did the white furry monster. The blue scaled monster with red hair, he couldn't help but notice, was still staring at him, and he awkwardly walked over to the entrance of the store and walked outside. His hands were shaking, which he did not give much thought to until he was halfway to the garage; he had felt alarmed and on high alert the instant that he had seen the monsters, which did not raise any red flags by itself.

But he had not actually felt afraid until he looked at the child's face.
“Alright, name?”

“Daniel Specter.”

“Age?”

“About a hundred and twenty years old, I think.”

“...you think?”

The ghostly figure made a motion that was probably a shrug, if it was possible to shrug without distinct arms or shoulders. “It was hard to keep track of time in the Underground for a long time.”

“Ah. Fair enough. We'll just round it off at one twenty then. Uh... does male or female even apply in your case, or...?”

“I don't think so.”

“Yeah, me neither.” The clerk scribbled something on the form. “We'll just leave that blank. Hair color is obvious not applicable. Same with eye color... it's not like we're not already waiving a lot of stuff anyway... okay! Just stand, er, float, or whatever in front of the camera and we'll get this done.”

The ghost floated over in front of the camera and a few seconds later, there was a flash and a click. The clerk narrowed her eyes at the screen and frowned.

“I'm sorry, can we go again? I think I closed my eyes.”

“That's not even the biggest problem we have to deal with.” The clerk moved her monitor enough so that the ghost could see the image that the camera had captured; there was barely the faintest outline to show where they had been floating moments before.

“...oh.”

“Yeah....”

Chapter End Notes

Just a quick heads up to everybody. The last two chapters have been a bit slow to complete because I live on a farm and harvest time is almost upon us, and as a result things have been busy. When harvest itself actually begins, the delays will definitely get even longer. Fortunately, this will be a temporary state of affairs, and once the combine's shut down for the season, we will return to our regularly scheduled small town insanity.
“East West Road, West East Road... if I ever meet the man who named the streets of this town I'm going to punch his lights out.” John pulled over to the side of street, compared the house number to the sticky-note on the manila folder in the passenger seat, and turned off the engine.

The house itself did not stand out in any significant way from the other houses on the street, even down to the color of the siding. One large window was unobstructed and John could see into an open plan living and dining room, which had a large table and chairs... with place settings, in fact. Two of them. There was also a large... a very large easy chair next to a fireplace. John looked up and saw no chimney, nor any brickwork or masonry on that side of the house, which raised a very important question about why there seemed to be a fire in the fireplace.

Movement caught the man's eyes, and John focused on what had to be one of the monsters. Certainly no human beings he knew were over six feet tall with white fur and horns. She was carrying a plate to the table, and a moment later, John saw a child in a striped shirt holding a plate and walking up to the table as well.

On the one hand, it was definitely rude to interrupt people when they were eating dinner. On the other hand, interrupting people's routines could teach the careful observer a lot about them. John hopped out of the car... well, stumbled might have been a more accurate term, and tried in vain to smooth some of the wrinkles out of his suit jacket and shirt before he walked over to the front door and pressed the doorbell.

“One moment!”

A few seconds later, the front door opened, and John had to fight not to flinch. The monster was a lot bigger up close. It was one thing to see it from a distance, and another to see it within handshaking distance.

“Uh. Sorry to trouble you this late in the afternoon, ma'am. I'm John Coppersmith, and I'm with Child Protection Services in Quarterhorse Fields.”

“I see. Is this about the adoption paperwork? Frisk did mention that there may have been other forms that we were not able to fill out because the reference book did not mention them.”

“I see. I'm not actually here in regards to that. At least not specifically. We actually got a couple of phone calls from people concerned about a child's safety.”

The child sighed and rolled their eyes. “This is because of me holding the fireball, isn't it.”

“I'm afraid I can't speak about the specific nature of any calls the department received.”

“Right, right. Well, we could probably get some of that straightened out, if you want to come inside.”

“Don't mind if I do.” John followed the child and the monster inside, looking around with undisguised curiosity. The floor plan was sparse, although what looked like vases, a few paintings, and some floor rugs broke up the monotony of the surfaces.

“My name is Toriel, Mr. Coppersmith, and this of course is Frisk. I do not mean to be rude but we
were just about to start dinner. I would invite you to join us but I do not know if that would be proper under the circumstances.”

“Yes, that could easily be construed as a conflict of interest. This is a very lovely house, by the way. Have you been here long?”

“We just moved in a few days ago, in fact, and unpacking is still an ongoing concern, when we have the time for it.”

“I see. Is it alright if I see Frisk’s living arrangements?”

John saw Toriel turn to Frisk, and the child’s brow furrow in confusion for a moment, before their face cleared.

“Sure. Follow me.”

The child made their way up the staircase, and John followed them up, down a short hallway, and into a bedroom. A bed took up space under one window, and a few cardboard boxes were stacked nearby with the occasional sock or shirt sleeve indicating that the contents were clothing. Another box, open on top, appeared to be stacked with books.

“The next big furniture purchase planned is a wardrobe or something to hold clothes, so I don't have all these boxes lying around. I could have probably stored all of them under the bed, but that would make some of them harder to get at when I needed them.”

“I suppose that makes sense. There seem to be a lot of books here.”

“Yeah. I can neither confirm nor deny that I went overboard at the Librarby earlier.”

“...looks like a lot of Discworld.”

“Hehe. Yeah. I always loved that series, even before I met real life talking skeletons.”

“I don't see a lot in the toy department, do you have those in one of the boxes?”

“Nah. Toys don't really interest me that much.”

“Oh?” John looked down at the child, who shrugged.

“Yeah. Toys are always about, you know, pretending. But if I'm reading a book, I can imagine a whole world. So books give a lot more bang for their imaginary buck. Besides, most of the stuff that I used to pretend I was doing? Now it's happening in real life. So, there's that.”

John’s brow furrowed in thought. “Just how old are you, Frisk?”

“I'll be nine years old in January.”

“You are... very eloquent for an eight year old.”

“Thanks. I try,”

John heard a snickering noise behind him and realized that Toriel had followed him up the stairs... something he had not noticed before, but felt that he should have.

“Alright, this has been informative. I just have a couple more things to ask, back downstairs.”
Once everyone had returned to the ground floor, John looked around the house again; through the doorway to the kitchen, some drawings could be seen attached to the door of the refrigerator, at least one of them resembling Toriel. John turned to face the monster.

“I understand that you're the queen, is the king busy with something tonight?”

“Asgore...” Toriel's face hardened. “Asgore does not live here. In the Underground we... I do not know what the equivalent is for humans. Regardless, he does not live here in this house.”

“...I see. I think. Alright. Does he have visitation rights, or...?”

“I do not know what those words refer to.”

“I do.” Frisk held up a hand. “I do see Asgore on a regular basis. Toriel's my mom now, and I think of Asgore as my dad. I know it's not exactly the typical nuclear family, but a lot about what we've been doing lately is out of the ordinary.”

“You can say that again. Actually... Toriel, do you mind if I speak with Frisk privately for a minute?”

Toriel's face contorted, but the expression... to the extent that John could read the facial expressions of somebody with a muzzle, fur, and long floppy ears... was more confused than anything else.

“Sure,” Frisk responded, pointing to the back door. “Let's speak in my office.”

The child headed towards the back yard, and after a moment's confused hesitation, John followed them outside. The child was already standing near one of the trees, looking up at one of the branches.

“I have plans to get a tire swing out here, but I'm not sure Toriel will go for it. Too much of a risk of physical injury. She's, um. Very overprotective, sometimes.” Frisk turned around, holding one hand in the other and rubbing their fingers together nervously. “That's not a complaint, by the way. Especially if we consider the alternative. So... what did you want to ask me?”

“...Frisk, are you, well, do you feel that you're in danger here?”

The child stared at John for a moment.

“If you mean in general, sometimes. Monsters just recently showed up, and a lot of people aren't taking it very well, inside or outside the town. I do worry a lot about what might happen if somebody... well. Takes matters into their own hands. But if you mean specifically because of Toriel or something she might do, then no. I don't think I'm in any danger.”

“...so Toriel has been taking care of you?”

“Yeah. Actually she's really gone out of her way to make things comfortable while we were all running around trying to get monsters established. Actually, even though I knew we needed to get this done as a legal precedent, I kind of feel bad that I get to live in a house while everyone else is still at the hotel, or in the Underground.”

“Sorry, hotel?”

“Yeah. We were using the Roll-On-Inn Traveler's Hotel as sort of a base camp while we talked to lawyers and politicians and everyone else. It's a nice place, and Mr. Forsythe is cool, but you know. There's no place like home.”
“I suppose there isn't. Has your, uh, family situation caused any problems at school?”

“That hasn't been an issue because Toriel's been tutoring me in her spare time. When she gets her school ready and open, it might be a problem, but I doubt it. Picking on the child of one of the teachers, to say nothing of the chief administrator, is probably a mistake most kids will only make once. But if most of the students are monsters I'm not sure the possibility will even cross their minds.”

“I see.”

“Is there anything else you want to ask? Keep in mind that I don't know that much about magic or anything like that, and I'm still learning monster culture and history from Toriel and everybody else, so my knowledge in those areas is still limited.”

“Right, right. Actually, I've already seen just about everything I need to.” John reached into his jacket and pulled out a card, which he handed to Frisk. “If anything does come up, well, here's my name and number. If I don't answer, somebody else at the office will.”

“I see. Well, I suppose it won't hurt.” Frisk put the card in their pocket. “Thank you, Mr. Coppersmith.”

“You're welcome.”

Toriel backed away from the back door quickly as the doorknob rattled, and John and Frisk walked back inside the house.

“Is everything alright?”

“Perfectly fine. Everything's clean, a bit disorganized but you did just move in, no obvious health and safety hazards... I apologize for disrupting your meal, but we are legally required to investigate any and all claims, and a lot about your situation is out of the ordinary.”

“Yes, I imagine it is.” Toriel nodded. “I do appreciate your concern on Frisk's behalf.”

John smiled. “And I appreciate you being so hospitable. I hope that you have a pleasant evening, Toriel. And you too, Frisk.”

“Thanks, Mr. Coppersmith.”

As the man walked down the sidewalk, the front door closed, and parent and child walked back toward the dining room table.

“Well... that was inconvenient, although it is a small price to pay for the safety of children.”

“It was probably about me grabbing the fireball when we first showed up. Or letting Undyne's spear hit me during that demonstration.” Frisk shrugged. “Some things take a while for people to get used to.”

“Yes, well, if that was the inciting incident then I agree fully with the concerns of those who made those calls...”

Outside the house, John climbed into his car, started the engine... and sat idling, pulling out a cell phone and dialing a number. After six or seven rings, the phone on the other end was finally picked up.
“Hey John, how’d it go?”

“Fine. By which I mean it was a big waste of time. Kid’s a little out of the ordinary, but everything is in this damned town. I'll write it up when I get back and we'll just keep tabs on them from now on.”

“So everything's cool?”

“Not everything. The kid's behavior...” John paused for a moment, picked up the folder on the passenger seat and opened it up, flipping through the papers inside. “This is just a first impression and a gut instinct, mind you, but I think Frisk has been neglected in the past, even if they aren't being neglected now. They don't seem to care about toys, like they never had any or never got to keep the ones they did have. And based on what I saw on those YouTube videos, they've got this kinda Zen thing going on. Upheavals that would leave most kids that age scared or excited or resentful seem to roll right off their back. Like it's not the worst thing that's happened to them by a long shot. Also I've never met an eight year old child talk like they were already in high school. Something tells me this kid had to do a lot of growing up at a very young age.”

“...it kinda sounds like we should step in.”

“If somebody had called us a month or two ago, I wouldn't think twice about it. But now... it's possible this kid has finally found some stability. The house is clean, it's safe, nothing about their room or their actions said food hoarding to me so I think they're getting fed regularly, they have a lot of fiction books in their room, and I saw some drawings on the fridge through the kitchen door, so they obviously have some hobbies they are allowed to indulge in. It doesn't matter if they're being taken care of by a six foot tall magic goat or not, if we uproot them again we're taking them out of a stable environment and adding all sorts of uncertainty.”

“Not to mention making more work for ourselves.”

“That too. We already have too many kids for too few foster families.”

“Hey, speaking of which, where's the case file for Fortitude Harrison?”

John sighed. “I left it on my desk. The folder was literally on top of the pile.”

“Oh... found it! Gotta wonder what kind of people would name their kid Fortitude, though.”

“We already know the answer to that. Crazy cultists. I'll see you in about forty minutes, assuming I can find my way out of this fucking Escher painting of a town.”

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them because he's looking the other way, but they know it's him, who else could it be and they open their mouth to call his name...

Nothing happens.

They try again.

Nothing happens.

They scream for help, and no sound comes out.

He walks away down the tunnel, and they look down at the waters below, memory catching up, they left him here, they left him alone and even if he could hear them why would he lift one finger to-

The wood crumbles beneath their hand, and they fall.

Frisk groaned as they managed to regain consciousness, and found themselves lying on the bedroom floor, next to their bed, tangled in the sheets. One arm throbbed, which seemed to indicate that they had landed on that arm when falling out of bed, and it a took a few moments to extricate themselves from the fabric.

After a few deep breaths, one arm reached under the bed and pulled out a particular box. A shoe box, positioned near the headboard of the bed, where Frisk could always find it even in the dark. After some awkward scrabbling, the lid was pulled off, and seven dim lights, seven stars in miniature, broke up the darkness.

Frisk let their breathe out... and a second later, sucked it in abruptly. The floor in the bedroom hallway squeaked as if somebody was walking on it, and the lid was hastily replaced and the box shoved under the bed as the door latch rattled. Frisk began tugging at the sheets to climb up and get back in their bed as the door swung open...

“Frisk? Are you alright? I thought I heard something...”

The darkness was pushed back by a sphere of orange flame, and Frisk's eyes were drawn to the light almost like moths, their breathing getting faster and faster as parts of a recent dream forced themselves to the front of the child's mind.

“Oh dear...” The flame vanished, and Toriel stepped forward, crouching down next to Frisk. “Frisk, can you hear me? Do you know where you are right now?”

The child did not respond, and in the dim light Toriel could just make out the child starting to shake.

“Frisk... I am Toriel. I am your mother. Remember? This is your home. You are in your bedroom. You are safe.”

“...it... it... it wasn't... a puzzle...”

Toriel blinked in confusion, then slowly reached out for the trembling child. Frisk flinched when her paws touched them, but did not pull away. Slowly, one paw was maneuvered under the child's legs, and the other supported Frisk's back, and Toriel carefully lifted them up off the floor, carefully placing them on the bed.

“You... you were having a nightmare, Frisk. But it is not real. You are safe. You are home. Can you
hear me? Whatever you are afraid of. It cannot hurt you.”

“...Toriel?”

“Yes, Frisk. I am here.”

“...where is this?”

“This is your bedroom. We are in the new house. We just moved in a few days ago. Do you remember?”

“...yeah. I remember. Now.”

Toriel let her breath out.

“You were having a nightmare, my child. I found you on the floor... you must have fallen out of your bed.”

“...oh.”

“Do you remember what the nightmare was about? Do you wish to talk about it?”

Frisk’s head shook back and forth in the negative, just barely visible by the starlight shining into the windows.

“I was... I was falling. I fell off... and I lost my grip, and I was falling. And there was... there was fire, and screaming, and... there was something else. Something important. Something more important than anything else and I can’t remember what it is.”

“It is alright, Frisk.” Toriel’s paw rested on the child’s head and stroked their hair. “It was just a nightmare. It was not real.”

Officer Steve scribbled something down in his notebook, then looked up at Dr. Alphys again; the scientist was staring at the old television wired up inside of the shed.

