Chara Featherstone and the Engine of Renown!

by Nicolle

Summary

A Steampunk UnderSwap style tale of intrigue and adventure in the hollow earth realm of Agartha for those looking for a little Charisk! Charlotte ‘Chara’ Featherstone has created a technological marvel: an aether engine capable of holding aloft Dr. Undyne’s insanely designed airship ‘Dalion!’ Now Chara is wanted by the mysterious Madam Glass. Can Papyrus and Frisk protect her from the dastardly woman or will Chara fall prey to Glass’ devious designs?

Notes

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Author’s Note: This novel is the product of the November National Novel Writing challenge. I didn’t make it. :( I got to 47,000 on Nov. 30th. I’m still pretty proud of that though! I am in the process of editing the chapters into something I am comfortable posting and I hope you all enjoy reading it. Now onto the story!
Chapter 1

Charlotte Amelia Featherstone’s hand flew up to her head, covering her eyes against the glare as the airship Dalion rushed by overhead. Despite its immense size and blocky design, it maneuvered around the steel and glass high rises of New Home with ease. The ship truly resembled a rectangular block of amber stained windows, brown painted metal, and brass gears. Gathering up her green skirts, she quickly ran down the brick laid street for the airport.

The airport terminal rose up out of the ground ahead of her, a building split into two pieces, one that sat on the ground and one that floated in the air. The ground terminal was a long and tall building made up of steel and stained glass walls, with an interior designed for comfort and relaxation. The first floor handled all matters of transportation: tickets, itineraries, and luggage. The other three floors were filled with shops, restaurants, lounges, and even a spa.

Passengers were ferried from the ground to the second part of the building in the air on a series of enclosed, floating platforms that rose and fell as needed. The platforms themselves were like glass gondolas outfitted in brass so that they shined even when the weather turned cloudy. Once raised up, the platforms attached to the second part of the terminal, a building that floated effortlessly in the air. Rather than a building of glass, this one was a one floor building of stone and steel, with long tubes snaked out from it to attach to incoming vessels.

Ten ships were arranged around it at current, ranging in size from the small private airship of the Dreemurr family to the intimidatingly large Dalion. Charlotte waited among the throng of people on the ground, some of whom waited for friends to disembark, while others had come to gawk at the Dalion. It was as amazing to look at as it was hideous.

And not a single one of her pleas with Dr. Undyne on the design had dissuaded the merwoman from realizing her grotesque dream. A few bystanders pointed up at the ship, talking loudly about this or that function of which they had no real idea. Charlotte didn't correct them. She looked too young with her pale skin and large, chocolate eyes, and too delicate with her small frame and delicate face to be taken for an engineer. Making assertions would only have others laughing at her. If Dr. Undyne hadn't also been the Royal Scientist, people wouldn't have taken the merwoman seriously either. Her appointment had come on the heels of her advancements in robotics, making machines so uncanny in form and easily inhabitable for the ghosts who lingered behind after their bodies had long gone.

Several platforms rose and fell to take the passengers of the Dalion to the terminal on the ground and Charlotte had to lock her knees to keep from bouncing impatiently. After a good hour, Dr. Undyne came out on the arm of the goat pooka, King Asgore Dreemurr, his wife Queen Toriel just behind with her son, Prince Asriel, on one arm, and their adopted, human son, Prince Frederick, on the other. Surrounded by journalists, photographers, and guards, and now with the crowd pressing in, Charlotte groaned. As the engineer who’d created the engine strong enough to keep the Dalion aloft, she was supposed to be introduced, but with the crowd, she’d never get through.

Standing still, the crowd flowed around her, moving with the royals and away from the terminal. Once only those who had other business with the terminal remained, she began the long walk back to the laboratory. Michaelis Karlson, a young lizard man in an orange suit to match his orange scales, ran up to her, tipping his orange top hat.

"Good afternoon, Chara! I've been sent to fetch you!"
"To where, MK?"

"To the palace!"

Charlotte cocked an eyebrow at him. "Why?"

MK rolled his eyes. "You know the doctor. She'd forget her own head if it wasn't screwed on." He stood up straight, and counted off on his curved fingers. "She forgot to get you a ticket for the Dalion's maiden voyage. She forgot that you weren't actually with her on several occasions during the flight." He paused for a moment. "She literally asked you to explain something to His Majesty a total of four times." He stood up straight again, holding up his six fingers and two thumbs, wiggling them at her. "Look, I've run out of fingers and I've only just started!"

He spun so that he stood next to her and hooked his arm in hers. "Come along! Prince Asriel is especially interested in meeting you!"

Charlotte double stepped to keep up with MK's long legs. "Why?"

He gave her an apologetic look. "It seems the good doctor mentioned that you were from the 'surface.'"

Charlotte groaned. She'd learned very quickly not to talk about her past. The one that was up beyond what appeared to be the sky. No one believed her. No one down here seemed to know that they lived inside a much larger planet.

She'd been living a relatively normal life on the surface of the world, in a house in the town of Mt. Shasta. Her parents, both doctors, and both too busy with their careers to notice that her grades had been slipping, often left her alone and without the semblance of supervision. Because of that, a bully and her little gang of friends had found an easy mark in Charlotte. She'd dreaded school, but had dreaded her parents' potential wrath if she attempted to pull their attention away from work. A school field trip to Lake Shasta Caverns ended suddenly when the bully shoved her over the edge of a railing and sent her falling into darkness.

She remembered hitting water and then nothing until she woke up in a small hut. She'd washed up from the river near a little village, and the villagers, not knowing what to do with the dumpy looking girl in a stained, striped sweater, speaking an unintelligible language, had called for help in the form of Dr. Undyne Cordata and Papyrus Featherstone. She'd been fearful of both of them, especially the giant skeleton man's suspicious gaze. But he spoke English, even while denying that the surface world she'd come from existed.

Charlotte slipped his arm and held out both arms to keep MK back. "No. No. No. I'm tired of people treating me like a sideshow curiosity. Tell them I am very ill and cannot attend."

"A LIE?! From my own sweet sister no less?!"

Chara turned to find Sans Featherstone, a tall, and somehow rotund, skeletal man in the purple, ceremonial dress of the royal guard which included shining armor, gaping at her in shock.

"Come on, Sans! Undyne always does this to me! She just blabs and I look like an idiot at best, or a liar at worst. I do not need to be embarrassed today, least of all in front of my boss' boss!"

Before she had a chance to attempt escape, Sans put an arm around her waist and steered her to a waiting, horse drawn carriage with the royal insignia emblazoned across the door. Gulping a deep breath, she carefully climbed inside. She sighed with relief when she saw the interior was empty. Sans climbed in behind her with MK and they were whisked off to the palace.
Getting to the palace wasn't that hard. It took up a quarter of the city. Originally, it was the lodge that
the Dreemurr chieftains of old kept for their clan. As the clan grew, so did the lodge. Stone replaced
wood, intricate carving replaced bare rock, and on it went until a massive palace that could house
half of the people in the city around it comfortably appeared. So getting to the palace was easy.
Getting to the front was a bit more challenging. The entire thing was so big it abutted a cliff against
an ocean on one side and on the other it looked down a rock face to the city below. While those who
lived in the palace knew of multiple ways in and out of the structure, the public used the Tower Gate,
a high tower reaching to the clouds that guarded a large bridge to the palace doors.

The carriage went through the Tower Gate without stopping and over the bridge into the palace
courtyard, coming to a stop at the massive, stone doors that made up the entrance. Sans jumped
down from the carriage first and offered Charlotte his hand. She took it as she stepped down.

"I need to make sure I look proper."

"HAVE NO FEAR, CHARA! We will be pausing for instruction from Lady Sarah Portia Austin.
You'll be able to make any adjustments then."

Sans escorted her through those heavy doors and into a grand stairwell. Leading her to the right, they
entered a sunlight filled, office suite of pale carpeting, dark blue painted walls, and white painted
furniture. Lady Sarah, a short and plump, older woman wearing a lovely blue frock, waited for them
in front of her white desk with a smile.

"Oh you are a pretty one! I have been assured you know your courtesies."

"Yes, My Lady."

Lady Sarah looked over Charlotte's green dress, smoothing it out so the drawn up folds on the skirt
laid properly. "I do love this new style. Very formal while being less voluminous." She looked up at
Charlotte. "You were to have already met with Them correct?"

Charlotte sighed. "I was supposed to be on the maiden voyage of the Dalion, but… a situation came
up that required me to stay behind."

"Oh you do know your courtesies. That was the most polite way I've ever heard someone say they
were a victim of Dr. Undyne's forgetfulness." She positioned Charlotte in front of a mirror, and
stepped up on a stool to gently comb loose hair back into the bun on Charlotte's head. "When you
meet the King or Queen, refer to them as Your Majesty first and then as Sire or Madam afterwards.
For the Princes, Your Highness to start and Sir afterward, though Asriel tends to be very informal
and may ask you to call him by name, which is perfectly fine."

Charlotte checked herself in the mirror to be sure her corset was straight and the laces tight, admiring
the hourglass silhouette for a moment. She'd baulked at the garment at first, but now felt naked
without one. It was the same with her morning exercise. Upon meeting Sans, he had not been happy
that she resembled a potato more than a girl. And the potato who'd once drowned her depression in
waves of chocolate, was dragged from bed early each morning for exercise before her lessons with
Papyrus, and then later, her apprenticeship with Undyne. Napstablook and Mettaton had both been
completely aghast at her lack of manners and proper dress. And no amount of arguing would save
her from hours spent learning etiquette.