“I’m sorry ab-bout the image quality. This was just supposed to be a stopgap solution until we g-got the rest of the lab up and running.”

The policeman watched the video again, trying very hard to keep his features neutral. A figure, obviously human from the proportions, walked in from off camera, looked around to see if there were any witnesses, then tried to kick the door to the shed in. The door refused to budge and the would be burglar was sent sprawling backwards, before slowly picking themselves up and limping along, trying to favor the leg that had done the kicking. After rattling the doorknob several times, the figure wandered off camera... and the video restarted again.

“It’s like one of those old silent films with Buster Keaton, or Charlie Chaplin.”

“Uh, what?”

Officer Steve shook his head. “Old stuff from like a hundred years ago. If you can get me a copy of that video I can send it to the Forensics guys over in Quarterhorse Fields. Maybe they can do something with it.”

“Uhm. Just a second.” Dr. Alphys pulled open a desk drawer and scrawled through piles of parts,
coils of wire, and a number of tools Officer Steve couldn't even guess the name of never mind the purpose, before pulling out what looked like a memory card from a camera. Shaking claws managed to fit the card into a slot, and then typed something on the old (and noisy) mechanical keyboard wired into the strange hodgepodge of computer parts that the monitor was plugged into. A window with a progress bar appeared over the video as it paused, which gradually filled up.

“This may t-take a while. Sorry.”

“Hell, it's not like I had a lot planned for this morning anyway... so, this place is going to be a lab?”

“Yeah! We've, uh, we've got to build more infused materials for monster safe buildings, of course, but there's a whole lot of projects I always wanted to do but never had the time or resources. Also there's a lot of. Uh. Unfinished b-business from my work as Royal Scientist.”

“What kind of unfinished business? I don't mean to pry but your tone shifted a lot right there.”

Alphys shrugged.

“Early attempts to break the barrier, after I was hired. They didn't work, obviously. And there were side effects.”

Officer Steve waited for Alphys to continue, but she seemed lost in her own thoughts for a while... until there was a knock at the shed door that grabbed the attention of both occupants.

“Hello? Doctor Alphys?”

“Anna?” The scientist walked over to the door and opened it. “Oh, hey! Uh, this is about the recycling stuff, isn't it?”

“Yeah, I thought you were going to be there around nine, did... oh,” Anna said as she saw Officer Steve with his notebook out. “Did something happen?”

“Sorta. Somebody tried to b-break into this shed last night. It didn't work, but I'm copying a video for the police anyway.”

“Oh. Well... if there was a good reason to be late, that would probably qualify.”

Outside the hotel, a nondescript rental car pulled up, and a black-haired man climbed out of the driver's side with a small plastic bag in his hands. The outside stairs were taken two at a time and he almost jogged towards one room in particular, the door to which he unlocked with considerable difficulty and at least two false starts.

Inside the hotel room, a figure was splayed out on one of the beds, groaning and swearing. Mr. Brown walked over and dropped the bag next to the figure's head.

“Here. That's the strongest painkillers available over the counter at the Wal-Mart pharmacy, plus an ankle support brace thingy. Great plan, by the way. Breaking and entering right out the gates.”

Mr. Black groaned and grabbed the bag, rustling through it until a bottle of pills were obtained. After almost thirty seconds of struggling with the child proof cap, two pills were removed and dry swallowed.

“...least we already learned one thing.”
“Yeah? And what is that?”

“...monsters build really fucking sturdy shit.”

Mr. Brown sighed and rolled his eyes.

“I'm gonna scope out the other monster locations, maybe keep tabs on that man making noise about
them. Then I'll probably grab lunch. You want anything?”

“...yeah. Burger. Cheeseburger.”

“Alright. You want anything with it? Fries, onion rings, tater tots?”

“Yeah. Morphine.”

“...I'll see what I can do but don't hold your breath.

Mr. Brown walked out of the hotel room, and his partner started swearing again, waiting for the
painkillers to kick in.

Chapter End Notes

We managed to get farm related stuff done right under the wire this year. No
breakdowns, no storms. So guess who's back way ahead of schedule? (Spoiler alert, it's
me.)
"Good morning, Ebott's Wake! You're listening to The Brink Of Dawn with Brett 'The Brett' Brinkmann! That's me, if you were wondering. I have to explain that because we are seeing a lot of visitors here in Ebott's Wake lately. And not just the monsters. I still can't believe that this is a sentence I have to say, and I was at that mixer a few nights ago after the old hotel got cleaned up. But the Ebott's Wake Tourism Board sent us some stuff about it, so here we are... what was I talking about? ...oh, right. Thanks Jeff. I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome all the visitors to our fair city on behalf of the Ebott's Wake Tourism Board, but I am not going to read the slogan they sent me on the air because they have yet to apologize or make reparations to Gary for using his likeness without his permission, nor have they accepted even partial responsibility for that stalker breaking into Gary's house and... well, I legally can't go into any more detail until and unless the lawsuit is settled or makes its way through the court system. On the other hand, I have absolutely no problem thanking the many individuals and organizations that help keep us on the air. Today's Brink Of Dawn has been brought to you by Banner, Banner and Paulson, Attorneys at Law, and The Wanton Wonton All You Can Eat Chinese Buffet. *The Wanton Wonton: Come For The Food, Stay For The Food!* Truth in advertising is a beautiful thing. As a matter of fact, we've got a few jingles to play for you, but we'll be right back after."

“Tired of the daily grind? Sick of screaming kids, demanding bosses, oblivious spouses? Come to the Ebott's Wake Arboretum and let our natural beauty soothe away all of life's distraction. And remember, on weekends, admission is half price through the end of November!”

“You've gone too far this time! You can't charge such low prices!”

“I can, and I have! Watch as I bring this sale to life with the power of MASSIVE DISCOUNTS!”

“You FOOL! The sale is rampaging through city streets! Everyone's buried in yarn! You're choking the world to death, and for what?! A cheap promotional stunt?!”

“Oh, why did I play God with the Supply and Demand Ratio?! WHAT HAVE I DOOOOOONE?!”

*The Knitting Samurai Post Halloween Super Sale, running from November first to December first. Prices so low, it's terrifying.*

“And we're back! Getting right into the groove of things, our top news story: Ebott's Wake continues to see an influx in travelers and observers. Local businesses are seeing a surge in customers, which makes those ads pretty well timed when you think about it, while our various hotels and motels and other short term lodgings are practically filled to capacity. We've also gotten word that even hotels in Quarterhorse Fields are filling up pretty fast. There are any number of reasons why, but I think most people would agree that monsters showing up belongs at the top of the list. As a matter of fact, we had Winston Devinter go around and talk to everybody, and apparently not only human businesses
are booming. Monster food vendors have been making money hand over fist with ice cream, soda, burgers, fries, hard candies, hot dogs, and other forms of convenience food. Apparently it's literally made with magic, which creates a, well, unprecedented culinary experience. We actually have some of Winston's interviews with several monsters and we'll be playing those after the break. For now, let's check in with Gary Welkin to get the scoop on traffic today! Gary, how's it look up there?

“I'm going to have to check back with you Brett! As of this moment, I am directly above the Triton water treatment facility!”

“What??”

“In order to keep my piloting skills razor sharp, I engaged in an exercise of night flying starting at eight yesterday evening! I filed a flight plan with the Quarterhorse Fields Airport and left a note on both Jeff's desk and the Studio A control panel!”

“...that's what that was? I thought that was a request for a song transition for the traffic report, but I couldn't figure out what you meant by Night Flight, Everything's Alright. My best guess was that you wanted something by David Bowie and even that was a shot in the dark.”

“Well now you know! And knowing is half the battle!”

“Wait, you were flying all night long?? I thought the helicopter's fuel tank was only big enough for a couple of hours at a time.”

“After getting completely turned around and running low on fuel, I was forced to make an emergency landing in the middle of the Cornucopia Valley Nature Preserve! Fortunately my choice to invest in pontoons for the helicopter proved remarkably prescient, as the closest clearing I was able to find happened to be one of the many ponds and lakes in the preserve!”

“...since when does the helicopter even have pontoons?!”

“Since I bought them on Craigslist, Brett!”

“...okay. That... that kind of makes sense. Just, uh. Just call Jeff when you're ready to give everyone the traffic this morning.”

“Will do!”

“...okay. Let's uh. Let's move on to more civic events. The uh. The monster queen, Toriel Dreemurr, announced yesterday that she was officially holding interviews for instructors at the school she plans to open. The results have been, well, surprisingly fast and prevalent, probably because our own broadcast to that effect yesterday was itself picked up by national news outlets and also became a viral internet phenomenon despite the lack of cats, sneezing pandas, or youths engaged in poorly thought out stunts. We here at KEBT wish all aspiring educators luck in getting their foot in the door, as it were, and all visitors to our fair city a most educational experience as well. To all our locals, on the other hand, a reminder that the annual Kick The Can competition is scheduled for the fifteenth of November! The first person to successfully knock over the port-a-john with only the force of their legs will win a year's supply of generic oat bran cereal. Originally the first prize was a years supply of toilet paper, but apparently raccoons got into the storage unit the Arts Council was keeping everything in. So it kind of went from one extreme to the other. In any event, that brings us up to the break, we'll be back with Winston's interviews after that so stick around!”

Chapter End Notes
Oh, radio chapters. How I have missed you.
“Hannah Mossman?”

A woman sitting on a bench outside of the room jerked up into wakefulness, looking around at her environment and flinching as she saw the face of the tall, muscular fish monster that had called her name. For all that, she still got up, clutching a manila folder in both hands, and walked through a doorway under the monster's suspicious eye.

The room wasn't necessarily well furnished, or even complete. Several floor tiles were missing, along with some of the acoustic sound dampening panels suspended from the ceiling. For all that, it still looked in better condition than any other part of the school building the woman had seen. And, much like the largely barren hallway, it was almost scrupulously clean. A single wooden desk was situated in the middle of the room, with chairs on each side, and two other chairs near the doorway.

All that was incidental, compared to the massive monster standing in the room itself, who was somehow even larger than the fish monster that had called her in.

“Ah, welcome, Ms. Mossman. Or do you prefer Mrs. Mossman? I apologize, I am not yet completely clear on the nuances for human honorifics at this time.”

“Uhm. Both work.”

“Very well then. I am Toriel, and I appreciate your... very rapid response to our job posting. Please, have a seat.” The monster took one of the chairs, on one side of the desk, and Hannah managed to sit down in the other one without having her legs collapse entirely beneath her.

“You have already met Undyne,” Toriel gestured to the fish monster that was sitting in one of the seats by the door, next to a human child Hannah remembered seeing on a few television broadcasts and many, many internet videos and animated gif images.” And sitting next to Undyne is my child, Frisk.”

“Hello.”

Hannah raised one hand awkwardly and waved in response to the child's greeting. “Uh. Hi.”

“Now then, Mrs. Mossman, let us discuss some of the practical matters first. I trust that you have the appropriate training and experience to teach large groups of children at a time?”

“...yes.” Hannah held out the folder. “Here is my, uh. My resume. Sort of.”

Toriel's brow furrowed slightly as she accepted the folder, which was opened, and the documents within swiftly scanned, before the monster looked up again.

“Under volunteer work, you mentioned a 'church youth group' or something to that effect?”

“I. Uh. I volunteered to lead church youth group for six years. Young kids, mostly. Uh. I guess monsters don't have that?”

“The term is not familiar but if it involved caring for and coordinating with young children, I see where that would give you experience. What about any formal training or education?”

“Uhm. Double Major. One was in. Education.”
“Alright then, what was the other major?”

“Botany. Plant studies.”

“A branch of the sciences, then.”

“Yes. I would. Uh. I would like to apply as science teacher.”

Toriel nodded. “Could you also teach other scientific subjects? Chemistry, geology, optics, physics?”

“I, well, yes. I had to get a background understanding of many fields before I could focus on botany.”

“I see. This is good to hear. And from what I understand of human post secondary education, the pursuit of two degrees shows dedication and intelligence both. I suppose the next question would be... why?”

“What?”

“She means why do you want to work here,” Frisk interrupted, and Hannah blinked and shrugged.

“I... I guess... I don’t know, I really don’t. I just. I heard about this school needing teachers. And a part of me was drawn here. Like... I guess it felt like a sign.”

Toriel raised an eyebrow.

“A sign?”

“Yes. Uhm. I’ve been thinking. For a while now. If I should go all the way into teaching. Or do something else. With my life. I was... debating with myself. When I heard about the school being started here. The timing... it seemed. Like somebody was trying to tell me something.”

“...well. There are, I suppose, stranger reasons to do something... is something the matter?”

“No. Well. I, uh. I got maybe four hours of sleep last night. Overnight flight to Oregon, and then...”

“Ah, I see how that would be an issue. Frisk, do you have any questions?”

“One or two.”

Hannah blinked and looked up at the child again, and out of the corner of her eye noticed that the large monster was staring at the child expectantly.

“Mrs. Mossman, your botany knowledge, is that more theoretical and abstract, or is it more hands on and applied?”

“It’s actually half and half, with the applied half being based on labwork.”

“Cool. I don't suppose you have any ideas on how to fix up the lawn here? You probably noticed that the grass doesn’t look outstanding.”

“I couldn’t possibly speculate without doing a pH measurement for soil acidity, and more than likely checking for excessive or lacking minerals in that soil. Maybe multiple tests for safety’s sake.”

“Right, because measurements are the foundation of science and the scientific method.”
“Exactly.”

“Okay, so, that was my first question.” The child tapped their chin, and then smiled. “For my second question, which in hindsight probably should have been my first, what are your feelings about magic?”

Toriel’s eyebrows rose up, and she turned to face Hannah. “Frisk is quite right, that is a question that should have been brought up sooner. As magic is a principle part of monsters, both culturally and in a more literal sense, any concerns you have about it should be addressed as soon as possible.”

“I uh. I didn't really believe in it before a week or two ago. And I'm not really sure how to feel about it now.”

“Would you care to see it in action?”

“It's not dangerous, is it?”

“It will not be dangerous.” Toriel smiled. “We will make very certain of that.”

“...okay.”

Toriel held up a paw, and an orange light formed into a glowing sphere. Streamers of light curled off of it and dissipated, and Hannah reared back for a moment... before almost leaving her seat as she leaned forward.

“What is going on? Is that fire?”

“This is a cursory example of fire magic, yes.”

“Does it involve combustion? Will it work in the absence of oxygen? What's the fuel source, what's being oxidized? Or is it a form of plasma?”

Toriel blinked, turned to Frisk, and then back to the aspiring teacher. “I am unfamiliar with much of the scientific nomenclature of the surface, and so I am not entirely clear on how to explain magic in terms of human science.”

“If there's fire magic, is there ice and lightning magic? Or does it go fire water earth air, like the classical Greek elements? Also I kept seeing reports online about healing magic, how does that work? Does it rebuild the body based on its DNA, or do you have to know what the body is supposed to be like when you put it back together? Wait, wait, can healing magic work on plants?!”

Toriel, for her part, seemed stunned into silence at the onslaught of questions. So did Frisk. The fish monster, on the other hand, had no such obstacle to speech.

“Hell yeah it does! King Asgore was like the best gardener in the whole Underground! He turned his whole throne room into a garden! Every flower humans threw out, he managed to get them to grow! It was awesome!!”

“Did you have any problems with mold, or parasites, or pests?”

“I don't know, but I bet Asgore would talk your ear off about it if you gave him half a chance!” Undyne cackled. “I get the feeling you two are going to be Botany Besties!”