A year later, she looked as she did now: a proper, educated, young lady. The dumpy, bullied, little
girl had disappeared. Even her name, Jane Smith, had been lost. Papyrus and Sans had taken her as
their younger sister, giving her a new name to go with her new life. It was the one change she'd
minded the least. She liked being Charlotte, or more commonly, Chara. It felt more dignified and
Having Lady Sarah's final approval, Sans escorted Charlotte back to the grand stairwell and up the stairs to answer her sovereign's summons. At the top of the white, marble stairs, was a painting of the current royal family: Asgore, Toriel, Asriel, Frederick, and Asgore's Queen Mother, Amarna, her hand resting on her adopted grandson's shoulder. The Dreemurrs were whitened furred, yellow eyed, goat pooka with the exception of Frederick, who was a tall, brown haired, green eyed human. King Asgore was a large and kindly goat man with a thick yellow beard and mane. He was the brains behind the throne, the political know how. Queen Toriel was a goat woman almost as tall as her husband and the martial might of the throne. Her stern appearance made for a terrifying woman. Prince Asriel was as tall as his father but thin and ultra fit in the human sense. His smile was easy and unguarded, his long, white hair always loose around his shoulders. The queen mother, Amarna, was a wrinkly old goat pooka with a happy smile.

Turning to the right, Sans held the door for her and she stepped onto the outdoor colonnade that faced the ocean. A few short steps had them at the room. Sans gave her a big smile before knocking on the door.

The Queen's voice boomed through the stone door. "Enter."

Sans opened the door revealing a room that was the very essence of coastal living with a dark blue carpet, white furniture, and sea shells decorating the room. The King, in formal purple robes, and Queen, in a purple gown with white details, sat together at a small table having tea and scones. Undyne was nowhere to be seen.

"MAY I PRESENT TO YOUR MAJESTIES! CHARLOTTE AMELIA FEATHERSTONE! An engineer in the employ of Dr. Undyne, and my dear younger sister."

Charlotte stepped inside the door and curtsied. "Your Majesties. I am honored to be in your presence."

Asgore motioned for her to join them at the table, standing to pull out a chair for her. "Welcome! Please join us for tea."

"Thank you, Sire." Charlotte carefully sat in the offered chair as the king slid it under her.

Toriel poured a cup of tea and set it in front of Charlotte without looking at her. "We are very sorry that you were not available during the maiden voyage of the Dalion. Your presence was deeply missed."

"I apologize for my absence. I'm sure that-"

"Why?"

Chara stiffened at the Queen's bark. The goat woman was looking at her now, her yellow eyes less than happy.

"I beg your pardon, Madam. A situation came up that required me to stay behind-"

"No. I want to know why are you apologizing. I was under the impression that your absence was the result of Dr. Undyne's forgetfulness. Are you saying it is your fault that you were not on the ship?"

Chara pursed her lips for a moment. Placing the blame at Undyne's feet would make her and the doctor look bad. Taking the blame might mean a swift discharge from her employment and it would be impossible to find another job as an engineer. Anyone willing to take a female engineer would not
take one discharged from royal employ. There was no easy way out of this one.

She took a deep breath. "I should have reminded Dr. Undyne more often in advance of the ticket sales to be sure of purchase amounts." She looked at her hands resting in her lap and waited.

The silence dragged on and when Charlotte snuck a glance, she found Asgore glaring at Toriel viciously while the the queen appeared utterly taken aback.

The door to the room burst open, banging against the wall. Prince Asriel, tall, long haired, and overly attractive in his white button down, black slacks and purple vest, strode in with a happy smile and excited eyes. "You're finally here!" He reached down, taking Charlotte's hand in his, and lifting her up and out of the chair with a spin. Catching her against chest, he laid a quick kiss to the knuckles of her hand. "Howdy, I'm Asriel, and you just have to meet my brother."

He looked over at his parents. "I can't believe you! Just hogging her all to yourselves!" He looked back down at Charlotte. "Come along!" He carried her out the door, spinning one finger in the air to magic the door, and slam it shut behind him. Setting her down in the colonnade, he let out a sigh. "Just in time, huh?"

Asriel smiled again. "I'm sorry about that. My mother was not happy in the least that Dr. Undyne forgot her chief engineer, especially since the doctor is terrible about explaining anything that doesn't have to do with automatons." He hooked his arm in hers. "This way please. I want you to meet my brother."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but why?"

He stopped. "You're from the surface, aren't you?"

Charlotte groaned. "Listen. I don't know what Dr. Undyne told you but-"

"Frederick is from Sacramento, California."

She stared up at him, slack jawed for a moment. "That's impossible…"

Asriel shook his head, causing his long hair to swing around him. "He fell on Mt. Shasta. Same as you. The difference between your fall and his, is that my family was on vacation at the time. I saw him floating down the river and pulled him out." He gave her a sidelong glance. "I do hope though, that the circumstances of your fall were less… intentional for you."

He whisked her down the long colonnade, taking a left through a door that led to another long hall. They stopped at the second door on the right, which was already open. The room inside had the same coastal flair as the one she'd first seen, but instead of a sitting room, this appeared to be the kind of kitchen you might find in one of the nicer condos in New Home. Sky blue appliances rested between white cabinets and a granite topped island served as both a food prep area and a bar.

Prince Frederick Laurentius Dreemurr stood behind the island, knife in hand, an apron protecting his white button down and pinstriped brown pants, a pile of chopped vegetables on the cutting board he stood over. He was watching Nacarat, a fae of flame in a faceless, horned mask, with some amusement, the hand holding the knife propping up his chin. Nacarat was a positively tiny fae, standing only four inches tall. She flitted this way and that on the countertop in the middle of a dance, her red, bat-like wings drooping over her shoulders like a cape. Twirling around, she bounced on her toes, and her wings lifted to reveal a pretty, little, red dress, its skirt twirling around her ankles. She lifted one leg high, spinning on one foot expertly.

As the fae's head came around, she saw Charlotte and Asriel in the doorway and gasped. Her
rotation faltered and she fell backward. Frederick reached over with his free hand and caught Nacarat before she hit the hard granite counter. Glancing up at Charlotte and his brother, he stood properly.

Asriel gestured to Charlotte with something of a false bow. "Here she is! The girl from the surface!"

Frederick raised an eyebrow even as he helped Nacarat gain her feet. "Hardly. She looks like she was born and raised in New Home if not some other city in Agartha."
Charlotte stepped toward him, leaning forward in both eagerness and trepidation. "Are you really from Sacramento?"

He blinked, mouth hanging open slightly. "You speak English."

She nodded quickly. "I'm from the town of Mt. Shasta. It's that little tourist trap at the base of the mountain. How long ago did you fall?"

He set down the knife in his hand and came around the bar. "Ten years ago. You?"

"Five."

Nacarat flew up to Asriel, sitting on his shoulder. She lifted the horned, faceless red mask she wore, revealing a childish, elfin countenance, and pointed ears. "What are they saying, Azzy?"

Asriel shrugged, but carefully so as not to dislodge the fae. "Beats me. It's the language of wherever they come from."

Frederick grew silent. He turned away to lift the cutting board, dumping the vegetables in a pot on the sky blue stove, and switching back to the language of Agartha. "We're having beef and vegetable stew for dinner. You're welcome to sup with us."

The goat pooka elbowed Charlotte. "Have a seat. My brother's a marginally decent cook."

Frederick gave his brother a sharp glare as Charlotte sat down at the bar.

"Thank you, Your Highness."


"Frisk it is then."

"Fritz," Frederick growled only to glare at Asriel's laugh.

The goat pooka would not be denied. "Oh, I like that one much better. Frisk for sure!"

Frederick snorted, putting his nose up. "Fine. I suppose Chara can call me whatever she likes."

"Chara?!" Charlotte blinked, and looked from him to Asriel, who was failing to hide his smile, and back. "How dare you be so informal! We've only just met!"

Frederick turned, leaning on the bar to prop his head up on his hand, a lazy smile on his lips. "You're an American. Formality is for your elders, not for your peers, Chara."

Chara scowled at him. "You better be a good cook, Frisk Dreemurr."

"The best."

Nacarat lifted Asriel's long ear to whisper in it. "He likes her!"
"I think so too." He held up a hand and she jumped onto it. "Be a dear and let Dad know where we are?"

"Certainly!" Nacarat jumped from his hand, wings spreading out and flew from the room. Spinning in the air happily, she sped out to the colonnade and down to the king's suite. Knocking with all her might only let out the softest of raps and she sighed heavily, shoulders drooping. The door opened and King Asgore smiled to see the creature.

He lifted one long ear, wagging it at her. "I heard you, Little One. How may I be of assistance?"

Nacarat curtsied, a neat trick seeing as she did it while flying. "Prince Asriel asked me to let you know that he has taken Miss Featherstone to Prince Frederick's apartment. They are going to have dinner together."

"Excellent!" He held out his hand and Nacarat alighted on his palm.

"I don't see how," Toriel growled. She took a long sip of her wine before setting it down and crossing her arms over her chest, fuming from her seat on the couch next to Papyrus, a tall, thin, skeletal homunculus. For his part, Papyrus looked relaxed, if a little bored, his boney thumbs hooked in the pockets of his orange vest.

Asgore turned with his hands on his hips. "You had that poor girl scared half to death! She was being perfectly courteous, and you couldn't muster even a little civility." The goat king inhaled noisily. "It is long past time that Frederick was married. I held off on it this long only because he was blatantly uninterested in any woman put before him. Now we have a young lady who may very well catch his eye."

"We don't know that," she grumbled sullenly.

"He's feeding her," Nacarat pointed out. "He doesn't let just anyone eat his cooking."

Toriel frowned in annoyance at the fairy. "Stop helping." She turned her head to put both of her glowing yellow eyes on Papyrus. "Are you sure she's from the surface?"

"Charlotte speaks English, which is a language you only get from surface dwellers. No one in Agartha speaks it, that's for sure."

Her frown remained, but she looked away toward a painting on the wall of Asriel and Frederick standing together. "The only reason I believe that there is a surface world is that I've met enough people with the same stories about it."

"You're a poor liar, Tori." Papyrus picked up his beer stein and swished the amber liquid inside around a little. "You've not let your son near any of them."

The Queen rounded on him. "What are you implying?"

Papyrus' brow bone raised. "That you fear losing him to the ghost of a memory of his former life." The skeleton shook his skull. "Relax, Toriel. He's not going to disappear on you. He loves this life and has made quite a name for himself as a historian and folklorist of Agartha. He'll not leave this place any faster than my sister would run for an exit and she hasn't been here as long."

The queen wrung her hands nervously. "Still… this meeting might stir them both to leave. I want a wife for my son, but does she have to be someone who would remind him of the past?"

Papyrus took a swig of her beer. "Frederick was attempting to escape that past in a permanent way
when you found him. And if I remember correctly, he was the one who refused to give his birth name and forced you to give him a new one."

Asgore nodded. "That he did." He regarded his skeletal friend thoughtfully. "You took Charlotte's name from her, did you not?"

Papyrus nodded. "She deserved better than the drivel her parents laid on her." He snorted, annoyed suddenly before shaking it off. He sighed. "Chara talks about the surface, but not her own life there. She avoids the subject vehemently. The half drowned girl we found in Faduwan Village is gone. Only my sister remains." He finished the beer in his stein and set it on the side table next to him.

Toriel took a deep breath and let it out loudly. "Fine then! We'll just make the arrangements and call it done!"

Papyrus shook his skull. "I wouldn't if I were you. They're from a part of the surface that values personal liberty and a loving partnership starts before the wedding rather than developing after it. Let them get acquainted, let them have time to talk, share, and have fun together."

He tapped one boney finger against the side of his skull. "Frederick's been wanting to visit the mountain villages in Syll. And Chara hides it well, but she was very disappointed to have not been on the Dalion's maiden voyage. The Dalion is scheduled to fly to Amron next, two months from now. That's just south of Syll. I'll arrange for the two of them to be on the Dalion for that flight. Asriel will be sure to fill that time with lots of 'chance' meetings."

Toriel, still holding out, snorted. "I doubt the girl can afford a ticket that would put her anywhere near the upper level suites."

"Yes. Yes. We all know how poorly the Crown pays its employees," Papyrus drolled. "Especially the ones who create mechanical marvels for Them. But that's a discussion for another time." He eyed Toriel. "The fact of the matter is this: my sister and your son make for a good match. You do not need the eventual scandal Frederick's long refusal to marry has brewed, and my sister deserves a husband who will not think her insane should she speak with him about her past."

Papyrus stood, smoothing out his long pants, and turned to his friend. "With your permission, my King, I will see to the arrangements today."

Asgore nodded. "Of course."

Papyrus bowed low at the waist and took a step forward, disappearing into thin air as he did so.

Toriel stood, but the anger in her washed away. "I don't want my child to disappear, Gorey. I don't think I could handle it. Not again."

Asgore sighed. "Frederick already knows of at least two entrances into Agartha that are both safe passages to the surface and he has avoided studying both of them for love of you." He set Nacarat down on the table and put his arms around his wife. "You've wished on many occasions that he would be home more often than he was away. A wife and children will give him cause to be home more often than not." He smiled. "And it would be nice to have a few grandchildren underfoot."

Toriel pursed her lips. "My boy is a contrary one. If he gets a whiff of a plot, this will be for naught."

Asgore shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not." He leaned down to rub his nose against hers.

Toriel looked up at him, troubled. "Do we really pay our employees so poorly?"
Asgore hummed thoughtfully. "Not in general, but there are a few who deserve far more than We pay." He looked to Nacarat. "Let Asriel know that such a correction needs to be made."
Chapter 2

Charlotte stepped into her suite on the *Dalion* and stared for a moment. She’d known the upper level suites were opulent. She’d looked them over while they’d been under construction. She still wasn’t prepared for what awaited her despite having always sailed in luxury cabins at Papyrus’ insistence since he’d adopted her. Over stuffed, butter yellow chairs and couch arranged around a dark stained, wood coffee table, took up the living room. Two, stained glass lamps rested on either side of the couch. A large, crystal vase filled to bursting with fresh, colorful roses, rested on the coffee table, and filled the room with a light, floral scent. Bright sunlight came in from two floor to ceiling, picture windows on the left, each draped with long silk curtains in a sheer cream.

Beyond the couch lay a doorway set in a pale wood wall into the dining room. Six, tall backed, gold fabric wrapped chairs lined a double clothed table in a room filled with landscape paintings. A spiral staircase went up to the bedroom. Charlotte climbed the stairs to find an overly large bed with blue, silk sheets, and blue velvet blankets under a crystal chandelier. The bathroom on the right had a white tub large enough to swim in, next to a window so she could enjoy the view while soaking.

Charlotte found her luggage not only already in the room, but her clothing carefully hung and things arranged. After checking to be sure all of her things were there, she found a handwritten note on the desk in the bedroom and a silver box with a shiny green ribbon on top, next to the itinerary. She carefully opened the letter.

*Dearest Charlotte,*

*We sincerely missed our engineer on the Dalion's maiden voyage. I hope this goes some of the way toward making up for not being able to join us on that historic flight.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Captain Evan T. Stormbrand*

Charlotte giggled a little. She sincerely liked the old airdog who'd come on to captain the ship. He'd been most pleased to meet her and had much to say, all of it good, about the design of the engine. Especially when you considered the insane, box shaped design of the ship. She pulled the ribbon and opened a box filled with myriad yarns of wonderful hues and several different crochet hooks. She blushed a little, smiling happily.

"Oh, Captain!"

She lifted the itinerary and blinked at it. While breakfast, lunch, tea time, and dinner were set, the amount of activities in which to participate were staggering. She looked down at the box of yarn. Why go out when you could stay in? The only thing she had scheduled for today was dinner with other, randomly chosen passengers. She was sure that she'd be asked at some point to give a tour, or at least an explanation of, the engine to some curious, well to do passenger or other. But until then... She scooped up the box and bounded down the stairs to cozy up on the couch for a bit of crocheting.

The evening sun filtering through the windows in the master bedroom found her checking the fit of her blue and gold dinner gown in a mirror. A long, dark, ocean blue, silk bodice lay over a much lighter, seafoam green skirt. Gold lace trimmed the edges of the neckline, short sleeves, and hem of the skirt. Satisfied that she looked the part, she carefully stowed her room key and dining card in a
hidden pocket of the skirt.

Charlotte walked down the hall from her room and entered the grand stairwell that ushered all of the luxury suite passengers from the quiet privacy above into the promenade, the 'lived' space of the ship. The promenade took up three levels of the ship's interior with the glass covered top revealing the sky above. Restaurants, shopping, and various diversions such as theaters and salons lined either side of the promenade while fountains, gardens, walking paths, and a few play areas for children made up the center.

The Peacock, the restaurant Charlotte was scheduled to dine in, was a short walk down the promenade. Before she could fish out her dining card, the hostess, a very tall and very thin woman in a long, almost pencil thin, yellow dress, took her hand. The woman's skin, hair, mouth, clothing, everything about the hostess appeared to be too tightly held together.

"I know who you are, Miss Featherstone. Please follow me."

The hostess guided her into a fabulous, two story, dining room with peacock blue carpeting, and cream colored columns holding up a mezzanine, from which a string quartet played. Paintings of peacocks strutting about in gardens decorated the mezzanine's hanging facade. Vases of greenery were livened up with peacock feathers. She was led to a white clothed table set for four and appeared to be the first to arrive.

The hostess held the chair for her. "This evening's dinner is sixteen courses consisting of four soups, two salads, three breads, four meats, and three vegetables served with wine. Fruit and dessert with tea and coffee will follow."

Charlotte sat down. "Thank you. That sounds lovely."

A smile broke on the hostess’ face and Charlotte was momentarily afraid that it might shatter the woman into hundreds of pieces. "Anything for the woman who got this ship in the air."

Charlotte blushed a little and smiled as the hostess left. As a server stepped forward to fill her flute with a golden champagne, Sir Hector Gosling, a rotund man who'd let his position add to his waistline, and his wife Lady Helena, a matron in a pink frock with too many white ruffles, were seated opposite her.

The hostess introduced. "Sir and Lady Gosling, you have the distinct pleasure of dining with the engineer who designed the Dalion's unique engine, Miss Charlotte Amelia Featherstone."

Charlotte shook hands with both of them. "How do you do?"

Lady Helena smiled warmly. "Very well, thank you. Oh this is a treat! Is there any chance we might persuade you to give us a tour?"

Charlotte smiled. "With Captain Stormbrand's permission, I would be happy to give you one."

The chair next to her moved as the hostess brought the last guest to the table. "Your table, Your Highness."

Frederick sat next to her wearing a formal black suit with a vest in the royal family's violet, the family crest embroidered on the dark jacket. Nacarat sat on his shoulder, the faceless red mask in place and her orange wings drooping over her shoulders to cover her.

Charlotte smiled brightly. "Frisk!"
Sir Hector huffed angrily. "Young lady! That is not how you greet a member of the royal family!"

Frederick gave him a withering glare. "Miss Featherstone is my friend and she may be as informal with me as she chooses." He gave Charlotte a smile. "Hello, Chara. Finally getting your ride on the Dalion?"

Charlotte politely ignored Lady Helena smacking her husband's arm with a cloth napkin. "Yes! I doubt you're on board for pleasure. Where are you heading?"

"The mountain villages in Syll. I've been wanting to collect their oral history for a while and the opportunity has finally arrived." He looked over at Sir Hector as he leaned back for the first soup course to be put in front of him. "Are you going to introduce you lovely companion or not, Sir Hector?"

Sir Hector sputtered, but quickly recovered. "I beg your pardon, Sir. This is my wife Helena. Helena, His Royal Highness, Prince Frederick."