Toriel snorted, quickly covering her muzzle with one paw in a doomed attempt to maintain a facade of professionalism, her demonstration fireball vanishing along with her concentration.
“Ahem. It, uh. It seems you may be exactly the person we are looking for, in order to instruct young monsters and humans in the ways of science. How soon can you start?”

“hey Lance,”

“GAH!” The rabbit monster jumped up, rocking his ice cream cart on its side, which was particularly troublesome because it was almost empty and tipped over a fair distance before its owner could pull it back upright again. “Sans, what the hell??!”

“Sorry buddy. Didn't mean to sneak up on ya. How's business?”

“How's...” Lance stared at the skeleton, wide eyed. “How's business?! I'm almost sold out again, and I keep selling out within hours! If I'd known humans loved ice cream this much I would have gotten a bigger cart before I started, but even if I did, I spend so much time and energy making enough to keep up with the demand that I'm exhausted before the sun even sets!”

“really a victim of your own success there.”

“Yeah... guess you could put it that way.”

Sans chuckled and pulled something out of his coat pocket.

“actually that's what this is for. Alphys whipped up some stuff for you and a couple other folks trying to win human hearts and minds through their stomachs.”

The device was held out and Lance took it, holding one paw over the blue light, which brightened immediately.

“Wait, I remember something about this, Dr. Alphys was making these things for Mettaton's home appliance brand deal, right?”

“something like that. there's a human in the recycling place up here that pulled some strings to get some of the stuff sent over to where Al wants to set up her laboratory. hehehe. she's practically swimming in metal and plastic and wire, and she's passing the savings on to you.”

“Wow, sweet! What do I owe her for it?”

“Nothing, buddy. This is on the house. Just keep on doing what you're doing, so we can keep humans wanting us around, and we can move everyone up here as soon as possible.”

The rabbit monster smiled.

“I think I can manage that.”

Toriel narrowed her eyes at the paperwork on the desk, adjusting her spectacles with one paw.

“It says here that you have ten years experience in teaching literature.”

The human sitting in the chair opposite the boss monster nodded. “That's correct.”

“And that was at James Madison Elementary, here in Ebott's Wake.”
“Also correct.”

Toriel turned to the chairs by the doorway, where Frisk and Undyne were seated.

“Frisk, do you have any qualifying questions to ask?”

“Not really.” Frisk shrugged. “I don't remember taking a class Mrs. Harrison taught, but she must have been in charge of grades above mine.”

“I taught fifth and sixth grades.”

“There we go. That was a few years away, minimum.”

Toriel nodded and made a note on the papers in front of her.

“It also says here that you have spent the last year as a tutor?”

“Yes, after I was fired from James Madison.”

“Fired? On what grounds?”

Erin Harrison's mouth contorted into a frown.

“The administration claimed that it was purely a matter of personality conflicts. I cannot legally disprove their claims.”

“I do not see how a conflicting personality would justify removing a teacher from their post if they were otherwise suited for the position.”

“Then you and I have something in common, your majesty.”

Toriel looked down at the paperwork, and then back at Mrs. Harrison, and stood up, extending a paw over the desk.

“Your experience and credentials speak for themselves, and if there is indeed a personality conflict, we will do our best to work around it. Welcome aboard.”

Joe looked around at the lot with undisguised curiosity and unconcealed glee. In a few short days the monsters had not only removed any trace of the old crumbling warehouses that had marred the neighborhood, but started construction on something completely new and made staggering progress. Metal girders reached up into the sky, a skeletal framework that reached up at least three floors in areas, while one whole ground level section seemed to be almost roofed over.

“Uhm, ah. Excuse m-me, can I help you?”

“What? Oh, sorry, just looking at your work in progress. Didn't know exactly who or where to talk to. Uh. Officer Steve sent me? Something about a security thing?”

“Oh! You must be Mr. Stanton!”

“Hah, just call me Joe. Mr. Stanton's my dad. Yeah, I'm kind of the go-to guy for security systems and locks and stuff in town.”

“Oh, that must by why Officer Steve recommended you.”
“Yeah, so, do you have something in mind, or are you looking for suggestions, or...?”

Alphys rubbed her claws together awkwardly.

“Well, it's, uh. It's k-kind of complicated, but... okay. We already have that shed,” one claw pointed at the simple structure, “and the locks held up when somebody tried to break in last night. But almost everything we had, we could fit in there anyway. Now, with all the materials lying around, and with all the construction we've managed to set up, well, two cameras isn't going to cut it.”

“Right.”

Alphys started to walk through the construction site, and Joe followed, looking up awkwardly as they passed a few monsters clinging to the framework and maneuvering panels and struts that glowed with a blue aura.

“Our biggest concerns at this point are theft, sabotage, and vandalism. Theft of raw materials, even trash, would only be a minor inconvenience but it would still be an inconvenience, especially if it was spread out all over the place or dragged across property lines. Theft of processed materials, or even the tools we're using, would be a much bigger problem, and it also opens up issues with humans tampering with magic technology.”

“And that would be bad.”

“Probably. We don't actually know anything about how humans and magic work together anymore. That knowledge was lost a long time ago. As a scientist I am curious, but there's safer ways to find something out than... than just injecting something and seeing what happens next.”

“Right. I've seen those movies.”

“Yeah... so... we, uh. We also don't want our t-tools broken, for the same reason, and we definitely d-d-don't want everything we built to be torn down the next day.”

“Right. I gotta say, I don't do camera stuff that often, more of a lock and key and deadbolt guy most of the time, but I can figure out where all the important sight lines are just by standing right here. Do you have any paper? I could probably draw a map.”

“Sure, let's uh, let's head b-back to the shed.”

“Hello, Mrs. Carson. Thank you for coming by today.”

“Thank you for seeing me.” The human woman shook the boss monster's hand, and they both sat down in their respective chairs. Toriel looked through the papers that the human woman had provided quickly, before placing them carefully on the desk.

“I cannot help but see a lack of educational experience in your paperwork. While this is not an automatic disqualification, as we have already had several applicants with no experience, I am curious as to what is attracting you to becoming a teacher.”

“Actually, I don't want to apply for a teaching post at all. I want to apply for the position of school counselor.”

Toriel's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “I am sorry, what do you mean by counselor?”
“You don't have those? A school counselor is somebody who speaks to students if and when they feel frustrated or are having difficulties with course work, home life, things like that.”

“Ah. I see. There appears to be some cultural confusion at work. We do actually have those responsibilities in monster schooling systems, but they are implicit in the responsibilities of the teacher. I was simply confused, I did not realize that this was a dedicated responsibility in the human educational system.”

“Well, in a perfect world, our system would probably look more like yours, but here we are. In practice, my responsibilities would be less related to coursework and study habits and more about recognizing signs of stress or problems at home and helping the students find a solution. As you can see from my paperwork, I have a considerable background in psychological studies. In fact, that's one of the reasons I want to work for you. All psychological science has been developed by studying a small percentage of human minds, and by the admission of many experts in the field, it is incomplete and riddled with confirmation bias. Interacting with an entirely new race, an entirely new culture, that is different in multiple ways from what everyone considers to be normal, well. Only good things can come from that.”

Mrs. Carson smiled.

“I guess you could say I'm applying to be a student as much as I am applying to be on the staff.”

Toriel smiled back.

“Well... if there is any sentiment that I can understand, that would be the one.”

Papyrus looked around; he had somehow gotten completely surrounded, with no possibility of escape. But then again, if these people had come so far just for this, he would be sure to make it worth the trip.

“How do you talk without lips or a tongue?”

“How do your bones stay together?”

“Are you, like, a dead human that got brought back to life?”


A few of the tourists laughed, some other humans made comments, and at least one person was writing down what Papyrus had said, or at least taking notes.

“What about that other question? Did you used to be a dead human?”

“WHAT?! DON'T BE RIDICULOUS! I'VE BEEN A SKELETON MY WHOLE LIFE, FROM WHEN I WAS AN ANKLE-BITING BABY BONES ALL THE WAY UP TO THE PRESENT DAY! THAT SAID, THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN SKELETON MONSTERS AND HUMAN
REMAINS IS VERY PECULIAR, AND I DO HAVE A THEORY! I... BELIEVE... THAT HUMANS EVOLVED FROM SKELETONS! GROWING A PROTECTIVE LAYER OF MUSCLE, FAT, SKIN AND HAIR THAT MADE THEM MORE DURABLE, BUT AT THE SAME TIME RESTRICTING THEIR MAGICAL CAPABILITIES! ALAS, I HAVE NO SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT MY HYPOTHESIS, BUT I HOPE THAT THE BRILLIANT DOCTOR ALPHYS CAN SET ASIDE SOME TIME TO INVESTIGATE IT ONCE HER LABORATORY IS FINISHED!

“Are you single?”

The tumult of questions, and the background noise of conversation, instantly abated as multiple people turned to stare at the human that had asked the question. Papyrus blinked in confusion, which prompted yet more people to comment on his flexible eye sockets, but mostly the crowd had become strangely quiet.

“THERE IS ONLY ONE OF ME, IF THAT IS WHAT YOU WERE ASKING. ANY OTHER QUESTIONS?”

“Your paperwork does not seem to indicate any prior experience in education, teaching, or tutoring.”

“Yeah, we just got our teaching certification done a few weeks ago.”

Toriel looked up at the pair of human men sitting in front of her.

“It says here that you both have musical experience... are you aware that we only have one position for music teacher?”

“Yeah. I'm aiming for that.” One man pointed at himself and his friend. “That's just our employment history. We both had a cover band for a while.”

“...you had a what?”

“A cover band is a bunch of musicians that specialize in arrangements and remakes of other artist's songs,” Undyne offered, causing the two human men, Toriel, and Frisk to turn to stare at her. “...what?! I have a life outside of the Royal Guard! I have hobbies!”

“...she's right. We were a cover band, and we specialized in songs by the band Ninja Sex Party, also a two man group with the names Danny and Brian, so it was like, destiny or something. Ronin Make Out Guild is what we called ourselves, and we were pretty popular for a while.”

“But as NSP got more and more popular, we got less popular,” the other man provided. “A lot of people accused us of trying to ride their coattails, even though as a cover band reproducing the work of others was our entire thing. Thus, the choice to go into teaching. Danny knows music, I know math, we can definitely pass that knowledge on to the next generation.”

“That is the ideal state of mind to have in a teacher,” Toriel nodded. “So I suppose the next question to ask is if you are comfortable with magic.”

“Honestly? I'm still not sure it exists. I mean, I'm looking at you, and I'm looking at Undyne there, and that little guy with the old timey washing machine on his back cleaning up stuff in the corner, and I know you can't be human, so I’ve seen that, but I still don't believe it...” Brian shrugged. “Everything I was ever taught about science says that magic is categorically impossible. There's no scientific theory that can account for it.”
Toriel raised an eyebrow, and then held up one paw. As it had several times before that day, orange light coalesced into a sphere, immediately gathering the attention of both men. So intent were they on the orange light that they did not even notice Frisk stand up from their chair, walk over to the desk, and pass their fingers through the flames of the fireball.

“...whoa. Can I...?” Danny asked. Toriel nodded, and Danny leaned forward, holding his fingertips next to the flame, then putting his whole hand in the fireball, before leaning back in his seat. “That is something else right there.”

Brian's mouth dropped open in befuddlement, and almost without thinking, he reached forward and reproduced the same action that Frisk had, running his hands through what appeared to be a flame that warmed without burning. After several moments, he sat down heavily in his seat, blinking, before coming back to himself and looking at Toriel's face.

The boss monster's eyebrow was still raised.

“Uh...” Brian cleared his throat and lowered his eyes. “I'd like to make a formal apology.”

The classroom was suddenly filled with the sounds of laughter as Danny doubled over in his seat.
Hans Therrick stared at the machinery inside the closet, watching orbs of ball lightning drift inside a transparent tube, passing through streams of light.

“Hypnotic, isn’t it?”

Therrick looked down at the monster standing close to his knee, an angular figure that appeared to be made out of crystal or gemstone.

“It’s like if a lava lamp and a rave had a baby.”

“...I don’t know what that means.”

“Me neither.” Therrick shook his head. “So, that’s your power supply. Heck if I know how it works, but if you’re not hooked up to the grid anyway... what about heating and cooling?”

“Ice and fire magic generators. Those are up on the roof by the way. Standard New Home hardware.”

“Alright. What about water supply?”

“Ice magic condensers.”

“...and wastewater?”

“Fire magic evaporators and incinerators. And before you ask, trash gets hauled to the doctor’s lab for recycling.”

“Okay, what about sewage?”

“...what’s sewage?”

Therrick looked down at the monster again.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and assume monsters don’t have that.”

“If you could describe it, I might recognize it and I could tell you.”

“Byproducts of the digestion of food or ingestion of water that are removed from the body and have to be processed carefully to avoid the spread of disease.”

“...sorry, Mr. Therrick. None of that rings a bell.”

“I kinda figured. Anyway, I can’t really approve connecting this to anything up here if it doesn’t meet code, mostly for safety and legal reasons, but it looks like you guys have everything taken care of. Also if you don’t have toilets and other sewage management plumbing, obviously you’re probably not going to be able to rent to humans if that ever comes up.”

“Well, this was mostly to get people out of the Underground faster. Waterfall’s basically a ghost town now, but everywhere else... people are gonna need a place to stay while they do all that paperwork stuff, find jobs, start businesses, buy homes, build homes, whatever.”
“Right, makes sense. Just thinking long term. Anyway, I'll sign off on the health and safety stuff with all the appropriate exemptions, and you guys can get started. I'll see you around.”

Thursday, November 6, 2014

“Well. That could have gone better.”

In the passenger side seat, Mr. Black refused to dignify his partner with a response. Mr. Brown did not seem to notice.

“I can't believe literally everybody realized who we were the instant we rolled into town.”

“It wouldn't have been a problem if you hadn't gone straight to the local conspiracy theorist,” Mr. Black snapped.

“How was I supposed to know the hotel clerk was a UFO nut?! We went in blind. That was the whole point of showing up in this town, to get information.”

“Yeah, go us. We confirmed that monsters are buying houses and selling fast food. Something we could have learned by keeping an eye on Twitter.”

Mr. Brown turned and glared. “Look, I know your fucking foot hurts but don't take it out on me. Trying to break into that shed was your idea and yours alone. You're really lucky that the lizard monster declined to press charges. I don't even want to know what kind of legal precedent that would have set. Or what kind of hell we would have caught back at the home office.”

“Impeying we won't catch hell anyway.”

“We did the job they gave us to the best of our abilities. If they think they can do better they can come out here and try their chances!”

A static laden crackling noise filled the air.

“So, uhhhh... you know what you wanna order yet, sir?”

“Yeah, yeah. Uh. I'll have a U-Boat with the Italian dressing, extra pickles, and no tomato please. I'm allergic.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, my friend will have the, uh, the Sink the Bismarck Combo. Hey, what do you want for your drink?”

“Pepsi.”

“Okay, Pepsi to drink for the Combo. And that reminds me, I'd like to order an Iced Tea.”

“...okay sir, your total is fourteen dollars and twenty one cents at the first window.”

Monday, November 10, 2014

“Alright, name?”
“Ribbit, ribbit... Ted Froggington.”

The clerk blinked, looked at the forms on the computer screen, and then back at the frog shaped monster.

“That ribbit stuff, was that part of your name?”

“Ribbit, nope, ribbit.”

“Okay. Had to ask.”

At the next desk over, another clerk wrote down some notes on a sheet of paper and looked back up at a monster that resembled a giant turnip with a face.

“So what kind of license were you looking for?”

“I was hoping to open a health food store, actually.”