Frederick stood to take Lady Helena's hand and kissed the knuckles of her fingers. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"And you, Your Highness." She smiled a little too knowingly, looking between Charlotte and the Prince. "So how are you acquainted? As Dr. Undyne is the royal scientist, I suppose through the Royal Laboratory?"

Frederick shook his head. "Chara was having tea with my parents when my brother kidnapped her and dumped her in my kitchen."

"He's a surprisingly good cook." Charlotte took a sip of her champagne to hide her smile.

Lady Helena's gaze went directly to the Prince. "I've heard that was the case. So what does one have to do to be a guest at your table?"

Frederick bestowed a dangerous smile on Charlotte before turning to Lady Helena. "Be kidnapped by my brother."

The dinner courses came out in rapid succession and Nacarat alighted to the table, revealing a fifth, very tiny, place setting for her at the table. The conversation was suddenly dominated by Lady Helena's questions for the fae of flame. As dessert came out, Sir Hector and Lady Helena excused themselves, leaving Charlotte alone with the Prince.

Frederick stood, and after lifting a sleepy Nacarat and placing her in his vest pocket, offered Charlotte his hand. "Shall I walk you back to your cabin?"

Charlotte wiped her mouth. "Certainly. Thank you." She placed her hand in his and stood.

He hooked her arm over his, leading her to the door. "Where are you staying?"

"I'm in the luxury suites. Number 15."

He paused for a moment, before shaking his head, and continuing for the door. And that pause was enough for Charlotte to notice that half the restaurant was watching them. Her cheeks flushed and she stepped a little closer. Frederick looked down, gave her a smirk, and walked her out to the promenade. There, less people seemed to notice them, and Charlotte relaxed with a sigh. Guiding her through the gardens and up the stairs, they left the noise of the promenade and entered the cool quiet of the luxury suites. No one stood in the hallway as they stopped at Charlotte's door.
Frederick patted her hand. "Wait a moment." He walked to the door of the next suite, fished out his key, and entered the room. He came back out with a bottle of wine and two crystal goblets.

Charlotte leaned back against her door, arms folded over her chest. "Are you trying to get me drunk?"

Frisk snorted and rolled his eyes. "Oh please. I don't know if I like you enough for that." He gestured to her door with one finger. "Don't you think this is a little too coincidental?"

Charlotte frowned and stood up. "That your cabin is next to mine? Not really. There's only twenty luxury suites."

"Who made your reservations?"

Chara shrugged and opened her door. "Papyrus."

Frederick frowned before shaking it off. "Go on. I want to see if your cabin is as nice as mine."

Charlotte rolled her eyes, entering the suite with Frederick shutting the door behind them. He glanced at the half crocheted project sitting on the coffee table as he headed for the dining room. Setting the goblets on the dining table, he proceeded to pop cork on the wine. Charlotte sat down across from him, accepting the wine he'd poured for her. She inhaled deeply, taking in the full aroma of the red liquid before taking a sip.

"Mmm… very fruity and sweet."

A smile tugged the corner of Frisk's mouth as he took a sip from his glass. "My mother says that my liking the sweeter wines is just a sign that I'm still too much of a child."

Chara smiled. "I don't know many children who've published multiple books on the history and folklore of Agartha."

He stared at her hard for a moment. "Knowing that, why haven't you asked me if there's a way to the surface?"

Chara's eyes flicked to him for a moment before returning to the glass in her hand. "I don't feel a need to go back."

Frisk turned the chair, and toed off his shoes before putting his feet up on the chair next to him, relaxing. "There's nothing you miss?"

She snorted. "Well of course! I really miss fried chicken and french fries." She sat up to point at him. "And I don't mean crappy fast food fries. I mean the hand cut kind you get at food trucks and fair stalls with the skin still on, fried in peanut oil, seasoned with the cook's own secret spices, and drenched in ketchup."

He chuckled into his glass.

Chara held out her's for a refill and Frisk obliged. "What about you?"

"I miss heavy metal music. That's not to say some of the bands here aren't close. They just aren't close enough." He looked up at her, holding her gaze with his own, the humor gone. "Did you jump?"

Chara frowned, but did not look away. "No. I was pushed."
"How old were you?"

"Fifteen."

Frisk cursed. "Jesus."

Chara looked into her glass. "Yeah." She took a long drink before looking him in the eyes. "You did."

Frisk nodded. "I jumped."

Chara set her goblet on the table. "Why aren't we dead? Even if we survived hitting the water after such a long fall, we should have drowned. How are we still alive? Or are we actually dead and in some strange afterlife?"

The ghost of a smile touched his lips. "We aren't dead. That water is the reason we're still alive. It's Aqua Vitae. The Water of Life. It heals bodily injury and when you let fill your lungs, you can breathe it." He poured himself another glass. "You aren't going to ask me why I jumped?"

Chara mulled over her answer for a bit before giving it. "I was pushed, but I wasn't that far away from jumping anyway."

Frisk lifted his glass. "To Agartha, and a life worth living."

Chara leaned over and gently tapped her glass to his. "To Agartha."

They both drained their glasses.

Chara giggled. "Here we are, murdering a bottle of wine. If we were top side right now, I'd be arrested for underage drinking and you'd be locked up for providing the alcohol."

Frisk chuckled and swished the bottle. "Want the last bit?"

She shook her head and he poured the last of the wine into his glass.

"Do you mind if I join you for breakfast tomorrow?" He finished the last of the wine.

Chara frowned. "What time?"

"Is nine too early?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No. I'm just at my exercise first thing in the morning."

Frisk burst out laughing.

"What?"

"I thought Sans was joking when he talked about training you!"

Chara sighed. "He doesn't need to drag me from bed in the morning anymore, but he was insistent that I be in shape and able to defend myself. I was something of a potato when I got here." She smiled. "I'll see you at nine then."

Frisk pulled out his pocket watch. "See you at nine is right. It's midnight." He reached over to collect her glass. "Will you be all right getting to bed?"
She nodded. "I'm tipsy. Not plastered." She stood and walked him to the door. "See you tomorrow."

Eight the next morning found Charlotte soaking in the too large bathtub after a long run. She'd been the only person on the track, which wasn't all that unusual. Most Agarthans who did not engage in a day's manual labor for work took their exercise in the afternoon and that usually consisted of a brisk walk. But having grown up on the surface, the idea of running for your exercise wasn't all that strange. Neither was weight lifting, which many Agarthan women avoided for fear of appearing masculine.

She swam up to the edge of the bath, resting her arms on the ledge, and gazing out the window at the blue sky as it lightened and the strange, half sun that rested in the middle of the planet appeared. Smiling a little, she recalled the first time she'd gone to her now favorite gym in New Home. Everyone had been thoroughly scandalized when she'd reached for the weights. Now, no one thought anything of it and regulars were quick to defend her honor should a newcomer protest.

A knock at the bathroom door was followed by a young, female voice. "Miss Featherstone? My instructions list a breakfast for two this morning. Is that correct?"

"Prince Frederick is joining me for breakfast at nine. Do you need me to sign off for that?"

"Not at all. I'm only confirming." There was a pause and then a conspiratorial excitement. "Is he really?"

Charlotte chuckled softly. "He and I are well acquainted. It's a social call, not a romantic one."

"Oh." The girl sounded disappointed. The sound of a deep breath carried from the other side of the door. "Would you like assistance with your dress or your hair this morning?"

Charlotte thought about that, watching the ghost of her reflection in the glass in front of her. Her hair was up, but it would need to be let down, brushed, braided, and put up again. "With my hair please."

"As you wish. I will be setting the table in the dining room. Please call when you need me."

"Thank you."

Charlotte rolled her shoulders a little and swam for the pile of warm, white towels, neatly rolled and placed on a corner. Stepping carefully, she climbed out of the bath and dried herself thoroughly before slipping into her white chemise. Opening the door slightly and peering out so as to be sure she was alone, Charlotte stepped out of the bathroom. Hooking her stays around her waist, she pulled the laces sharply and turned to check that the lines of the metal boning in the back were straight. Pausing for a moment to let the corset warm up to tighten more easily, she picked out a white button down blouse with a light blue skirt, matching coat, and a wide embroidered belt. Pulling her stays tight, she tied them securely before braiding down the hanging laces and sliding the braid under the woven laces of the corset back.

She finished dressing and called for the serving girl. "I'm ready for help with my hair."

"I'll be up in a moment, Miss Featherstone."

Charlotte unpinched her hair, letting a long braid flop down her back. Carefully unbraiding it revealed hair that reached long past her waist. Reaching for her brush, she slowly and gently pulled the knots from her hair. It was strange to go from shampooing her hair every day to once a week. It was especially strange to see how long her hair was in the mirror. One of the few things her mother had ever cared about was that her daughter's hair be short. Her mother had claimed it made her look 'cuter,' but Charlotte knew that it was really about her mother not needing to do anything with it. No
braids. No pony tails. Nothing approaching more than two brush strokes in the morning.

The serving girl, a chimera who appeared somewhere between human and leopard, wearing a modest black dress with white trim, ascended the stairs.

"How should you like your hair put up, Miss Featherstone?"

"Two braids, pinned in a figure eight, please."

The girl took the brush and proceeded to split Charlotte's hair down the middle. "Would you like the two braids to start in the hair toward the front?"

"If you are comfortable doing so, yes, please."

The girl proceeded to make two french braids on either side of her head, curving them around gently into two long braids and twisted them up.

Charlotte smiled at her reflection. "Perfect! What is your name?"

"Feleena."

Charlotte looked up at her. "Thank you, Feleena. It's marvelous work."

"Well, you should look good when sharing a meal with a Prince." Feleena put her hands behind her back and toed the floor a bit. "Even if it is only a social call." She clapped her hands together softly. "Are you sure it's only social?"

Charlotte chuckled a little. "I do not have the appropriate pedigree for that." She stood. "Now, what is on the menu for breakfast?"

Feleena gestured to the stairs. "Eggs, bacon, fresh bread still warm from the oven, and a selection of fruit preserves. After you, Miss Featherstone."

"That sounds delicious." Charlotte headed for the stairs and down into the living room.

Frederick was already in the dining room, pouring himself a cup of tea. He'd outfitted himself in a plain, dark brown, button down, sleeves rolled up, under an unadorned, cream colored vest, and long brown trousers. Nacarat sat on the table, already munching on honeyed bread.

Feleena jumped forward. "Oh please, Your Highness! Allow me!"

He waved her off. "I can pour myself a cup of tea."

Charlotte crossed her arms over her chest, attempting to glare at him and failing. "Oh, why don't you just let yourself in?"

Frederick gave a devious smile. "I will. Thank you." He stood and came around the table to pull out her chair for her. "My lady."

She sat down. "Stop that. You'll give people the wrong impression."

He snorted. "I don't care what people think of me."

"Well I care what people think of me."

He shrugged. "Very well." He leaned on the back of her chair for a moment, regarding Feleena. "I
would prefer that my breakfast with Miss Featherstone be just the two of us and that you not mention that was the case to anyone."

The chimera looked between them nervously. "But... to be unchaperoned..."

He gestured to the Flame fairy. "Have no fear. Nacarat is here."

Nacarat looked up from her honeyed bread. "I promise to set him on fire if he tries anything."

Frederick snorted. "Well, there's familial loyalty for you." He waved to Feleena. "We will be on our best behavior."

Feleena curtsied and left.

Frisk sat down and poured Chara a cup of tea. "Do you always travel first class?"
Chara nodded and lifted the silver dome off her dish to reveal eggs, over easy, and crispy, maple smoked, bacon. "My brothers insist that I do. They demand the best of everything for me."

Frisk smirked, spearing an egg. "How are you not spoiled?"

Chara twirled the fork against her plate for a moment, watching as it spun. "I was fifteen when I washed up in Faduwan. When Papyrus and Dr. Undyne got there, I was less than nine months away from my sixteenth birthday. And you know how it is down here. Sixteen is an adult for humans in Agartha. I had less than a year to become a proper, educated lady, and start my apprenticeship." She cut an egg in half with the edge of the fork, the yolk spilling across the plate. "I think it's more of a reward for accomplishing the impossible."

Frisk shook his head. "I don't think so."

Chara raised an eyebrow. "Really? What's your hypothesis?"

Frisk sipped his tea. "I've met Papyrus. He doesn't care about things like that."

"For himself? No. But he's adamant that I have the best of everything I need."

He looked at her for a moment before staring at his plate. "What about a husband?"

Chara shrugged. "He's never said anything about it. Well, nothing beyond assuring me that he'd find me a proper match." She stared at her plate, poking at the bacon. "Is it just me, or do you feel relieved to not need to make that decision yourself?"

Frisk glanced up at her. "What do you mean?"

"Marriage. I was never the kind of girl who dreamed of my own wedding. Around the time I fell, I was pretty sure I wasn't ever going to make it to being old enough anyway. Now, it's a relief. I don't have to go through the process of meeting someone, and hoping that they like me enough to go to the trouble of finding me an engagement ring. It's just arranged. Like having a business partner."

Frisk pushed the eggs on his plate around. "What about love?"

"I'm less concerned about that than I am being married to someone I can never talk to about my past." Chara sighed. "That I will always need to smile and nod, and say I've always been a Featherstone."

"You don't think that Papyrus would find you a husband who came from the surface?"
Chara frowned. "That'd be a hard find. The only person I know who fits the bill is you and that's not happening." She pointed at him with her fork. "You are royalty and I have no pedigree. That match wouldn't happen unless the sky was falling first."

Frisk shrugged.

"Don't shrug! You're lucky you've made it this far without being forced to the altar."

Frisk sipped his tea. "I suppose I am. Or maybe my parents are happy to wait."

"For what?"

"A match who won't think I'm crazy when I talk about the surface."

Chara snorted. "Unless there's a passage underneath Buckingham Palace, you're out of luck."

A knock sounded at the door and Charlotte left the table to answer it. When she opened the door, Captain Stormbrand, a gray wolf man, in all his royal blue uniformed and white bearded glory, stood outside.

He took his royal blue, captain's hat off, revealing short, pointed ears, and held it over his heart. "Good morning, Chara. Would I be able to count on you to give a tour of engineering this morning?"

Chara smiled brightly. "Absolutely. What time should I be in engineering?"

"At the noon hour, followed by lunch with myself and the engineering crew."

"I'll be there at noon and would be happy to join you for lunch."

The Captain nodded once, giving her a soft smile, before putting his hat back on his head and walking down the hall. Charlotte shut the door and headed back into the dining room.

Frisk raised an eyebrow. "A tour, huh? I'll join you. It'll be nice to have one where Dr. Undyne isn't asking you to explain everything when you aren't physically present to do so." He wiped his mouth and stood. "I'll be by at eleven thirty to escort you down."

Nacarat stood and flew up to alight on his shoulder. "I've had enough. Thank you for having us for breakfast, Chara."

Chara nodded her head to the fae. "You're very welcome."

As Frederick left the suite, Feleena came back in to clean up and Charlotte went back up the stairs to change. Her dress had been suitable for breakfast, but would not be suitable for a tour of engineering. Undressing down to her stays, she pulled on a pair of royal blue trousers and attached the leather case that held her work tools to a set of loops on the trousers. A royal blue, floor length skirt over top to hide the pants and tools. Over her stays went a white, long sleeve blouse with ample lace at the neckline and cuffs. After tucking the blouse into the skirt, she put a royal blue jacket over the blouse, buttoning it in such a way as to make the entire ensemble appear as one garment. Pulling out her work goggles, she placed them on her head. Opening her hat box, she lifted the matching, royal blue, women's top hat and put it on her head to cover her goggles. Turning to look at herself in the mirror, she was satisfied that she looked acceptable.

Frederick was promptly at the door at eleven thirty, Nacarat on his shoulder, and hooked Charlotte's arm over his for the long walk down the promenade to engineering.
Chara looked down at her arm in his. "Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Walk arm in arm with me."

He lifted his nose. "Well, no young lady should be without gentlemanly arm candy."

Chara huffed. "You're using me to keep anyone with eye toward marrying you away."

He chuckled, smiling deviously. "Absolutely."

"You jerk! People are going to think we're lovers and that will sink my reputation!"

Frisk looked down at her. "And yet, you haven't stepped away."

She glared at him. "Shut up."

They arrived in engineering just as a small group of nobles and a few well to do merchants were gathering for a tour.

Lord Averdale, a thin, middle aged man of some standing, gestured vaguely in the air while his fourteen year old daughter, Rebecca, stood next to him. She wore a long, heavy velvet dress in a dark red, her hair separated into two, massive, pigtails and ringlets, and looking a bit miserable at being dragged around by her father. "The ship is obviously run on a storm chamber. Nothing else is powerful enough to lift such a massive vessel."

Chara sighed, fighting a growing annoyance. "The ship does not run on a storm chamber. Storm chambers are highly unstable, which is why their use is restricted to small airships built for speed."

Lord Averdale rounded, looking down his nose at her. "Oh, and I suppose you understand the intricacies of mechanical engineering?"

Chara continued as if she hadn't been interrupted and Rebecca came around to get a better look at her. "The idea behind a storm chamber is to get to your destination before you over tax the power node and crack the containment unit. A crack in a storm chamber containment unit always results in catastrophic system failure and explodes. It's the reason why a storm chamber's containment is checked before and after use, and, after about ten uses, is intentionally detonated in a quarry. The containment unit cannot hold the electrical storm inside the chamber for too long."

The man snorted, rolling his eyes. "Well, I guess we'll just have to ask the engineer when he arrives."

Charlotte's goodwill sank and her ire rose.

Frederick stepped in, voice less than gracious. "My lovely companion is Miss Charlotte Amelia Featherstone, the engineer who created the magnificent engine that keeps the Dalion both aloft and extremely mobile despite the ship's cumbersome design. She knows what she's talking about."

Lord Averdale paled a little, but regained his composure quickly. "Forgive me, Your Highness."

Frederick's eyes narrowed. "Why are you apologizing to me?"

A sudden hush went through the little group, each watching Lord Averdale.

He shook himself before sighing. "I apologize for my rudeness, Miss Featherstone."
Charlotte looked up to Frisk and he gave her a small nod.

"I accept your apology." She stepped away from Frisk to address the group. "Please follow me, and stay on the path. Do not attempt to touch anything in the Engineering core as it maybe be very dangerous. If any member of the crew asks you to step away or to keep from distracting them, do so without fail. The crew inside the core are not just maintaining the engine. They are also maintaining the safety of the entire ship."

As she turned to step toward the walkway, Captain Stormbrand appeared and she hooked her arm in his with a smile. Little Rebecca frowned, and Frederick swallowed a chuckle, offering the child his arm. She brightened suddenly and took it, practically bouncing as they followed Charlotte and the Captain.

Rebecca spotted Nacarat and waved. "If I may be so bold, Your Highness, how did you come by a fae of flame for a companion?"

Frederick raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Huh. I thought everyone knew this story by now." He patted her hand with a smile. "As an impetuous child, I found her abandoned egg. And despite multiple warnings that the fairy to hatch would burn my face off, I was determined to care for the egg. As is evident by my lack of burn scars, Nacarat did not burn my face off."

Nacarat giggled. "He's being too kind! I've burnt his hands on several occasions."

He smiled and gently tapped the top of her head with one finger. "Only by accident."

Rebecca giggled, skipping along.