“Okay, that's a business license right there, you'll also need food handling certification if you're going to be providing food to humans at any point. If there are food handling requirements for monster food, I don't know what they are and we don't have any legislation about it, so yeah, you'll need to head over to health and safety, they are on the second floor....”

Thursday, November 13, 2014

“NYEHEHEHEHEHEHE!”

The air was filled with the sound of an engine roaring and a skeleton cackling in glee as Papyrus sped down the road. Some distance away, Officer Steve watched, occasionally sipping at his cup of coffee, seeming not to take notice as footsteps came closer and closer.

“Hey Steve.”

“Sup Justin. How's it going?”

“Eh. Turns out having hundreds of monsters show up looking for work kind of alters the employment landscape. So I guess I'm still sleeping on Hal's couch for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, the whole 'monsters stole my job' angle should give me an inroad with those guys hanging out with Dwayne Riley.”

“Well, I'd say you're always welcome at my place but frankly I sleep better knowing that there's somebody acting as a living parking brake on Hal's shenanigans.”

“Heh... hey, Steve.”

“Yeah?”

“Why is Papyrus driving on the wrong side of the road?”

“...nobody starts as an expert, Justin.”

“That is true.”

“Besides, that's why I told him to use the mountain road first. Not a lot of traffic on a road going to
nowhere.”

“Well, not until now anyway.”

The two men watched as another skeleton riding a tricycle sped up to Papyrus's convertible, turned to wink at them, and then passed the car entirely. Even from a distance and with the sounds of the engine, it was possible to hear an irate screech.

“SANS! STOP PLAGUING MY DRIVING WITH INCIDENTAL BLUE MAGIC!”

“Huh. I wondered how Sans was going so fast.”

“Me too.” Justin held up his hand to block the sunlight. “Hey, you think they'll get in their right lanes before they get back on the main drag?”

“...oh shit.” Officer Steve spun around, pulled open the door to his cruiser, and started the engine, dropping the coffee cup in Justin's hands as he did so.

“I'm going to want that back so don't drink out of it!”

“I won't,” Justin said as he raised the cup to his lips.

Saturday, November 15, 2014

“So you're looking at half the house being a furnace and half the house being a freezer?”

“Nah, a third of the house needs to be in da middle.” The ice-covered bird monster tapped at the blueprints with one feather. “That way, the whole family is heah. Snow monstas on one end, plant monstas on the otha, and we meet in da middle with mah wife.”

The gem monster nodded at the blueprints. “Okay, that makes sense. We are going to be held up until Dr. Alphys can make more of those point... emission... things. I tell you, I would not take her job for any amount of money.”

“And dat's why she's the doctah, and yer heah helping build a house.”

“Yeah, yeah. It's all going to need to be infused anyway, but maybe we can save time on the greenhouse side.” The gem monster looked to the human standing next to him. “Eric, what do you guys have up here that's good for windows besides glass? Certain plastics, transparent metals?”

Eric did not seem to hear the question, and his eyes were transfixed on one particular monster... if it was just one. It superficially resembled the icy birds running around, but partly melted... and its eyes looked like the plant monsters that were burrowing around the lot and excavating a basement. Even as he watched, there was a snap as the monster's leg seemed to break off, and it tripped.

“Mom, are you sure you still want to play tag?”

“Its... fine...” came the reply from a crumbling, slushy beak, as ice crystals seemed to grow out of the leg and rebuild it. “I... just need... a moment... now... and again.”

“Okay, mom.”

“Hah... hah... I may... not be... a spring chicken... but... I can still... do... a late frost...”
The smaller ice bird monster cackled, and the older ice bird chuckled.

“Ah, weathah jokes. She’ll learn mah boy one way or dah othah. Punning is da lowest form of wit, as dey say.”

“But wit is the highest form of humor.” The gem monster turned back to his human coworker. “Am I getting that quote right?”

Eric's eyes rolled up into their sockets, and he crumpled to the ground.

“...is dat normahl fah humans?”

“It's not normal, but it's not something to worry about too much. Humans don't Fall Down, if something's actually wrong with them then there's other stuff that happens. Lots of sweating, coughing, sneezing, color changes in the skin, and so on and so forth. Eric actually got me hooked on this game that's all about it. Plague Inc. Evolved or something like that... so yeah, I'll try to get a quote from him on the greenhouse materials when he wakes up. Once the Vegetoids have excavated the basement I'll get you set up with the concrete, and with any luck we can work from there.”

Sunday, November 16, 2014

1:21 PM: hey anna how are things back at the lab
1:21 PM Zig_Zaggerman: arent you on vocation
1:21 PM Zig_Zaggerman: w ur gf
1:21 PM: IM JUST WORRIED
1:21 PM: we still have to get all that stuff done
1:22 PM: 4 the school
1:22 PM Zig_Zaggerman: I thought the queen wasn't going to start classes until after new years
1:22 PM: tru
1:22 PM: but we still need to finish the repairs
1:23 PM: we barely got the stuf 4 the roof ready b4 that big storm
1:23 PM Zig_Zaggerman: it wasnt tht big
1:23 PM: yeah well
1:23 PM: u try living ur hole life n a cave w no wether
1:23 PM: and then c how u handle lernig abt thunderstorms personally
1:23 PM Zig_Zaggerman: ok thats fare
1:24 PM Zig_Zaggerman: srsyl doc we got this
1:24 PM Zig_Zaggerman: just relax and enjoy the surf and sand and sun

1:24 PM: im trying

1:24 PM: just wa9999

1:24 PM Zig_Zaggerman: lol did u drop ur phone

1:24 PM Zig_Zaggerman: or wat

1:25 PM Zig_Zaggerman: doc?

1:25 PM: sry undyne distracted me

1:25 PM: gotta go bye

Tuesday, November 18, 2014

“oh... i'm glad... you decided to take Mettaton's offer...”

Shyren made a movement with their fins that sort of implied a shrug, but Napstablook understood what the singer was trying to say.

“yeah... he bought a whole part... of the town... empty lots, I think... and he's calling it New Blook Acres... he's trying really hard... to keep the family together...”

Shyren tilted to one side in midair.

“oh... that's right, we... were supposed to be... rehearsing... and the show is only two days away... I'm sorry, I kept talking and I...”

Ectoplasmic tears started to form a puddle on the floor, and Shyren sighed. Beneath her, Shyren's agent sighed as well.

Wednesday, November 19, 2014

Elijah watched as the fire elemental sorted through assorted drinks, measured them out in the appropriate proportions, muddled some limes, and performed all of the other steps necessary for the creation of various cocktails and mixes.

“Damn. That was fast.”

“...thanks. I try.”

Eli reached out, grabbed one of the glasses and brought up to his face, inhaling the aroma first before taking a careful sip.

“Hmm. Frankly at this point you're all but hired. All my questions from this point forward are just going to be for my own curiosity.”

“...ask away.”
“Okay, first things first. Where exactly did you get alcohol in the Underground?”

“...that's actually a really complicated and involved question, but the short answer is that any plants grown with magic were magical food. This meant that they couldn't be fermented the same way that human alcohol is created. Magical alcohol actually has a completely different chemical makeup compared to purely chemical alcohol, so the name is more a reflection of what it does than what it's made of.”

“Huh. Well ain't that something.” Elijah tapped a finger nervously for a moment. “Second question. Can water hurt you? Because the importance of keeping a clean bar and kitchen here can't be understated.”

“...I'm not in any particular danger. Fire elementals don't rely on oxygen to sustain a chemical process, so we can't be 'put out' or smothered that way. Still, if I were to put my hand under a running faucet? There would be a lot of steam. That could pose a hazard to anyone near me at the time.”

“Okay, good to know. Last question, do you know how to handle belligerent drunks?”

“...you don't tend a bar for a living and not know how to deal with drunks.”

“Right, right, but I guess I should have asked how you would manage them. I mean, do you have a magic solution, or what?”

“...in my experience, it was easiest to just cut people off and let them cry themselves to sleep, or rant and rave and attack until the same thing happened. But then again, I knew all of my regulars. I won't know anybody up here and figuring out how different humans react to different drinks seems like it's going to be a learning experience.”

“Yeah, there is that community element at work... still. Nobody goes in knowing all the answers. You're hired.” Elijah picked up a glass and raised it in a toast, and Grillby picked up another cocktail in response. “Welcome to the Dank Memehaus Grillby, and here's to a quick approval to your liquor license or a long and successful career here, whichever comes first.”

The glasses clinked together, and both drinks were downed.

Thursday, November 20, 2014

“BLOOKY YOU WERE MAGNIFICENT! AND YOU TOO, SHYREN, YOU HAVE THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL!”

Backstage, a light covered box balanced on a single wheel oscillated back and forth along the length of the dressing room.

“OF COURSE WE CAN'T FORGET MY OWN CONTRIBUTIONS AS THE CENTRAL TALENT! I'VE ALREADY RECEIVED SEVERAL CALLS FROM HUMAN MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES, WANTING TO OPTION SOME OF MY SCREENPLAYS! BUT I ABSOLUTELY COULD NOT HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT YOU TWO! YOU ARE THE WIND BENEATH MY... WELL, MY SECONDARY DRIVE SYSTEM IS A ROCKET ENGINE, BUT IF I HAD WINGS, YOU WOULD BE THE WIND BENEATH THEM!”

Shyren made a curious noise, looking at something behind Mettaton.
“HMMM? OH, YES, RIGHT.” The robot turned around and faced a cat monster, still dressed like a shrubbery. “YOU DID VERY WELL BURGERPANTS. STATIONARY, SILENT, CONVERTING ONE ATMOSPHERIC GAS INTO ANOTHER. VERY SHRUB LIKE. I WOULD GO SO FAR AS TO SAY IT WAS THE ROLL YOU WERE BORN TO PLAY-”

“I quit.”

Mettaton stopped talking, which was in impressive enough feat by itself. Robot, fish monster and ghost all watched as the cat monster turned around, pulling off the costume and also the MTT brand themed hat, but for the most part, those assembled in the room stared at the monster's eyes.

They were eyes that saw nothing, because they had seen too much. They were eyes that were too wide, too unfocused. They were the eyes of a man teetering on a razor's edge between the world as most saw it, and a world that was naught but screaming and pain and destruction.

“BUT... BUT BURGIE! AFTER ALL THIS TIME YOU'VE FINALLY GOTTEN YOUR FOOT IN THE THESPIAN DOOR! IF YOU GIVE UP NOW, IT WILL ALL HAVE BEEN FOR-”

“I. Don't. Care.”

The cat monster walked out of the dressing room, leaving a very confused trio of monsters behind.

Saturday, November 22, 2014

“Here is your Librarby card, Reggie. Don't spend it all in one place.”

“Thank you!!” The small volcano grabbed the card with one leg and ran off into the shelves, looking for books to check out and Michael Van Garrett turned to the next figure in the line.

“How can I help you this fine day?”

“Actually I was hoping I could get a job here. My name is Mindy and I worked at the Snowdin Librarby, and I opted to stick with what I know.”

“Okay. Uh, let me grab an application for you to fill out. Frankly if it was entirely up to me I'd just quiz you on what organizational systems you know, but I'm just the Vice President of the board. I can't make unilateral decisions like that.” A sheet of paper was printed out, and handed to the pale yellow monster. “Here you go Mindy.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Alright, how can I...”

Mindy saw the human's eyes bug out as he looked to the next monster in line, and turned to see... a figure with eight limbs, five eyes, and a mouth that was licking its lips.

“Ahuuuu. I was wondering if this Librarby had any books about starting a business. I had a very successful spidery bakery in the Underground, and if it's not broken, why fix it?”

Van Garrett's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

“Second. To Top Shelf. Shelf Unit. Has A Decal. Of A Truck.”
The voice that came out of the man's mouth was distant, monotone, and almost sounded like a different person.

“I see. Thank you so much, dearie. It's refreshing to meet a human that doesn't hate spiders-”

There was a cracking noise that caused Mindy to jump, and a visible crack in the wood of the desk could be seen originating from where Van Garrett's hand was crushing the edge in a death grip.

The spider monster blinked all five eyes a few times, then backed away slowly.

“Ah, I think I will find that book now. Thank you for your help.”

Van Garrett's head turned to track the spider monster until Mindy cleared her throat, at which point he turned to face them so quickly that the monster flinched.

“Is... is everything okay?”

“...well... I think I have massive splinters in my hand. So that's not great.”

“I guess you aren't a fan of spiders, then.”

“Not as such. Fortunately, uh... whoever that was... doesn't look that much like the spiders I'm familiar with. I think that's why the part of my brain that keeps track of all the books still worked.” Van Garrett let go off the desk, pulled open a drawer with his uninjured hand, and pulled out a pair of tweezers. “That said, if some monster shows up that looks like a giant tarantula or funnel web or orb weaver or whatever, I have no way to predict what my brain is going to do and I can't guarantee anybody's safety.”

“...uhm. Don't you think it's a little close minded to judge people by their shape and appearance-”

“I'm not judging anybody. My brain reacts in a specific way when exposed to specific stimuli. I don't have any control over that. It's not something I decided one day.” A few wood splinters, soaked in blood, were removed from the man's hand and dropped on a sheet of paper. “I'll point anybody who comes in here towards whatever information they need if we have it, but the fact remains if I see something that resembles a spider too much, I will have enough adrenaline to reach geostationary orbit above this town and nobody wants that.”

“...oh.”

“Yeah. Sorry for flying off the handle. I have. Uh. Issues with people learning stuff about how my brain or body works, and then treating it like a personal flaw or a lapse in morality or other nonsense like that. I really shouldn't have jumped down your throat like that.”

“It's fine. I actually forgot that the phrase 'Some humans hate spiders' could actually mean 'Some humans are afraid of spiders' instead. And there's been a couple run ins with humans who are afraid of snakes, or ghosts, or fire, or even certain animals that monsters can resemble. So I guess I felt a little defensive on everyone's behalf right now.”

“Heh. Culture shock's a bitch, isn't it?”

Mindy grinned. “Yeah.”

Monday, November 24, 2014
Frisk flipped a sheet of paper over on the legal tablet in their hand, then looked up across the table. A too-flexible face with a too-rigid default expression looked back at the child.

“Okay, starting with a blank slate. What kind of problem are you having?”

“Well, until yesterday it was nothing overt. And we kind of expected getting stared at by humans once we got up here, even if nothing else happened. But now people in stores and business are just leaving when we show up.”

“Alright... there's not much we can do legally about businesses that refuse service to monsters, what with the whole right to refuse service to anyone-”

“Actually that's the thing.” A plastic hand was held up. “The last two times this happened, I saw a slime making purchases at the same store. So it's not anti-monster bias, whatever it is.”

“...oh.” Frisk wiggled their pencil back and forth rapidly, staring off into the distance. “Okay. So... I have a question. And it may or may not be too personal, but I won't know unless I ask.”

“Okay, go ahead.”

“Why, exactly, did you decide to possess an old department store mannequin?”

“Oh... well, that is pretty personal, actually.”

“Okay then, never mind. But... remind me again, what does each person in your family and friend group possess, if anything?”

“Oh. My husband has another mannequin, my son found this old doll he really like, and my friend, uh, what's the term for when humans pretend that an inanimate object is talking for them or to them, but they don't move their lips?”

“Ventriloquism.”

“Right. My friend lives in one of those figures used for ventriloquism. And my daughter hasn't decided on anything, she say's she's still 'finding herself' and you know how teenagers are...”

Frisk stared at the possessed mannequin. “I really don't.”

“...oh. Right. Well, anyway, my friend's husband decided to possess a television set.”

“Okay then. Have your daughter and your, uh, your best friend's husband, have they reported any problems specifically?”