Charlotte continued her lecture as the group entered a large, open room, from a staired walkway, where members of the ship's engineering crew moved from station to station on a massive control board. "This room contains the ship's control board. Each station has its own unique paint job, effectively color coding the interior by function. You'll notice that each member of the crew, while uniformed in royal blue, has a hat in a color matching his or her specific station."

The man supervising the work of the crew, looked up to the walk where the group watched the crew. "Captain on deck!"

The crew suddenly turned from their posts, lining up to salute. "Sir!"

Captain Stormbrand nodded to the crew. "At ease, boys. Miss Featherstone has joined us today."

Raucous applause filled the large room along with a few, shrill whistles. A young man ran up to the supervisor with a large bouquet of pink and cream roses. He walked up the stairs and presented it to Charlotte. She took the bundle in her arms and leaned over to kiss the man on both cheeks. The Captain nodded for her to follow and the group made its way from the control board into the engine interior.

In here, the room was whisper quiet despite the engine running at full tilt. Five massive cylinders, each three times taller than any member of the group, and shining a bright, polished silver took up the entire interior of the room with the exception of the platform on which the group stood, looking down on the cylinders. Each silver cylinder was connected into the ship and each other via multiple, metal pipes of various sizes.

One of the merchants in the group looked at Charlotte. "I don't understand. Why is it so quiet? The combustion should be insanely noisy in those tubes. Are the engines off line?"
Charlotte smiled. "The Dalion's engines are not internal combustion engines. They are aether engines and they power themselves by running aether through a continuous series of long coils. The coils are interconnected with each other in large, concentric loops, which keeps the process continuously producing energy for a large set of turbines located in the next room. This looping creates a balance between production and consumption, keeping them equal and entirely stable. The energy running through the coils is automatically sped up and slowed down based on the ship's energy needs. The first two cylinders power the flight and maneuverability of the ship. The third powers internal electricity needs such as the shops, restaurants, and guest cabins. The last two are back ups."

Lord Averdale shook his head. "That's impossible! You can't just bend the energy of the cosmos in such a way!"

Charlotte refused to groan. "And yet, here it stands. A perfect blend of science and magic."

"I refuse to believe that what I'm seeing is real. This obviously a staged area with the real engine hidden somewhere else."

Chara breathed in deeply before answering. "And why would anyone waste the kind of money it would take to do that? Especially on an airship where every bit of space counts?" She glared at him. "Or would you have believed that what you are seeing is real if I were a man?"

Lord Averdale lifted his nose in the air, arms crossed over his chest.

Charlotte lifted her chin. "Well, that hit the nail on the head, didn't it?"

An explosion rocked the Dalion, and Charlotte grabbed the nearest railing, the Captain steadying her while Frederick knelt to help Rebecca keep her feet.

One of the ladies clutched at her husband in panic. "What was that?!"

Lord Averdale, brushed himself off despite not having any sort of dirty on him. "I suppose an engine designed by a woman was simply destined to fail."

Frederick stood and tapped the man on the shoulder. When the man turned to look at him, the Prince punched him square in the nose and sent the lord sprawling to the platform. Lord Averdale lay there, groaning as he held his nose. He knelt on one knee in front of Rebecca. "If your father or anyone else ever says that you, or any other woman, is incapable of scientific endeavor, you punch him in the face as hard as you can. And if you can't reach his face, kick him in the crotch. Is that understood?"

Rebecca smiled brightly. "Yes, Your Highness!

He looked up at the Captain. "That explosion came from outside the ship."

Captain Stormbrand shook his head. "Airship pirates wouldn't be bold enough to take a ship this big."

Frederick shook his head. "That depends on whether or not the payoff is big enough to outweigh the risk and even a mad grab and dash on just one of the Dalion's shops would be worth it."

"Are you sure it's not the engines?" One of the merchants asked.

Charlotte shook her head. "Aether engines don't explode, they simply stop running."

Another explosion rocked the ship, this time coming from another angle, and Frederick grabbed
Nacarat, shoving her down his shirt.

The captain frowned deeply, his fangs bared. "That clinches it. It is pirates. Chara, please move our guests back to the lobby before the promenade. Go around the back, away from the control board."

She nodded. "Everyone follow me."

The group followed Charlotte down a set of stairs and between two of the engines, when they came to a dead stop. Multiple, half skeletal pirates, glowing the bright green of ghostly undeath, had crew members backed against the engine cylinders. Black, cracked veins appeared in pale, yellowed skin where it still clung to the rotted meat on their bones. Those that still had eyes, glowed a terrible white in their sockets. Worms freely crawled on the skull of one, while a black ichor dripped from the ragged flesh of another. Their clothing hung from them in tatters, revealing the wounds that had caused their deaths. One was missing his stomach, it having been blown away by a cannon, and the rot inside festered with maggots.

A dog chimera crewman growled at them even as he clutched an an obvious wound in his arm. One of the women behind Charlotte screamed, turning to clutch at her husband in fear, while little Rebecca clung to Frederick for dear life.

"Ah! More little rats, scurrying around the boat!" One pirate smiled widely and some bits of his flesh fell off around yellow, rotted teeth. "And fancy ones too!"

One of the crewmen stood ready with a sword. "What do you vermin want with the ship?"

One of the pirates waved a sword in the direction of the silver cylinders. "The engine, of course. Quite a marvel it is. We've been promised a fine price for its procurement."

"You idiots!" Charlotte sneered. "The engine is consists of all five of those cylinders and if you disconnect it, the aether running in the coils will dissipate. There's no way to remove the engine without completely destroying it."

The ghostly pirate stood up straight. "Well then. I suppose then, to make this worth our while, we'll just be taking the whole ship." He pointed his sword at Rebecca. "And that means clearing the ship, don't it?"

Frederick immediately put himself in front of the child.

"Wait!" Charlotte swallowed hard. "If it's the engines you want, you can't have them, but you can have the one who created them."

The crewmen gasped, looking to her and several risked moving to protect her.

The injured dog chimera barked, "Miss Featherstone! You may not give yourself up to these pox faced scoundrels!"

The pirate, who'd looked dubious, suddenly smiled, shamelessly wicked. "Featherstone, eh? You are the engineer." He nodded to the other ghostly pirates. "Take her! And take the Prince too. The royal family will pay a nice ransom for him."

"Touch either them and we send you to the abyss!"

The pirates laughed, and their leader sneered. "We've already seen the abyss, doggie. It holds no terror for us. Come along, you two. You're not wantin' to send an entire ship to hell for yourselves, are ya?"
Rebecca grabbed at Frederick, eyes wide. "Don't go!"

He patted her head. "It'll be all right. Just stay here."

Frederick stepped forward with Charlotte and the ghosts swarmed the pair.
Chapter 3

Charlotte knelt next to Frederick, using a bit of fabric torn from her chemise to stem the bleeding on his forehead. The cut wasn't deep, but it still bled like it was.

"That was a fool thing to do."

Frederick eyed her. "Defending a lady's honor isn't foolish. That undead vermin grabbed your ass. And the only reason you didn't round on him was because you weren't sure where to hit him."

"Not the point." She let her hand drop when his came up to hold the fabric in place. "Where's Nacarat?"

He smirked. "In my shirt and very unhappy about it."

The fae of flame's tiny head of red hair popped out from under his shirt collar, mask off. "It's my job to protect you! I can't do that like this!"

Frederick tapped the top of her head gently with one finger. "You don't need to be exploding into your full form in an engine room filled with people. We can wait this out. It's not the stickiest situation we've ever been in." He looked around the brig of the ghost ship, which, despite its fetid nature, was still very secure. The interior glowed a bit, which kept them from being completely in the dark. He sat up a bit and grimaced at the sound of his jacket coming away from the filthy wall. "Well, physically speaking it is, but still not the worst."

Charlotte sat back on her heels. "And how often are you getting yourself kidnapped?"

Frederick shrugged. "Not often. When I'm out in the middle of nowhere, I'm not often recognized as a prince. I'm just some human, which has its advantages. But now, the advantage is that they won't hurt me too much in order to collect a ransom." He sighed. "At least they're keeping us together."

Charlotte looked around the interior of the brig. "They have too. None of the other cells are containment worthy." She frowned. "So what do we do?"

Frederick's mouth pressed into a thin line. "First, we behave ourselves so they'll keep us together." He smiled wryly for a moment. "If that doesn't work, go full swoon at being separated." He sighed. "We need to wait until we're on the ground again before we attempt anything."

Charlotte sighed. "I don't understand the Dalion is filled with riches. Why go for the engines?"

"These are ghost pirates, not your typical air raiders. They don't need the cash. But your engine is a technological marvel. There will be people who want to steal it, or at least the design. I'm betting that they were hired to take the engine."

She shivered and moved to sit a little closer to him.

Frederick smiled and put an arm around her, pulling her into the warmth of his body. "I know you all of two months and look at the trouble you've gotten me into."

Chara rolled her eyes, shivering. "Oh yes. Two months of hanging out totally leads to kidnapping by ghost pirates. It was destined to happen."
Frisk rubbed her arm a bit, pushing the fabric of her suit jacket around. "You really are cold, you're trembling." He held her hand. "And a little clammy." He touched her face and caught the fear in her eyes. "It's okay to be scared. We're in a scary situation." He lifted Chara into his lap, and moved her so that her head rested on his shoulder.

She shivered in his arms. "I'm not a helpless damsel."

Frisk hugged her tightly. "And yet, you're letting me hold you."

She pressed her face against his chest, eyes squeezed shut. She took a deep, shuddering breath, but couldn't hide the tremble in her voice. "So historians in Agartha are adventurers?"

He gently rocked her side to side. "I'm no Nathan Drake… Wait. Was Uncharted still a thing when you fell?"

Chara shivered. "Yeah. Remember Chloe? She has her own game in the series."

"That's cool. So yeah. I'm no Nathan Drake. He's damn near indestructible and the last time I took a fall like the ones he shrugs off had me laid up for a month. But ancient cities and tombs filled with puzzles, and the occasional bad guy trying to steal artifacts for monetary or magical value is a thing."

"And your mother is worried that you'll just up and leave for the surface for knowing me? I'd be more worried you'd disappear on some half cocked expedition."

Frisk scowled. "None of my expeditions are 'half cocked.' I know damn well what I'm doing."

She let out a breath and clutched at him. "Even now?"

He lowered his face to her hair. "Even now," he whispered. "Try to get some sleep. I know it's not anywhere near night time for us, but you'll feel better if you're rested. I'll be here. I won't leave you."

Charlotte nodded and closed her eyes, eventually falling into a fitful sleep, her hand still trembling where it rested on his chest. When he was sure Charlotte was out, he tapped Nacarat on the head.

"I want you to stay with her."

"Okay." Nacarat crawled out from the collar of his shirt and jumped onto Chara's blue jacket.

He raised an eyebrow. "What? No arguments?"

Nacarat shook her head as she pulled her mask into place. "Of course not." She frowned sadly. "I was afraid that you might stop liking her when she got scared."

Frederick shook his head. "What should she be right now other than scared? This is the first time anything like this has ever happened to her. At least she has us to help her through. I nearly got us both killed the first time I was this frightened."

Nacarat smiled under her mask. "You like her."

"Yes. Yes I do."

Nacarat clapped both hands together softly. "Oh good! Your parents will be so pleased!"

"So my suspicions that she was being thrown at me were correct, huh? And you didn't tell me?" He smiled and tapped her head. "You little traitor."
Nacarat swayed happily from side to side.

Frederick sighed and changed the subject. "I'm betting they'll separate Chara and I. So stay with her, no matter what might happen to me. You and I can always find each other, and if you're with her, I can find the both of you."

Nacarat nodded. She toed open the breast pocket on Charlotte's jacket and slid inside. Frederick leaned forward a little, cuddling Charlotte, and closed his eyes.

An hour later, two of the rotted, undead pirates shambled down to the brig. "Wake up, pretties! We be at our destination."

Charlotte shuddered against him.

"It's all right. Come on." Frederick helped her find her feet before standing himself.

Charlotte gripped his hand tightly as she followed the corpse leading them up and out of the hold. They stepped onto a deck that was surprisingly intact and well maintained. Two of the pirates were in the process of scrubbing it down with sudsy deck brushes. The captain of the ship, a pirate who'd become completely skeletal a long time ago, gestured toward the gangplank. It was connected to a dock on the side of a tall, decrepit tower. Beyond the tower lay a long dead city in ruins.

"Take them both to Madam Glass," he wheezed.

The pirate who'd taken them captive, the captain's first mate, waved at Frederick. "The boy's Prince Frederick. We keep him and the ransom will be pretty heavy."

Charlotte immediately clutched Frederick's arm, holding on tightly.

The skeletal captain turned to his first mate. "Ye should have left him, ya scurvy dog! The Dreemurr are pooka! And they won't be handing over a ransom for their son. Only a solid helping of magical fire the likes of which would destroy us all! Leave him with Madam Glass. He can be her problem instead of ours."

There was a murmur through the crew, some agreeing with the Captain and some with the first mate.

Frederick put his face in Charlotte's hair. "When I say go, we run for the gangplank."

"Madam Glass ain't payin' us for a prince," the first mate sneered.

The captain pointed at his first mate as the pirates arranged themselves around the man they supported. "She ain't payin' us for a girlie, either, ya pox. She wanted that ship!"

Frederick stepped Charlotte back toward the gangplank.

The first mate gestured in Charlotte's general direction. "That girlie is the one who made the engine! That's Featherstone!"

The captain waved him off dismissively. "Featherstones are skeletal homunculi. That's a flesh and blood human!"

"You cur!" a pirate who looked to be more ghost than skeleton yelled. "You're the one who stuck us with a bad pair! We stormed that ship for nothing!"

Frederick stepped Charlotte back toward the gangplank again, getting them near the ship's rail.
One of the pirates scrubbing the deck, lifted his deck brush, and cracked a shipmate across the back of the skull.

"Go!" Frederick pulled Charlotte along with him, both of them flying down the plank while the pirates slammed into each other, two masses of green glow clashing against each other on the ship. Frederick dashed into the white, stone tower and came to a quick halt to keep from falling down a hole in the wooden floor. Charlotte skidded to a halt behind him, spotted the stairs to the right, and pulled Frederick toward them. They descended quickly and deeply into the tower, the sound of the fight above dissipating. At the bottom of the stairs, they found an open doorway, the wooden door long having disappeared from its hinges.

Going through it put them on a remains of cobbled street shadowed by tall, white buildings on both sides. Windows, long empty of glass, gazed down on them sullenly amid the vines and moss that covered the stonework. Where grass and trees hadn't pushed themselves through the stone, small ponds of rain water rested. Frisk looked up at the tower, the ship still hovered there, but the green clashing appeared to have stopped.

"We're sitting ducks if they come down this way looking for us." He took Charlotte's hand. "We'll go through the buildings."

She nodded and followed him into the first building, the remains of a hotel. The interior was not too shabby in appearance. The lobby, while very dusty and covered with vegetation, appeared to otherwise be in good condition. Faded green chairs and couches were arranged around two fireplaces on either side of the lobby. They ran across a marble tile floor for the front desk and went around it, aiming for the door into a kitchen littered with dishes, pots, and pans that all seemed to have been thrown to the floor by an earthquake.

The back door of the kitchen let out onto a brick laid alley lit by the evening sun. The alley abutted a dried up riverfront. All that remained was a small creek running down the middle of a grassy plain. To the left was a stairway down to what was once the water level. To the right was a stone bridge that went across the dry river bed. Beyond that was a residential district. Frederick walked to the edge of the alley and looked up. He could make out the tower, but not the ship. It'd left the tower.

"Oh hell."

Charlotte looked up. "The ship is gone. How likely do you think it is that it's looking for us?"

He glanced at her and back up at the sky. "Always assume very. We need to get away from here, but in a way that we won't be seen by the ship." He sighed. "Unfortunately, we have the distinct disadvantage of being alive, and undead can spot that miles away."

Charlotte pointed down the way. "See the stone bridge? It's naturally cool. It will mask us if we make for it on the level of the riverbed."

Frederick nodded. "Let's go."

They went down the stairs to the dry river bed and ran for the bridge while staying close to the wall. They got to bridge and hid under it just as the ship crested the buildings behind them and flew overhead. Getting a real look at it for the first time, the ship didn't look anything like intact. The entire bottom of the haul had been ripped out and pieces of it hung by the sheer willpower of the wood to stay together alone. Tattered green sails fluttered uselessly as the ship flew past. Members of the crew lined either side of the ship, looking over the side to spot their missing captives. The ship turned in the air, a long and wide half circle, before disappearing again behind the tall buildings. Frederick and Charlotte made another dash for it, sticking close to the bridge's foundations.
Chara glanced back for a moment and then pushed Frisk around the side of the nearest tower foundation. Breathing heavily, she snuck a glance back, the ship was coming around again, but that wasn't what forced her to hide.

"There's a green glow in the buildings behind us! Some of the pirates are on the ground!"

Frederick snuck a peek and spotted a walking corpse, sword in hand, walking by a window. He looked to the sun as it turned, the moon beginning to come into view.

"Oh hell. We're running out of time." He looked up and smiled. "Look!"

Charlotte followed his gaze and saw an opening high above them. A door in the wall of the bridge foundation. "How do we get up there?" She looked around. "There has to be a way."

Frisk took her hand. "Trust me?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He spun her around and hefted her so that she was on his back. "Hold tight and try not to choke me." He reached for the cracks in the stone of the foundation and climbed.

Charlotte hid her face against his back. Holding onto his vest so as not to wrap her arms around his neck, she let her legs dangle to keep them out of the way. A rock crumbled under his foot, causing a slip. Charlotte pressed her mouth against the back of his neck to keep from screaming. Finding his footing, Frederick continued, reaching the doorway as the sun turned away and the moon shone brightly.

Crawling inside, he lay on the floor for a moment while Chara rolled off of him.

"What was that... about you... not being... Nathan Drake?" Charlotte managed between gasps.

He pushed himself up to a sitting position, chuckling a little as he shook his head. Charlotte sat up and pulled up her skirt, revealing her pants and her leather equipment pouch. Pulling out a flashlight, she clicked it on and looked around. The room appeared to be an empty nothing of peeling paint and a stone floor, with a door in the back. Chara's stomach growled loudly and she blushed a bright red.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Sorry."

Frisk stood, brushing himself off. "There's nothing to apologize for. The last we ate was breakfast." He pointed to the door. "We need to keep moving. Let's check out where that goes."

Chara nodded and handed him the flashlight. Frisk tried the door and it let into a dark stairway, clicking off the light for a moment, he checked for the tell tale green glow. Not seeing it, he turned the light back on and proceeded down the stairs. The stairs seemed to go on and on, and Frisk was sure that he was further down than he'd climbed up. Chara held his hand, careful to be quiet as they descended and kept looking back up, eyes watching the top of the stairs for a green glow. When they reached the last step, there wasn't a landing, just another door.

Frisk looked the door over for a moment before carefully opening it. It opened onto a platform in a huge cavern. Four of the bridge's foundations extended down into the cavern, massive towers of stone with an entire town attached to them. Houses and shops wrapped around the pillars with stairs leading up and down between different levels. Bridges hung between the pillars, connecting the town on its level rather than forcing everyone up to a stone walkway above them. All of the buildings were lit, glowing a happy yellow and lighting the cavern.
Finding a set of stairs, Frisk and Chara descended from the platform and down to the buildings below them. Humans, chimera, and various fae types moved about and around them as if they weren’t strange in the least. Looking down to the cavern floor revealed more houses, these ones made of wood with steel roofs.