To the extent that the face on the mannequin could shift, it suddenly adopted an exaggerated expression of confusion. “I... don't think so. Bansheila actually hasn't complained about anything the last couple of times she went out by herself with her friends... but why would that make a difference?”

Frisk sighed and drew a line on the legal tablet, curving starting high on the page, curving down to the bottom, and then back up again.

“I was wondering when we'd have to deal with this from the day the Barrier broke. Do you know what the phrase 'Uncanny Valley' means?”

“...isn't that where Ice Wolf works now?”
“No, that's, that's Cornucopia Valley. The Uncanny Valley isn't a geographic place. It's a name for a phenomena in human psychology. For some reason, if we see something that looks too much like a human, but not quite enough, it sets off warning signals in our brain. I'm looking at you right now and I'm getting those signals, actually.”

“Really??”

“Yeah. Monsters that resemble surface animals don't set it off in most people because the animal features automatically cut off the human pattern matching. Also people on the internet have been drawing pretty similar pictures for a long time, because of reasons, so most people are acclimated one way or another. Of course if it's an animal that somebody is afraid of, that's a whole new problem.”

“Like that guy at the Librarby.”

“Yeah, exactly. It's the same thing with elementals, and with ghosts who aren't possessing anything... even skeleton monsters don't set off the uncanny valley for most people, which is interesting. I actually thought that was going to be a bigger problem.”

“...what... why would humans be more comfortable with a floating television set than with somebody that looks and acts almost exactly like them?!”

“It's that 'almost' part that's the deal breaker. I'm sorry, Mrs. McWraith. I don't make the rules, I just try to find ways around them.”

Tuesday, November 25, 2014

Asgore walked out of the house, took several paces, then turned around and retraced his steps in order to lock the door.

“Old habits,” the king grumbled, and turned back to face the street.

A familiar vehicle, with a familiar driver wearing a familiar uniform, had pulled up in the time it took Asgore to remember to secure his home.

“Hello Your Majesty.”

“Hello Officer Ward. Can I help you?”

“Uh. Not specifically with anything. Do you have time to talk?”

Asgore smiled. “While I do need to head to the school to finish putting the final touches on the topiary before Toriel's open house, I can make time.”

“Alright, let me get this parked.” Officer Steve rolled down the street, turning in and parking on the side, before hopping out and jogging to where Asgore was waiting.

“So...” the king prompted, when the policeman had been standing silent for a few seconds.

“So, uh,” Officer Steve adjusted his hat. “So... the fallen humans. Some of them have been... claimed.”

“...I see.”

“There's, uhm. There's been some attempts to drum up the same sense of outrage as when the
information first went public, but. It hasn't gone anywhere. Just. Just thought you ought to know.”

“I appreciate it. Is there something the matter?”

Officer Steve sighed.

“So, have you heard about those two federal agents that came into town, and one of them trespassed on the science lab property and tried to break into the shed?”

“Yes. Undyne told me about it when she was helping me move in.”

“Right. Well. I did some follow up work with Dr. Alphys a few days ago, and we got to talking, and, well, she talked some more about her work and... and how bad things were down there. And, well, that night, I was talking to... a friend. And he told me something that kind of stuck with me these past few days. He, uh, he reminded me that, well. There's been a lot of bad stuff done in human history. And some of the worst stuff has been when some people point fingers at other people.”

The policeman took off his hat and scratched his head.

“I know that... I know that if you adopted Chara, the first human. If that was your first move. That says a lot. And what you wanted to do, after you lost Asriel... any parent who lost a child would want that. And countries have declared war for much less than that. So... that's been on my mind a lot lately.”

“I see... Officer Ward, could-”

“You don't. Uh. You don't have to call me that, in the future. Officer Steve is fine.”

“...thank you, Officer Steve. Ah. I had something that I was going to ask, but I seem to have forgotten.”

“Right. I know how that is. Anyway, I have paperwork to deal with, and you have school stuff. I guess. So. I'll see you around town.”

“Yes. Have a good day.”

The policeman returned to his patrol car and drove off, and Asgore sighed, walking down the sidewalk, his thoughts someplace distant.

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Thursday, November 27, 2014

The table was already loaded to capacity, not only with plates and utensils, but platters of food. Bowls of potatoes, dishes of casserole and stuffing, ears of corn... and around the circumference of the table, eyes were staring and all the mouths capable of salivating were doing so.

“Okay, we haven't even started eating yet and this is already my favorite human holiday!” Undyne grinned and turned to Frisk. “A whole day set aside for good food? Sign me up!”

“Actually, Thanksgiving didn't become an official holiday until the end of the Civil War. People were celebrating the end of the country tearing itself apart. Before that it was sort of an informal harvest festival with no set date.” Frisk shrugged. “Nowadays most people think it has to do with the first Europeans coming to North America, but even the people who think that's the only thing about it, they don't really care. For them, Thanksgiving is an excuse to eat lots of food and watch sports.”
“YEAH! Priorities!”

Undyne abruptly got quiet as she saw Toriel walk out of the kitchen with a large platter, upon which was resting a great deal of sliced meat.

“wow, you really out did yourself on this Tori. that turkey looks good enough to eat.”

Next to Sans, there was an exasperated sigh, and Toriel set down the platter in the center of the table.

“Well, it is our first Thanksgiving, not only on the Surface, but at all. So I thought it was important to *gib-let* my best shot.”

Sans and Frisk started to laugh, and then the rest of the table joined in as Papyrus groaned. Toriel sat down in her seat and turned to the human child.

“Now, I understand that before the meal itself begins, it is customary to say a few words of import?”

“Uh, yes. That is true. Some people use a religious prayer, others people go around the table and say what we're thankful for.” Frisk looked around. “Would anyone like to go first?”

“I will,” volunteered Asgore. “I am thankful that all of our people can now enjoy the sun and moon and stars, and that everyone was able to move out of the Underground so quickly and with so little friction.”

“Like, I think we ALL are thankful for that!” Undyne pointed out.

“Yes, but now it has been made official, so to speak. Uh, who would like to-”

“I will! I mean. Ah. I. Uhm. I'm. I'm thankful that, that the lab is almost d-done, I'm, uh, I'm glad that... glad that...” Alphys trailed off as she turned to look at Undyne. “Well. I'm g-glad in general.”

“Well I'M glad you asked me to move in with you, nerd! And I'm thankful that Frisk told us about Netflix and Crunchyroll, so we could start catching up on all the missing bits of the anime that never made it to the garbage dump!”

“I AM THANKFUL FOR DRIVER'S EDUCATION, GORDON RAMSEY, AND THE FACT THAT A CERTAIN ANNOYING DOG HAS NOT PESTERED ME SINCE BEFORE THE MOVE TO THE SURFACE!”

“hehehe. I'm also thankful for three things: Bad jokes, good food, and good friends.”

“That also is what I am thankful for, with one addition. I am thankful that Frisk showed up in the Ruins one day, and turned the world as we knew it inside out and upside down.”

Frisk looked around the table. “Wow, so, you guys aren't leaving me anything, you took all the big stuff. Uh... okay. I'm thankful that... I got to meet all of you. I'm glad that, that we could all be here today, around this table, together. As a family. I mean, Toriel and Asgore are the only other names on the adoption paperwork, but still. I think of you guys as family. The coolest big brothers and sisters that any child could ever have....”

Frisk trailed off as their mind went off in a different direction: A young child in a striped shirt, with white fur... standing alone, in a circle of sunlight.

*He should be here.*

*Next year.*
'He should be here but he's not here.'

'Need to learn more about magic, but there's a way, there has to be a way."

'did I miss something was there something I needed to say or do or a place I needed to be what did I miss what did I miss what did I do wrong'

'Don't cry don't cry this is supposed to be a holiday everyone's supposed to be happy don't drag everyone down with you'

Frisk reached up a hand and rubbed at their eyes, then pushed their chair away from the table.

“Excuse me, I need to... I'll be right... just, just go ahead and start...”

The human child darted towards the staircase, running up the steps at a reckless speed, and the monsters around the table turned to each other in confusion, with one exception.

“...please excuse me, I will go check on Frisk.” Toriel stood up, and headed towards the stairs, and Undyne looked around the table.

“Hey. I just realized something. We don't... we don't know that much about Frisk. Do they have brothers and sisters, human brothers and sisters? Or did they, maybe they lost them? Maybe that's why they...”

Sans stared straight ahead, past the table and its bounty of food, with empty eye sockets. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he nodded his skull.

“I get the feeling that it was something like that.”
"The Next Day..."

"...been saying from day one, these monsters are a threat and now they have all but admitted the truth. The human children that fell down into the Underground were deliberately targeted and murdered in order to further the aims of the monsters."

"Mr. Riley, if this is true, how do you explain the Ebott's Wake Police Department exonerating the monsters of any wrongdoing?"

"Either incompetence or corruption. It doesn't matter which. All that matters is that now we have the truth and we have to act on it."

"And what actions will your, uh, Anti-Monster group be taking?"

"The Anti-Monster League will do whatever has to be done to protect humanity from the monster threat. No more, and more importantly, no less. We especially want to implore everyone watching to join with us. If you are still on the fence for some reason, even after all this, then I will remind you that this so called "Doctor" Alphys not only performed experiments on human remains, but on other monsters, so not even their own people are safe-"

The television set was turned off, the power button pressed with such force that the television actually scooted backwards on its stand several inches, and Undyne was forced to grab the edge with her other hand to make sure it did not fall and break.

"Well, I think we've heard enough of that."

"UUUUGGGGHHHH."

The fish woman turned to see Alphys sitting at the dining room table, with Papyrus, Sans and Asgore, her claws digging into the scales on her head... and actually digging in alarmingly deep.

"Alphys, this isn't-"

"Of course it's my fault! I'm the one who published the paper on Souls! I'm the one who put everything about the Barrier right there!"

"come on Al, we all know that was going to come out eventually, and that's why we told everybody about the other humans first. so nobody could accuse us of hiding anything."

"Then why are we being accused of hiding things, Sans?!"

There was the sound of a throat clearing, and the monsters looked up to see a human child descending the staircase, carrying a stack of papers in their arms.

"Because that guy, Riley whatever? He was looking for an excuse to get mad at monsters. He was starting with what he wanted, and he worked backwards. There's nothing we could have done to stop this from happening, but we managed to delay it as long as we could." Frisk deposited the stack of papers on the dining room table. "And I think I have an idea for how to counter it."

"we're all ears, kid. well, those of us that got 'em."

"You already showed Officer Steve parts of the videos with the other humans. I'm in those security records too. I remember seeing the display monitor watching me in real time when I got to the lab. I
think that if we show that what happened to me was in line with what happened to the other humans. That reinforces the idea that monsters aren't dangerous, but the Underground is."

“And how is that supposed to stop Dwayne Riley from calling us all threats to be exterminated? More importantly, how does that stop him from dragging my girlfriend's name through the mud?”

Frisk rubbed their head. “It won't actually. Not directly. But it will help convince people who are on the fence, I think. If we can keep that monster hater group from recruiting, that can only work out for us.”

“-reached out for further commentary from the monsters, the robot Mettaton provided us with another video tape, which it, or he, or they, referred to as 'my demo reel' and in an interesting change of pace this video actually has audio accompanying it. What Mettaton states before the fight actually begins does confirm a declaration of war and intent to harm, but... take a look at these segments in particular. First, the child Ambassador shows absolutely no shock or even concern regarding Mettaton's stated plan to take their Soul. They don't even seem surprised when the floor starts to move. Second, in this segment, Mettaton announces a union mandated break, and the child immediately pulls out something to eat and actually looks away from the robot, with no concern about being attacked. Third, at one point Mettaton actually throws a marker and whiteboard at Frisk, and they actually write a simple poem on it about the robot's legs, again with no apparent concern about being attacked. Mr. Riley, how does this fit into your claims?”

“Very easily, when you remember two things. First, that robot monster claims to be an entertainer. It's clearly acting in these videos, just like Frisk. And for that matter, Frisk is acting too, and at least the robot is programmed to be good at it. Any normal child in those situations would be frightened, or at least wary of the danger they were in and the clearly stated risk to the rest of humanity. Frisk didn't even act like they cared. If you look at some of the other videos the monsters released, Frisk and the fish soldier monster actually stop running while Frisk appears to be talking on a cell phone, and then the child gives the monster a thumbs up gesture to start running again! They basically left in an outtake by accident, which is a particularly new height for incompetence because they had over a month to get everything right!”

“...unless, of course, the monsters and Frisk are actually telling the truth-”

“Lies, damned lies, and wishful thinking promoted by traitors and quislings. All of the videos released today could not have been better to prove our point than if we had asked for this specifically. Monsters have all but admitted to open warfare against any human that fell into the Underground, and it makes the fact that this child is still in the custody of monsters even more bizarre. I can only attribute it to a combination of police corruption, bureaucratic incompetence, and Stockholm Syndrome.”

Undyne punched the power button even harder, and had to lunge to grab the television set before it fell to the ground.

“Sorry, I got it, I got it.” The appliance was returned to its original position, and Undyne turned to see Toriel staring at her with narrowed eyes. The Boss Monster's reproachful gaze didn't last very long, as she turned to face the dining room table. Undyne's eye followed, and saw that Frisk had taken a seat in the very same chair that Alphys had been sitting in that morning... and had even adopted the same posture, slumped over with their fingers digging into their hair.

“My child...” Toriel paused to place a paw on Frisk's back, but the child flinched as if they had been shocked or burned and the paw was quickly withdrawn. “It is as you said this morning. There was
nothing we can do to convince those who already made up their minds.”

There was no response, only the same irregular breathing as before... Undyne couldn't be completely sure, but she suspected that Frisk was struggling not to cry. For a few seconds she debated trying to comfort the child or snap them out of their funk, but decided against it; if Frisk flinched when Toriel's paw touched them, then they probably wouldn't enjoy a pat on the shoulder either. Instead, Undyne turned to face the seat where Alphys was sitting, the one Frisk had previously occupied, and for a moment was stunned by how the two of them had not only changed physical positions, but attitudes. The scientist was staring at her phone, scrolling through news articles and videos with narrowed, analytical eyes.

“I'm noticing a trend. A lot of the, the sites that are, that are trying to p-promote the idea that we're all dangerous and want to k-k-kill everyone? They k-keep using screen captures that are c-cropped to leave Frisk out, or where Frisk's back is facing the c-c-camera.”

Undyne turned to stare at Toriel, who had a similarly confused expression on her face. “Soooo... why is that important?”

“B-because if you look at the actual pictures with Frisk's face in them, they look... bored, or d-distracted, or even excited. Like in Mettaton's video. Or, the uh.” Alphys slowly began to turn red in the face. “The whole... you know. The anguished c-c-c-confession of love in the g-g-garbage d-dump.”

“Dr. Alphys. I would speak to you regarding Mettaton's... activity, in Hotland. But,” Toriel amended as she watched Frisk flinch again, “now is not the appropriate time.”

“Oh. Uh. Right...”

“-the pattern here. Having giant bones thrown at them? Nothing. A dog showing up chewing on one of those bones? That gets their attention. Because it's off-script. The kid has to be acting.”

“You make a convincing argument, but, let me give you one now. Our team has been looking at these videos that the monsters released all day, and here's one that sticks out. Notice the child, Frisk, and this lizard in the dress is the scientist Dr. Alphys, and here comes Undyne. Now there's no fighting in this segment. Also no audio. But look here. Right here. Frisk is grinning like, and there is no better comparison I think, the Cheshire Cat. And if we skip ahead a bit, when Undyne and Dr. Alphys are talking? I'm not that good at reading lips, but I'm pretty sure Frisk is basically yelling 'Now kiss!' right here.”

“Wait, what were you saying about a cat just now?”

“...we're going to go to a commercial break now, but when we return, we'll have more from the Monster Research Paper and the subject of Souls, and we'll be going over everything again, this time with our next guest Neil Degrasse Tyson-”

“We have seen a lot of video evidence that seems to support Mr. Riley's point. However, it is important that we critically examine Mr. Riley's interpretation of that video evidence, because there are two glaring contradictions. The first is that Mr. Riley claims that Frisk's lack of concern during what must clearly be dangerous situations is an indicator of their poor acting skill. But when showing them actually emote, such as during the fight with Mettaton, their apparent reactions are also an
example of acting. Only in the second case, their acting is suddenly much better. So Mr. Riley goes back and forth between Frisk being a good actor and a bad actor, depending on what is more convenient for him. The second contradiction might as well be called the Outtake Theory, and it's this segment right here, where Frisk is being chased by Undyne, and they both stop while Frisk answers a call on their cell phone. The chase starts again immediately when the call is over, and Mr. Riley basically says that this is proof that all of these videos were faked, and this one was released by mistake. But! If the monsters did want to hide information from people, why would they want to leave this out, but include a child being attacked multiple times on purpose? If we are going to assume that the monsters are concealing information, why on earth would we assume that the information they intended for us to see is information that fits conveniently into the narrative being promoted by their biggest detractors? In a way, it's not unlike the conspiracy theories about the moon landing being faked. The government spent billions of dollars pretending to do something and yet somehow missed a clue so obvious that only people at the forefront of aluminium foil fashions can spot them.”

The picture in picture next to the host switched from a frame of the surveillance video with Frisk talking on the cell phone while Undyne waited, to a photograph of a man with an unkempt beard wearing a folded sheet of aluminum foil on his head, with one point sticking straight up. Alphys snorted and covered her mouth with one claw out of reflex, wary of waking Undyne.

“A much simpler theory is that the monsters are actually telling the truth. There was a lot of lingering resentment, and probably still is, but when faced with the choice between finally being free, and having to murder a child in order to do so, most if not all monsters choked and did not follow through. And according to the Ebott's Wake Police Department, this is exactly what happened. Video evidence, which due to its graphic nature and content has not been and will not be released for public viewing, has indicated that the monsters were not the real danger to humans that fell into the Underground, but rather the Underground itself. Now... could those deaths have been avoided? Yes. At least one child was able to survive, even in such a hostile set of environments. Was King Asgore responsible for their deaths? He himself has claimed responsibility multiple times because of his authority and his declaration of war, even though all of the deaths were declared accidental based on the evidence available. These are important points that cannot, and should not, be ignored... and the fact that the Anti Monster League is reduced to using the logic of conspiracy theories is very telling about how much they actually care about things like justice, evidence, due process, and ethics. Or to be more accurate, how little they care.”

Alphys paused the video and tapped a few options on the touch screen, leaving herself a note to remind herself to show Frisk the video in the morning, then resumed the video.

“Having said all that, there is only so much that we can actually determine and talk about here in a studio, so...” the host paused as some people in the studio audience realized where he was going and began to clap, “in December, we will be doing yet another special episode, traveling to Ebott's Wake and interviewing locals, the police, the anti monster league, and yes, some of the monsters themselves if we can manage it.”

Some of the applause became so loud that Alphys had to mute the video. Too little too late, as it turned out; the sound had managed to rouse Undyne and she turned to look at Alphys through an eye narrowed to a slit.

“What was that?”

“Sorry,” Alphys quickly pulled off the headphones and closed out of the browser app, putting her phone on the nightstand. “I got pulled into some human memes and then I ran across a video. I think Frisk will want to see it tomorrow, maybe it will make them feel better.”
“...oh.”

“Sorry for waking you up.”

“It’s alright. But we should probably get some sleep now.” Undyne rolled over on her back, and Alphys was so distracted by the sight in front of her that she almost missed what Undyne said next. “Everything looks better after you sleep on it.”

The only sounds were the sounds of crickets and other insects, making the most of the unseasonably warm weather while it lasted, until a door latch clicked open.

Toriel peered around the bedroom. Still rather plain and uncrowded, and Frisk would need a desk at some point for studying and working on ambassadorial responsibilities, to say nothing of a bookcase for all the books presently stuffed under the bed, but at least the child had a wardrobe to store their clothing and even a floor lamp that had been heavily discounted at Joe's House Of Stuff. Frisk had pointed to it and referred to it as an “inconveniently shaped lamp” for some reason, but it worked, and the price was right.

Neither Frisk nor Sans were able (or perhaps willing) to explain the resulting giggling fit that the two of them shared when Frisk mentioned the encounter to Sans later.

But Frisk had not been laughing earlier. Or smiling. Or talking. Or eating. It was almost as if having their suggestion to release videos backfire had caused them physical harm, which was absurd; Frisk was human and humans could not be hurt by mere intentions.

They could, however, starve to death. Thus, the plate in Toriel's hands, with a slice of pie upon it, one of the few remaining after the Thanksgiving feast the day before. The plate was gently placed on the floor so as not to make any noise that might startle Frisk awake, and Toriel slowly made her way back out of the room, turning back one more time to check on the sleeping child before closing the bedroom door.

Two red lights pierced the darkness, and the child sat up, looking at their hands and arms, opening and closing their fingers. The room strobed red as the child blinked, and after a few moments, the bed covers were pushed back and they climbed out of bed.

The pie was easy enough to see in the red light, but it was ignored in favor of the shoe box underneath the bed, near the headboard. The lid was pulled off, and the tiny stars were pulled out.

“Out of time,” the child mumbled in a voice not quite their own, and winced at the sound. “Have to try.”

With seven tiny stars in their hands, the child slowly and carefully made their way past the slice of pie, despite the loud noises being made by their stomach, opened the bedroom door, and carefully looked around. There was no light from the staircase downstairs, and no light from underneath the door to Toriel's bedroom, just the sound of a mattress creaking. The queen must already have gone to bed.

The child carried the stars down the stairs, across the house to the back door, and outside.

The insects outside paused in their nightly symphony, and then picked up where they left off, as the child stared at the stars in their hands...
“Call for help. I dare you. Cry into the darkness! ’Mommy! Daddy! Somebody help!’ See what good it does you!”

It took a few seconds for Frisk to even consider opening their mouth; the sensations of being burned to death, then ripped apart, then burned again, over and over and over, were taking up every available spot in the child's mind. It was suffocating terror and horror and pain and jumbled up memories of screaming figures intruding into the present and they couldn't get away, they could never get away from Frisk, they were drowning in the child's fear like they had almost drowned in their guilt and despair after Asgore yielded in their battle...

And yet there was something else.

Watching through the child's eyes, just like them. Apparently calculating the rate of rotation of the bullets surrounding Frisk, measuring the gap between them, looking for an opening, because from time to time there were snippets of thought, fragments of some sort of back-of-the-envelope mental arithmetic that could not possibly have been from them or Frisk, because those thoughts had absolutely no trace of fear.

And then the child looked up.

“I know there's someone out there. Someone, or something. I remember the stories. The Trickster that the monsters spoke of... and the Demon, from the ancient texts. The one who comes when called. When... when Frisk didn't have the answer, and I didn't have the answer... the answers would still come. When Frisk was terrified, and I was terrified... there was still something else. Like the eye of a hurricane, planning and plotting even in the heat of battle....”

The child's hands lifted the stars up to the sky.

“This is my sacrifice. What power remains in these... and whatever is left of me, in this limbo... it is yours. I summon you with this offering, Demon. Heed my call. Help my brother. Help me save Asriel.”

* Chara called for help....

Slowly, the stars began to glow brighter and brighter, and lifted themselves out of the child's hands. The blue, green, and yellow stars spun clockwise above the red star in the center, while the orange, purple, and cyan stars spun counterclockwise below. The orbits became faster and faster, until suddenly, and soundlessly, the stars shot up into the night sky and vanished from view.

The child looked up, a cold sensation crawling on their back and neck, ice forming in their stomach. Whether the Trickster honored the request or ignored it, whether the Demon took action or not... it was too late for buyer's remorse.

The stars were gone.

The child stood outside for one minute.

Two minutes.
Five minutes, and then the chill of the night forced the child back indoors; unseasonably warm or not, it was still the end of November. Slowly and carefully and above all silently, they returned to the bedroom, walked around the untouched slice of pie, took one last look at the starry sky outside the window, and crawled into the bed. Eyes were closed, and the red light vanished.

Time passed.

But nobody ca

* CONNECTED
The Name Of The Fallen Human

The covers were thrown back as Frisk woke up, pulse pounding and skin slick with cold sweat, visions of the giant flower abomination still fresh in their mind's eye and tangled up with dozens of other nonsensical images... Mt. Ebott erupting, the waterfall garbage dump frozen in time with water droplets and garbage alike suspended in mid air, the DT Extractor machine from Hotland arcing electricity, and even stranger memories that Frisk couldn't process as anything more than discordant sounds and strange flashes of colored light.

The child's eyes darted around the room; doorway, window, wardrobe, floor lamp. Their bedroom... or at least, the room Toriel was letting them live in for the moment, for however long that lasted after the previous day's screw up.

One memory jumped to the front of the line, skipping past all the half remembered interviews and sound bites; the seven miniature stars flying away into the night sky, and taking with them any chance of helping Asriel. Frisk pushed back the covers all the way and almost rolled off the side of the bed, dropping down to the floor and reaching for a shoe box, ripping off the lid, and-

'no no No NO NO NO'
The stars were gone.

Frisk stared at the box, with the dull red crystal sphere and a pile of golden monster coins and nothing else. Shaking fingers reached inside, just to make sure that they had not somehow turned invisible. Or maybe they had been placed in another box and that change had been forgotten. Or maybe it wasn't actually happening. Maybe they hadn't actually woken up yet. There had been many nightmares before where they couldn't help Asriel. This made perfect sense. It was the only answer. It had to be a dream.

It had to be a dream.

Frisk sucked in a lungful of air after they remembered to start breathing again, and sat back on their heels, grabbing the skin on their arm and pinching as hard as they could. Everything felt and looked and sounded exactly the same, so they let go and adjusted their fingers, squeezing skin between their fingernails until it was cut clean through.

Nothing.

The fingertips were pulled back and Frisk felt themselves breathing faster as their mind ran on ahead, filling in the blanks. They must have waited too long, the stars must have run out of whatever power they had and disappeared, they didn't know, they didn't know anything about magic but they had their chance and they lost it-

Nails scraped across the skin of their forearm, leaving bright red lines that got darker immediately as blood filled in the gaps left behind, but they still couldn't wake up.

Because they were already awake.

Because it was real. It was all real.

Panic faded, leaving... nothing. Not despair, not fear, just... nothing. Not even the sensation of their blood running cold, or the all consuming gnawing of uncertainty, like they had eaten something that had gone bad and it was fighting them from the inside out.
There was nothing.

Frisk felt something brush their hand and looked down, only to see that the blood from the scratches had made its way down to the side and back of their hand.

'Probably need to take care of that before Toriel sees it.'

And then what?

Monsters were about to be wiped out, or forced back underground again. Asriel was still trapped as a flower. The whole world was ending, so what was the point of thinking about tomorrow? Or even the rest of today?

'...if Toriel sees you getting blood on everything, she will be angry. Eating monster food to heal the injury and cleaning up the blood will avoid that.'

Slowly, Frisk took a deep breath. Toriel getting mad was probably something that had already been set in motion, but... the child flinched, remembering the fireballs that had killed them once. That had been an accident, if her panic and the subsequent crying and pleading to Frisk's burnt body was any indication.

Frisk was in no hurry to see what would happen when Toriel really lost her temper.

They still had some snacks in their phone's storage boxes, but the cell phone was downstairs, charging in the kitchen. And the emergency stockpile in one of the other physical boxes under the bed had gone into restocking the dimensional boxes after the chaos of the last few weeks. Even the Astronaut Food was gone. To get access to any sort of monster food, Frisk would have to head downstairs and sneak into the kitchen to grab some leftovers from the refrigerator, and do so without being spotted by Toriel. Actually, aside from the sun being up, Frisk had no idea what time it was, but odds are Toriel was awake and in the house... possibly waiting for Frisk to get up. No good could come from that.

Then again, maybe they didn't need any monster food. The bathroom was right across the hallway. They could run in, clean up the scratches, then bring some toilet paper back, clean up anything that the blood touched, dispose of the paper, and get dressed in something with long sleeves. It was almost December anyway. It wasn't a perfect plan, but it was a plan, and that meant something to do besides sit quietly and wait for the end. Frisk pushed themselves back and got to their feet, turned towards the door-

There was a plate on the bedroom floor, in the exact middle of the room, with a fork next to a slice of pie.

When did that happen?

Frisk shook their head, then walked over to pick up the pie. After only one bite, they could feel the sting of the scratches fade away, and they ate a few more bites just to be sure, but after that they put the fork on the plate again. Even though monster food evaporated as it was chewed, they still felt queasy, as if what they had eaten was being rejected by their body.

Without solid food to puke up, that meant dry heaves. Frisk wasn't looking forward to that any more than they were looking forward to attempting damage control on the released videos. Something they were probably not going to be allowed anywhere near, considering that releasing those videos in the first place had been their attempt at damage control. That was a firing offense if there ever was one.

'Hah. Firing.'
Frisk smiled without humor, slowly walked up to the bedroom door, and tried to open it without making any noise.

“I know, your Majesty. I would never have done what I did if I realized Mettaton was going to go off-script.”

“Your script, Dr. Alphys, involved letting a human child be electrocuted during a game show, travel across the Hotland industrial park alone in dangerously high temperatures, be accosted multiple times by somebody who threatened them with dismemberment, explosions.”

“Special effects!” Dr. Alphys managed to choke out. “The chainsaw was a prop, the bombs were never real, even the jet pack race was just forced perspective! Frisk never got more than two feet off the ground the whole time!”

Toriel opened her mouth, but said nothing, apparently stuck halfway between wanting to snap at Dr. Alphys for interrupting and being mollified by the apparent danger of Frisk's adventures in Hotland being more simulated than actual.

“...and what of Mettaton himself?”

“I d-d-didn't know he was g-going to try to t-take Frisk's Soul. I swear, if I thought he was tempted in any way, I would never have... I would have just explained everything to Frisk instead of doing that whole stupid g-game. I...” Alphys shook her head. “I wanted them to be safe. I didn't want them to make it to the castle. I just... I c-couldn't... all I could think of was I had to convince them that they couldn't win. That they were safer staying with us. And... I didn't think they would believe the truth.”

“...well.” Toriel sighed. “If nothing else... you were trying to keep them from Asgore, rather than preparing to deliver them straight to him. Even so, you will remove those dangerous functions from their cell phone immediately. The jet pack, the pistol, all of it. Frisk is too young to be fooling around with such dangerous objects, simulated or otherwise.”

“Of c-course. I can do that right now, if you want—”

Both monsters looked up as one of the steps on the staircase squeaked under the addition of new weight. Frisk looked down at Toriel and Dr. Alphys, and sighed, abandoning any pretense of stealth and walking down the staircase normally.

“So... yesterday didn't turn out very well. What do we do from here?”

“Oh! About that!” Alphys quickly got up from her chair and walked over to Frisk, pulling out her own cell phone. “I have something that I think you need to see!”

“You ever think about tricking this thing out? I mean, I don't exactly know how it works or runs or anything like that but I could hook you up with some cosmetic enhancements. Fuzzy dice, undercarriage lights, smokescreen generator, solar panels, waffle iron... stuff like that.”

Beneath a black cloak, a head cocked to one side. “Tra la la. True beauty and elegance lies not in addition, but when one has reached a simplicity wherein nothing else can be taken away. I'd be lying if I said I was not tempted by the waffle iron, though.”

“There ya go.” Hal snapped his fingers. “Tell you what, I promised a friend I'd meet him for drinks
and a game of Puzzle The Bystander, so you think on it, and then if Monday rolls around and
something really speaks to you, bring her on by and we'll see what we can fit in there.”

“...bring her?”

“Yeah. The boat. Oh... okay. Yeah. In some human cultures, boats and some other inanimate objects
are referred to as 'her' because of... reasons I don't actually know. It's traditional, which means
nobody remembers how it got started.”

“...peculiar.”

“Eh.” Hal shrugged. “So yeah, catch up with me later and let me know what you decide.”

“I shall think upon your offer, and I thank you again-”

The figure suddenly flinched, and then the hood started to look around.

“Uh... ya'll right there, buddy? Tim??”

“...something is wrong. I apologize. I must leave.”

“Oh...kay...?”

The cloaked figure jumped into the boat, which promptly grew legs and a face, and ran away from
the outside of the garage. Hal watched the boat and the figure disappear, not turning as the sound of
footsteps got louder and louder.

“Where's he off to in such a hurry?”

“No idea. He was in too big a hurry to explain. We'll probably find out what that was about if we
wait long enough, but in the meantime, I'm going to take a break and go meet up with Joe. Be back
in a couple hours, help you replace that transmission.”

“Sounds good. Tell Joe I said hi!” The elder Greene called to his son as he headed down the street.

Frisk stared at table, just as they had for the last few minutes after the video on Dr. Alphys' phone
had ended. The Anti Monster League was always going to twist whatever they said or did or
released, and doing so quickly and loudly after the videos had been released, then repeating
themselves over and over, had created the illusion of their position being much more common and
popular than it really was. They had even predicted some of what had happened, when they tried to
explain to everyone their reasoning for releasing the videos in the first place.

The Anti Monster League's push had run out of momentum, apparently owing more in part to the
abrasive, “you are an idiot if you do not already think the way that I think” attitudes of its members
than to any other factor. Even a moderate position that refused to take either side drew out their
dismissive tones and in some cases actual epithets. True opposition and the deconstruction of their
claims made them openly angry, and most if not all of their representatives to the media became very
inarticulate when angry. That certainly made it harder to make converts.

It should have been reassuring, possibly even amusing.

Frisk couldn't feel that way. The whole world felt like the light and the color and the warmth had
been drained out of it.
When a yellow claw held a dramatically modified cell phone in front of them, it took them several seconds to even respond.

“Here you go, Frisk! Newly upgraded! I've overhauled the interface so you have a modern touchscreen now, headphone jack if you want to listen to music or videos or something, and updated your application suite! All the old texts and conversation histories are still there, the software skin is all that changed.”

“...oh. Thank you... does it still have the Dimensional Boxes?”

“Yeah! Definitely! Oh, uh, speaking of which, Dimensional Storage will probably go offline some time late next week, we're still moving all the hardware into the lab building. I'll send you a text before we do anything, just so you're not caught off guard! Uhm...” Alphys rubbed her claws together. “I did take out some of the older apps, from you know... b-back in Hotland. The jet pack was out of fuel anyway, and the bomb defusal thing-”

“-was just part of the set dressing, right.”

“Uh. Yeah.”

While Alphys continued to explain the intricacies and logistics of the phone system and its applications, Toriel pulled out her own cell phone and stepped back into the kitchen. Two rings later, the number she dialed picked up.

“HELLO YOUR MAJESTY! YOU HAVE REACHED THE CELL PHONE OF THE GREAT PAPYRUS!”

“Ah, yes, hello Papyrus. How is your day going?”

“EXCEEDINGLY WELL SO FAR, AND THANK YOU FOR ASKING!”

“Do you and Sans have anything planned later, by any chance?”

“I DO KNOW THAT SANS IS SUPPOSED TO BE INVOLVED IN SOMETHING AT ALL FINE LABS, BUT BEYOND THAT EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE WIDE OPEN!”

“That is most fortuitous. I was wondering if I could impose upon you today...” Toriel leaned out through the kitchen doorway and saw Frisk nodding as Dr. Alphys spoke, then stepped back into the kitchen again. “I believe that Frisk is still feeling a little overwhelmed in regards to what happened yesterday, and I was hoping that you could perhaps cheer them up sometime?”

“A FRIEND IN NEED OF CHEERING UP IS A FRIEND IN DEED... OF... CHEERING UP!” Papyrus attempted to clear his nonexistent throat. “OH, WE COULD GO TO THE ARBORETUM! MANY OF THE TREES THERE ARE SHEDDING THEIR LEAVES AND PRODUCING A SPECTACULAR KALEIDOSCOPE OF COLOR! EVERYONE I KNOW HAS MENTIONED THAT THE SIGHT CHEERS THEM UP!”

“That is as reasonable an idea as any other. Thank you, Papyrus.”

Frisk walked down the path without really seeing it, or any of the trees, or even the monsters in front of them and behind them. Papyrus was talking up a storm, with Alphys occasionally chiming in, but the Ambassador could not even remember what they were saying from one moment to the next. It was almost as if they were underwater... sounds were distorted, light was dimmer, and it felt as
though they were in slow motion.

They weren't exactly drowning, but even breathing seemed to take more effort than it should have, so that wasn't helping.

“BASED ON MY UNDERSTANDING, THIS PARTICULAR EXPERIENCE IS ONE RESERVED FOR A SPECIFIC INSTANCE OF A YEAR! THEREFORE IT MAKES SENSE TO SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ENJOY IT WHILE THE OPPORTUNITY EXISTS!”

“Yeah...” Frisk mumbled, nodding their head on autopilot. “That makes sense.”

“Uhm. Frisk? D-do you... I mean, is there something-”

“I'm fine,” the child answered out of reflex, even as their eyes refused to focus on anything or anyone in front of them.

'I left him there, I screwed up and I couldn't save him. I sleep in his bed and I sit at his spot at the dinner table and everything I have was stolen from him I don't belong here I shouldn't be here I'm supposed to be-'

Frisk's breath hitched for a moment as they remember the angry words that cut through them... and then the angry words burning inside them until they couldn't stand it, they lashed out and cut and cut and cut and then they were back in the Ruins, at the very beginning.

'How many times to I have to die in order to find a way to save him'

In their mind's eye, Frisk could see Asriel as he transformed back into a child, sobbing and apologizing.

'As many times as it takes.'

And that settled it.

Papyrus and Alphys were chaperoning Frisk out of some sense of duty to Toriel. Once the errand was done and they were back at Toriel's house, Frisk would sneak out, head to Cavendish Street, and-

Despite their eyes sliding over all of the scenery in front of them, movement and color still caught their attention as a yellow flower emerged from the ground.

And then the rest of Frisk's brain caught up, taking up all of their attention and nearly causing them to trip over their own feet. The yellow flower was moving, the petals swooping back and forth as if... as if the flower was a person trying to get their bearings.

“Flowey?!”

The flower spun around, just in time to see Frisk take off through the leaf piles, heading straight for the monster, breath caught in their throat. Too excited (and moving too fast) to slow down normally, the child tripped and went sprawling in the leaves, but quickly pushed themselves upright again next to the flower, which was staring at them with an expression that could only be total confusion. Behind them they could hear Alphys and Papyrus talking, but they couldn't concentrate on the words; there was a nervous energy inside of them and it almost felt like it was trying to escape in the form of giggling laughter. The colors of the leaves jumped out at Frisk; the information had been there and their mind had filed it away, but now it was there, it was real, it was alive, the whole world was coming back to life again.
“It's so good to see you again! I was starting to worry you'd never come down from the mountain! You won't believe everything that happened while I was underground! So much has changed! So much is still changing! I can't wait to tell you everything!”

The flower monster blinked at the human child several times, and Frisk felt their grin start to slip away.

“Is there... is something wrong? Are you okay?”

“This is NOT how I expected our reunion to go,” Flowey answered, making the closest approximation he could of a shrug without any shoulders to work with. “It's been a really weird day.”

“Hehehe.” Frisk grinned. “Well, that's fair... okay. Where do I start...”

Between the trees of the Arboretum, their foliage turning orange and red and gold with the passage of the seasons, four figures talked together. A tall skeleton. A short yellow lizard. A small golden flower creature. And a human child. From time to time, laughter could be heard from the skeleton or the human or both at once.

Some distance away, behind several trees, a fifth figure watched the group, a dark and formless shape, a shadow with nothing casting it.

“You are not supposed to be here any longer.”

A cloaked figure stood nearby, and despite not having an obvious front or back, the shadow appeared to turn around to face the cloaked figure.

“What do you want?”

The darkness waited.

“Monsters are free. Prosperity will reign across the land. There's nothing left to worry about. So why are you still... no. That's not it. Why did you come back?”

I have a question.

“...then ask.”

Who is Chara?
Flower Power

Toriel stared at the golden flower, which stared back. The boss monster's face twitched a few times, and while this hinted at the queen's internal struggle, it did nothing to indicate the scale of that conflict.

"Before you say anything, mom, you need to know that Flowey is why we're all here." Frisk cocked their head towards Alphys. "Dr. Alphys was trying to create a way to channel Soul Power and Flowey was the result. He took the human Souls that Asgore had been holding on to, and he destroyed the Barrier. Everything I've done as Ambassador starts with him setting everyone free."

Toriel blinked and turned to face the scientist, who was wringing her claws together nervously. "Dr. Alphys... is this-"

"I d-didn't know!! I didn't know I didn't know! There was no difference from any of the control cases! I swear I thought it was just another d-d-dead end!"

"WHAT A FORTUITOUS HAPPENSTANCE THEN, TO STUMBLE BLINDLY INTO EXACTLY THE AVENUE OF RESEARCH WE NEEDED TO DESTROY THE BARRIER!" Papyrus declared.

"What he said." Frisk pointed at Papyrus. "So yeah. Flowey was a vital part of getting everybody on the surface. The most vital part, probably. And whatever your personal feelings about him and what he's done in the past... well, please keep that in mind going forward."

Toriel sighed and reached up to rub her forehead with one paw.

"I suppose, given your track record, that I should not be surprised that you have made yet another friend."


"YES! FRISK IS THE ULTIMATE FRIEND-MAKER! NYEH HEH HEH!"

The room was dark, but not to the point of impaired vision; the people within could still read text printed on paper and displayed on electronics. It also did not impair the recognition of the other people in the room. If it was intentional, it likely served as a reminder of the importance of circumspection. If it was not intentional, it was likely a subconscious acknowledgment by those holding the meeting that what they were doing was, if not strictly illegal under the law, then certainly considered damming evidence in the court of public opinion.

The darkened state of the room also precluded any of the occupants from noticing a shadow in one corner, with nothing casting it.

"Social media accounts and on-the-ground reports both confirm the presence of sizable gold reserves in the monsters' possession. So far they have not attempted to leverage them on a large scale, so we'll need to acquire the gold before they can make the attempt. We'll need an SEC investigation into this Exchange Trust for starters."

"Why not just seize the gold directly? They're not even human, never mind American citizens. I don't see a legal problem."
The man at the head of the table looked up from his papers, and then shuffled through said papers until he found one specific sheet.

“One of the law firms in Ebott's Wake has actually filed paperwork according to the legal argument that, because monsters were born within the geographic confines of the United States, they technically qualify for citizenship on that grounds alone. If we precipitate a legal conflict regarding the rights of monsters, we risk it being dragged out into the House or Senate. It is not yet clear if the popular opinions regarding monsters will compel most members of Congress to side in their favor, but even if they do not, forcing the issue publicly takes the initiative out of our hands.”

“I understand. What about media depictions? Can we exploit that?”

“Unfortunately our efforts in that regard have been countered by the social media presence of the monsters, especially the skeleton called Papyrus. It already has very nearly one million followers on Twitter. Apparently the combination of subtle wordplay and naivete about human culture creates an image completely at odds with the image we want to promote. Thus, why we are reduced to tying all monster efforts up in red tape.”

The man at the head of the table looked around at everyone else who was seated.

“On the subject of monster citizenship, I believe that it is in our best interests to start a concerted push in favor of it right after the new year, at the same time that the SEC investigation into their Exchange Trust goes public. If they grab the opportunity as soon as it presents itself, we may be able to make multiple cases regarding market manipulation and fraud stick, thereby removing their primary source of economic leverage and many of their social and political leaders in one fell swoop. Fines will do the rest over time, while also damaging the public reputation of monsters as a whole. If they do not try to seize the opportunity, we can spin that as a case of monsters attempting to have their cake and eat it too, wanting the advantages of citizenship without being subject to our laws. This will also give us the opportunity to tighten the screws on the Exchange Trust, so there is no actual downside.”

The man returned his gaze to the stack of papers in front of him, and selected another one.

“On the subject of the monsters forming their own school, we will obviously apply the strictest possible standards in order to potentially exclude them from federal and state educational funding…”

In the corner, the darkness shifted, and then faded away.

Outside the meeting room, underneath a desk, the darkness grew again. Slowly, a part of the darkness extended, like a pseudo pod or even a tentacle, flattening out until it slid easily through the gap between the desk and the desk drawer, flowing over and under pens and papers and paperclips and stationary... until it found a cellular phone. Beneath the desk, there was a subtle yellow glow, while inside the desk drawer the end of the tentacle dragged across the surface of the touchscreen, then tapped the numbers on the display in a specific order...

One eye narrowed to a slit stared at the flower.

The flower stared back.

Eventually, after long enough for Frisk to start sweating nervously, Undyne grinned.

“Fuhuhu. I was wondering when I'd see you again. Wondering how the rematch would go if you didn't hit me with a surprise attack first.”
“So. You remember what I did.”

“Hell YEAH I remember what you did! That was fucking awesome!!”

Flowey blinked.

“What?”

Next to the flower, Frisk was wearing a very nearly identical expression.

“What?”

Undyne grinned even wider.

“What, you think I’m going to forget something like an Ultimate Battle For The Fate Of The Universe?! Okay, yeah, my head’s a little fuzzy on the details, because I was being crushed to death by giant vines, but I remember the important stuff! An irresistible force of six human souls, versus the immovable object, the human that never, ever gives up! A titanic clash of magic and wills so great that it shattered the Barrier itself!!”

Flowey rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Sure. Let’s go with that.”

Undyne’s grin disappeared suddenly.

“Just remember one thing, punk. I know Alphys is freaked out by you. Anything that reminds her of her experiments bothers her. You ever hurt her or make her cry, and I will chop you up into a salad. Understand?!?”

“Pfft. I’ve already said what I needed to say to Alphys way before Frisk and I ended up fighting. Been there, done that, and bought the hat because I can’t wear a T-Shirt.”

“...good. For you. Then.” Undyne looked up at Frisk. “Okay. Now that we got that out of the way... I was gonna go pitch in with some of the repairs at the school building, now that the lab is making the stuff we need. You want to come along?”

“Sorry, still need to make a few more introductions. And then there’s some other stuff mom wants to do.”

“Alright then! I’ll see you around, nerd!”

—on a slightly more serious note, scandal is rocking the halls of government as over a dozen DC insiders have all had some very unpleasant activities catch up with them. The news site I'm looking at hasn't listed names yet but apparently it covers everything from unsolicited cell phone pictures of genitalia to insider trading to extramarital affairs to misappropriation of government funds. And as soon as I can find a website that is more reputable and not engaged in click bait title practices, I will put names to each of those unsavory actions. In the meantime, have a little thematically appropriate music in the form of 'Somebody's Watching Me' by Rockwell, requested earlier by Quentin Forsythe!”

The announcers voice faded out as the music faded in, and a hooded figure began to bob their head to the beat of the song as a flaming figure moved towards them.

“...another round?”
“Tra la la. My thirst has been slaked, and your generosity appreciated. One more, please.”

A black gloved hand emerged from beneath the cloak, placing some money upon the bar, and Grillby nodded.

“...coming right up,”

As the fire elemental moved away, towards the various bottles and hoses and containers needed to mix another drink, the hood turned slightly to see a shadow forming next to the end of the bar.

“Tra la la. I hear you've been traveling in powerful circles, keeping busy and making enemies.”

Yeah, well, he shouldn't have been taking those kinds of pictures with his work phone.

“Well. I suppose that could have gone worse.”

“Yeah.” Frisk shrugged, then leaned back on the park bench. “But you know. You were the one that broke the Barrier. You made all of this possible. That has to count for something, and probably goes a long way towards making up for... well, whatever they can remember.”

Flowey blinked, then turned to look at the child.

“I have a question.”

“Go ahead.”

“Was I really the first person to ask your name? I mean, I know why I didn't ask before then. I was projecting and didn't want to ruin the illusion. But nobody else asked? Not even once??”

“They probably didn't want to get attached.” Frisk waved one hand as if dismissing the entire subject. “The monsters that didn't want me dead still didn't expect to ever see me again once I escaped the Underground.”

Flowey opened his mouth to reply, then closed it.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“...okay then.” Frisk didn't sound very convinced, and Flowey scowled.

“So Toriel took you in. How's that working out for you?”

“It's great, really. She doesn't get mad when I screw up, she doesn't treat me like I'm stupid when I don't know the answer to a question or get the answer wrong, she hasn't yelled at me since the fight in the Underground, and on top of all that I have a roof over my head. I basically won the foster parent lottery.”

“...huh. Well. Good. For you.”

“...I remember what you told me. Take care of mom and dad. If anyone tries to hurt them, they won't make it past me. I promise.”

Flowey blinked and looked up at Frisk, and then sighed.
“That's not what I meant, idiot. I meant fill in the gaps in their lives so they're not so lonely and torn up all the time. Which it looks like you're doing anyway.”

“...oh.”

“Yeah.” Flowey rolled his eyes. “Oh.”

“...how are you fe- how are you doing? I mean, after all that?”

“About the same as before. Had some time to think... there is one thing I need to tell you, Frisk.”

“Yes? What is it?”

Flowey turned to face Frisk and gave the human child his undivided attention.

“It's obvious that you're still thinking of me like... like back then. And you can't do that. I don't have those feelings anymore. I don't want to... I don't want to do what I was originally planning to do. Not after that. But that's only because I, well, had a change in perspective. Not a change of heart. I always knew some things were right and some things were wrong, I just stopped caring at some point. And I'm back to not being able to care again. If you keep hanging out with me, you will get hurt. That's a certainty. You need to forget about... who I was. And stick to the people that can love you.”

Frisk said nothing, and eventually Flowey turned to face the street again. Human and monster pedestrians walked by frequently, talking to each other or on phones or staring at the screens of phones, and now and then glancing at the falling leaves from the trees behind the Arboretum wall.

Almost a full minute later, Frisk leaned forward on the bench.

“I think you should know. I had a plan to try to help you. To bring you back again, for good this time. It, uh.” Frisk swallowed. “It didn't pan out. I don't know nearly enough about magic or souls to even attempt something like that, and I don't think any monsters, even Toriel and Asgore and Alphys, are going to let the knowledge I need slip into human hands. Even mine. So I lost my best chance because I didn't know how to use it. But I'm not giving up.”

“You should. I spent a lot of resets trying to change back. You can probably guess how well that turned out.” Flowey sighed. “But I doubt you're going to. Just like I said. Your Determination is going to be your downfall.”

“Maybe so... but there's something else.” Frisk cleared their throat. “I don't want you to think that... that I'm just putting up with you. Until I can 'fix' you or something like that. You're not like a placeholder until a Soul comes along. You weren't my friend for just a little while. You're still my friend. Soul or not. Flower or not.”

Flowey slowly turned to stare at Frisk, and the expression on his face could not easily be read.

“...why?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, why would you want to be friends with somebody who can't care about you, or love you, or worry about you when you get hurt, or anything that basically makes up friendship?”

“Well... let me put it this way... I know that if you could care, you would care a lot. And the fact that you can't care, that's not your fault.”
Flowey frowned, but said nothing, and Frisk looked down at their feet instead.

“You didn't deserve what happened to you, Asriel. That was wrong. And I swear I'll make it right.”

“Yeah? How exactly?”

“I dunno. Probably just do what I always do; stumble into something much bigger than me, and keep going no matter what.”

“...well, you had enough Determination to outlast an actual god. I guess I wouldn't be that surprised if you managed-”

There was a beeping sound, and Frisk pulled their phone out of a pocket. “Sorry, that's mine.”

“Well I should hope so. It's not like I have an abundance of pockets right now.”

Frisk half smiled, but their face became annoyed as they read through the text.

“...something wrong?”

“No. Just need to head back home now. We're heading into the clinic so I can get tested for allergies and a couple of vaccines.”

“I think I know what an allergy is. What's a vaccine?”

“It's this thing in human medicine where they take an infectious disease, and then mostly kill it, then they put the mostly dead disease in the body so it can learn to fight it without being in actual danger.”

“...oh. Seems kind of risky. Mostly dead is a little alive.”

“Right. I'm oversimplifying the process, and there is a distinction between live vaccines and other types. Either way, mom wants me to basically be immune to every possible disease.”

“...well. She would.”

Frisk sighed. “Yeah. I don't want to blame her, but she's not the one who's going to be stuck with needles over and over again. I hate needles.”

“Wait, wait, what's this about needles?”

Frisk held up a finger and tapped their arm with the tip. “That's how they get the vaccines in. Hollow metal needles. They're called hypodermics, since they go under the skin. Then the liquid in the needle either ends up in the bloodstream or the muscle or the fatty tissue, depending on what it is.”

Flowey's face contorted into an expression that looked like a tug of war between shock and disgust.

“Euagh. That is... ugh, I wish I had a stomach because I feel like throwing up.”

“Yeah. Well. I can only drag my feet on that for so long. We'll have to pick this up again later.”

“Alright. See you later Frisk.”

Flowey watched the child stand up, put their cell phone back in their pocket, and start walking down the road, before clearing his throat.

“Hey. Frisk. One more thing.”
Flowey stared at the child for a moment, opened his mouth, closed it again, and then turned around to see if there was anybody nearby capable of listening in.

“It's about Smiley Trashbag. I mean, Sans. Whatever you do... don't let him know anything about... what you can do. He... well. Let's just say he caused me more than my fair share of Resets.”

Frisk nodded, slowly.

“Right. I wasn't going to advertise it anyway. I wouldn't be able to prove it, and I don't know how I'd get anyone to believe me anyway-”

“Trust me. That last one's not going to be a problem with Sans. So... don't take the chance.”

“...okay. I won't.”

“Good. See you around Frisk.”

“Yeah. See you.”

The flower descended into the earth, and the human child began to walk down the street.
“Gooooood morning Ebott's Wake! You are listening to KEBT FM and unfortunately Clutch has been snowed in and couldn't make it this morning, so you are listening to Brett “The Brett” Brinkmann, and today we have a very special guest, it's our newest intern who is already making a big splash around the office, so much that Jeff has already given him an iconic nickname! Ladies and gentlemen and everybody in between, I present to you the one, the only, DJ Pantz! How are you doing this morning?”

“Doing pretty good, how about you?”

“Faaaantastic! And I hope that everyone in town is enjoying the winter wonderland we are experiencing today here in Ebott's Wake. Ordinarily this is where we would ply our listening audience with one of many tourism board slogans but in a show of solidarity with our intrepid traffic reporter Gary Welkin, we are boycotting the Tourism Board until such time as they stop using his likeness without his permission. So, what do you say we jump right into the deep end?”

“Sounds good.”

“Our top story is of course the weather, it took till the beginning of December but we finally got some snow here after winter was playing hard to get for two months. We are looking at at least four inches, which doesn't sound too bad but between some of the drifts and the ice build up, the whole thing has been a real deal breaker. A number of businesses are closing for safety's sake today, as well as James Madison Elementary, Ebott's Wake High School, Ebott's Wake Community College, and the mini golf course at the Greene Machines Garage. The actual garage and gas station are still open for business though. Somehow.”

“The Library is open for business too. I even heard somebody joke about the Vice President clearing the sidewalk and streets with a flamethrower.”

“Actually, that probably wasn't a joke.”

“What??”

“I mean, I wouldn't put it past him. Moving on, later in the program we'll be getting an update on the weather from Hailey Skye. For now, time to move on to our next item. Monster Food has been the literal and metaphorical talk of the town and the sales numbers are off the charts. It appears that a key part of this is due to the recuperative and restorative properties of the magic used to create the food. Which was not a sentence I expected to read on the air even a month ago.”

“Actually Brett, a lot of this kind of caught monsters off guard too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I know Lance, he's the guy who sells Nice Cream. The way he told it, every time he finds a way to increase production, demand skyrockets again and he can't seem to get ahead even after hiring three other people.”

“Wow. I kind of thought the whole healing thing was part of the big diplomatic strategy that the Ambassador cooked up. No pun intended.”

“It probably was, but it's not something monsters specifically planned around. I mean, it does all this amazing stuff for you guys apparently but for us it's just ordinary everyday food.”
“A valid point, and it's worth mentioning that a lot of medical authorities are cautioning people not to try to rely on monster food as any sort of substitute for conventional medical science. There's simply not enough information on how healing magic works yet.”

“Actually I may be able to help with that, at least a tiny bit. If you see monsters creating bullet patterns, pay attention to the colors. Different colors mean different things, but the one most pertinent to our conversation right now is Green bullets. Those are made with Healing Magic and I don't even think it's possible to hurt somebody with Green bullets. Uh, don't quote me on that though. I think I heard some talk about having Green bullet patterns being adopted as an accepted greeting for humans, but I don't think it's gonna happen even if it is perfectly safe.”

“Really? It seems like a good idea, at least in theory.”

“So if I happened to run up to you in the morning, go 'Hi Brett!' and throw a handful of Tylenol in your face you'd be okay with that?”

“Uh... probably not, thinking about it some more.”

“Well, there you go.”

“As you say, there I go. And speaking of going places, the Lost Eagle County False Mustache Enthusiast Society has elected Leigh Benson as the new leader of their organization. This following the otherwise inexplicable Foliclegate scandal that wracked the society and the entire county over the past two months. We here at KEBT wish Ms. Benson the best of luck in... whatever the society does. I genuinely have no idea and at this point I'm afraid to ask.”

“Well, probably something involving false mustaches, if the name is anything to go by.”

“You would think it would be that simple, but if reporting the news here has taught me anything, it's that there is no such thing as face value. And I didn't realize that could be construed as a pun about facial hair until I said it out loud. Play me off, Jeff... no, not literally. I just realized it was a pun is all... that's a fair point. DJ Pantz, do you want to take a run at announcing a story?”

“Don't mind if I do... okay, here we are. The Belmoley Players theater group recently announced their intentions to resume their collaboration with the Shakespeare In The Park Group as soon as their schedules align and the weather warms up. So I guess everybody gets to look forward to that in the spring then. According to this, they had suspended the original team up program back when the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi were getting really aggressive.”

“That is very true. Speaking of everything old being new again, the Archaic Arcade is running a special promotion running up until Christmas with free tokens for customers who sign up for their mailing list. Sort of like an Advent Calendar thing I guess.”

“Like a what?”

“Oh. Right. It's like this thing that counts down from the first of December to the twenty fourth or twenty fifth, so like, kids can have a treat each night and it's something to look forward to on the way to Christmas. Personally I think it's a scheme to get people to buy even more Christmas stuff way before... what? Okay then, everybody! Jeff says we have a caller on the line! Hello caller, you are on the air with The Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!?”

“Hey, that's my line!”
“AFTER EVERYTHING WE'VE DONE TO TRY TO WARN PEOPLE ABOUT MONSTERS YOU GIVE ONE A *BEEP*ING JOB?! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TRYING TO PULL?!”

“Language, please. This is live radio-”

“I DON’T *BEEP*ING CARE IF IT'S *BEEP*ING LIVE! YOU'RE A *BEEP*ING TRAITOR TO HUMANITY AND SO HELP ME GOD THERE’LL BE A BULLET BETWEEN YOUR EYES FOR THIS!”

“...caller, can I ask your name?”

“My name is Dwayne Riley, spokesman for the Anti Monster League, and-”

“Thank you, that will make filing the police report so much easier.”

“You think the police can protect you from us? You think the monsters will save you once you're no longer a useful pawn in their plans? The Anti-Monster League is more than just a name. We are the face of an idea, and you can't kill an idea!”

“You know, if Jeff plays back this call in segment I'm pretty sure that it will show pretty conclusively that you were the only one making threats to kill other people. Speaking of which I think Officer Steve is probably going to want to have a word with you about that. Assuming he hasn't heard it already.”

“Hey, Brett, I don't mean to interrupt, but the whole Guardians thing, wasn't this their exact game plan? Intimidation followed up with actual violence?”

“Well, they were a lot more subtle about it, but yes, that's exactly right. Mr. Riley, I don't think you've chosen the right time, or the right town, to attempt that particular strategy-”

“DON'T YOU *BEEP*ING TRY TO MAKE ME LOOK LIKE THE BAD GUY YOU SON OF A-”

“...uh. Jeff says that he ended the call because his censor finger was getting tired and didn't want to slip up. Good call, honestly.”

“Has that ever happened before?”

“Well, you get your occasional belligerent callers if you have any kind of call in segment on the radio, but I think this is a station record for profanity. Fortunately, that brings us up to the break, but when we come back we'll have an interview lined up with Lars of the Exchange Trust as they do a public Q and A session, so stick around!”
On A High Note

Hannah Mossman stared at the arrangement of parts on the tables, and then watched as much smaller hands than hers took various pieces, seemingly at random, and grouped them together. Parts slid or snapped into place, and were secured with screws that were practically standing at attention, stuck as they were on a strip of masking tape folded back on itself.

“One down, five to go.”

“...Frisk, I don't mean to distract you in the middle of something...”

“It's alright, go ahead.”

“Uh, how old are you again?”

“I'll be nine in January.”

“...okay then.”

Frisk looked at Mossman in confusion, then shrugged and resumed assembling the second microscope.

“We'll have some extra parts left over, and there's a few elements we might be able to reuse in an emergency, but it won't be as good as these. I know how to grind lenses in theory, but I've never actually done it, and we don't have the right tools anyway.”

“Just getting these completed is amazing on its own... what is that noise?”

Frisk paused, carefully placed their screwdriver on the table, then walked over to the door to the science classroom and pushed it open.

“OH YEAH! OH YEAH!

IT'S A GOD DAMNED DINOSAUR LASER FIGHT!

IN SPAAAACE! WITH SHAAAARKS!

IT'S A BALLS OUT DINOSAUR LASER FIGHT!”

Two human musicians, and one enthusiastic blue monster, danced their way past the science room doorway, with Danny playing a guitar or possibly a bass, and Brian carrying a keyboard.

Slowly, Frisk pulled the door closed and scratched their head.

“...huh.”

Hannah nodded. “Yeah.”

Behind the closed door, the musically inclined trio continued to sing.

“IT'S FUCKING SCIEEEEENCE!

JUST ASK ALBERT EINSTEIN!

HE INVENTED SPAAAAAACE!”
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