"Where are we?" Chara whispered.

Frisk looked around. "I think we're in a mining town." He handed her the flashlight back and nodded for her to follow him into a shop. The chubby, lavender furred, rabbit woman behind the counter gave him a smile. "Haven't seen you around before. Are you from Waterfall?"

Frederick shook his head. "New Home."

Her smile widened. "Well, I'll be! We don't often get you fancy folk here in Snowdin. How’d you end up here?"

Charlotte sighed. "It's a long story. Where can we find a place to stay and some food to eat?"

The rabbit woman gestured to the left. "If you head out the door and go left around the corner you’ll be at my sister's inn. If you go down one flight, there's a bar with a decent grill. The food isn't fancy, but it's good, home cooking."

"Thank you," Charlotte breathed.

Frederick frowned for a moment. "Why is the town called Snowdin if there isn't any snow here?"

The rabbit shrugged. "Beats me. It's always been called that. Maybe it's the original founder's name, or something similar."

He shrugged with her. "Works for me. Thank you very much." He took Charlotte's hand and they went back out of the shop. "Food first?"

"Yes. Please." She paused. "Do you have money on you, because I don't."

Frederick smiled. "We're good."

"You were carrying money around with you on the ship."

He shrugged. "I carry anything I might need at a moment's notice on me."

"You have a magic bag of some sort, don't you?"

Frisk smiled and took her arm, hooking it over his to escort her along. They found the bar, an old school tavern with booths lining the wall opposite the bar. The only person to notice them come in was the waitress, a strange looking, yellow bird woman wearing a white apron with the words 'Let's Eat!' embroidered in pink on it. She gestured for them to find a booth and came over just after they sat down.

"Tonight's special is meatloaf. We also have cubed steak in gravy. Both come with big helpings of mashed potatoes and green beans, and both cost two gold apiece. The water here is terrible, so you should drink from the bar."

Charlotte chuckled and the waitress winked at her.

"What'll it be, darlin'?"
"I'll have the cubed steak." Chara looked toward the bar. "If you have a fizzy pop, I'd really like one."

The waitress nodded. "Cherry, orange, or grape?"

Charlotte smiled brightly. "Orange."

"Spiked?"

Charlotte shook her head. "No, thank you."

The waitress looked to Frederick. "And you, honey?"

He sat back, relaxing in the booth. "I'll have two plates of the cubed steak and one mug of whatever beer is on the tap."

The waitress blinked at him. "Two? You that hungry?"

"Me? No." He tapped the table. "Nacarat. Come on out."

The fae of flame climbed out of her hiding place in Charlotte's jacket to fly up and land on the table, her bat wings drooping over her shoulders.

Frederick reached over and gently poked the fairy's stomach, earning a giggle. "The second plate's for her."

The waitress nodded. "Well aren't you a little cutie! I'll be back with your food."

Charlotte stared at the fairy. "You were in my pocket?!"

Nacarat sat on the table. "Frederick asked me to stay with you in case we were separated. He and I can always find each other."

She looked between the two. "How does that work?"

"Nacarat imprinted on me when she hatched." He smiled apologetically, rubbing the back of his neck, and looked surprisingly genuine. "Sorry. I'm not sure how it works. I just always know where she is and can home in on her location to get to her and she can do the same for me."

The fae shrugged. "It's a magical bond."

They both fell silent for a moment, before Chara leaned forward. "Is it just me, or is it weird that we're in a cavern in an even bigger cavern?"

Frisk nodded. "Yeah. That hit me too." He frowned, reaching across the table to take her hand. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, smiling a little. "Yes. Thank you."

He sighed, relieved. "We should be safe and since New Home isn't unheard of here, we should be able to get back pretty quickly."

Chara looked around the bar. "You don't want to stay here for a while? I mean, you didn't even know this place existed. I bet they have lots of stories to collect."

Frisk smiled warmly and squeezed her hand once before letting go so there was room on the table for
their arriving food. The waitress set down their plates before handing them silverware wrapped in paper napkins, including a small set for Nacarat.

She frowned at him. "What?"

He looked up at the waitress. "Thank you." He waited until the bird woman walked away. "Here we are, in what could still possibly be mortal danger, and you're remembering my profession."

Chara shrugged as she picked up her orange soda. "It's what you do." She took a long sip and sighed gratefully. "Oh yeah. That's the stuff. Almost as good as chocolate."

Frisk smiled as he dug into his potatoes. "I wonder who this 'Madam Glass' is. Does the name ring a bell?"

Chara shook her head. "No. The name doesn't sound familiar at all. But we'll need to find out who she is if we want to know why she's so keen on my engine."

Frisk sighed. "Let's do something incredibly ill advised."

Chara frowned as he waved down the waitress.

"Whatcha need, honey?"

"Have you ever heard of someone with the last name Glass? Would be a woman."

The bird woman thought about it for a moment, tapping the tip of her beak with one, feathery finger. "I can't say that I have. But I know who you can ask. Papyrus Featherstone. That's if he's here. He's usually in New Home. Just take the lift on the other side of this pillar down to the ground level and walk the main street. You'll see a cabin decorated in colored lights on the left, just past the library. He knows everyone in Snowdin."

'Papyrus?' Chara mouthed. She and Frisk both stared at each other from across the table.

Frisk shook himself. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome." The waitress wandered off.

Frisk leaned toward Chara. "Are you sure you've never been here before?"

"Yes." She pursed her lips for a moment thinking. "I mean, Sans and Papyrus have always kept me in New Home, but Paps would leave on occasion and be gone for days or weeks at a shot. Maybe he came here?"

"Let's check the place out before going to the inn."

Chara nodded. They finished their meals and paid while Nacarat flew up to sit on Charlotte's shoulder. Heading around the pillar, they found the lift, a crystal and ironwork elevator that was attached to the side of the bridge's massive, tower foundation. Taking it down to ground level, they found that, despite it getting late, Snowdin was still busy. Humans, monsters, chimera hybrids, and fae of all sorts wandered the streets. Here, the homes were made of wood and built like cabins in a forest, though no trees grew in this massive place. Walking down the main street, they found the library easily enough. Next to it stood a two story cabin with twinkling, colored lights. The windows were dark, but were frosted a little, meaning that the interior was warm.

They both stood in front of it for a moment, staring.
"Chara?"

"Yes, Frisk?"

"That looks like your house. I mean, exactly like your house. And we aren't in New Home."

Chara nodded. She walked up the steps, reaching out for the door and stopped. She turned, looking to Frisk. "Try the door."

"Okay." He stepped up to the porch. "Why?"

"Because the house in New Home doesn't require me to have a key. I can enter at will. For anyone else, it's just locked."

Frisk shrugged and reached out, trying the door. The knob turned halfway and stopped, locked. He stepped back and gestured for her to try. Chara grasped the knob. It turned all the way in her hand and the door clicked open. Pushing the door, she stepped inside, reaching over out of habit to flip the switch and turned on the lights.

What greeted her was a replica of the house in New Home. The wooden floor of the cabin was covered with a large, brown patterned rug. An overstuffed, caramel colored couch and cherry wood coffee table rested on the rug in between two leather chairs. Hanging over the coffee table was an electric chandelier made of shed deer antlers. All of that faced a large, stone, fire place.

To the right of the fireplace was an entrance into a white painted kitchen with a small, white painted, dining table made for four. To the left was a set of stairs, leading to the second floor. Frisk headed up the stairs and found a long hallway with three doors.

Chara followed him, opening the first door to reveal a plain room with exposed wood beams, a simple metal desk, simple wood chest of drawers, and bed that was little more than a mattress on the floor. Chara cringed a little at the dusty interior and the mass of unmade sheets on the bed. "This is definitely Papyrus' room."

She tried the next door and found a room painted blue and a bed with a frame carved like a red dragon in flight. A book shelf filled with all sorts of fantasy novels stood next to a desk covered in pewter miniatures, some painted and some in the process of being painted. The open closet door revealed lots of clothing, neatly hung. "This is Sans' room for sure."

Chara looked around, and noticed that Frisk wasn't with her. Heading back into the hall, she saw the last door open. She looked inside and flushed brighty. Frisk stood in the middle of a room with thick, cream carpeting, a large area rug in a complicated pattern of flowers over it. A crystal chandelier hung over a four poster bed, heavily carved with roses and vines, the vines painted green and the roses painted every color of the rainbow. The bed itself was covered by a luxurious quilt of golden silks and a silk pillows. White, night stands with gold accents flanked the bed. A wardrobe, dresser with a mirror, and desk matched the night stands. Thick, floral curtains draped over the windows. The room was easily twice the size of the other two put together.

"This is your room," Frisk said.

Chara nodded.

"When you said that your brothers demanded you have the best of everything, you meant it. There isn't a bedroom in the palace this nice." He turned and noticed her blush. "Are you all right?"

She looked away. "You're in my room."
Frisk rolled his eyes, but smiled all the same. "Oh." He stepped up to her, invading her personal space. "Look at you, going all native. Since when did an American girl care about a male friend being in her room?"

She continued to look away. "It's not like my brothers are here to chaperone."

"I suppose not." He stepped away. "Again. I don't know that I like you enough to impinge on your honor." He turned a slow circle, taking in the room. "This is obviously a replica of your home and one that at least Papyrus uses. Though by the looks of the miniatures in Sans' room, he comes here too." He sighed. "Let's take the opportunity to get cleaned up and rested while we're relatively safe. If I know your brothers, the house likely has other protections."

Frisk reached out and took her hand. "Do you want the bathroom first?"

Chara blinked and then shook her head. "There are two baths. The one down stairs and the one attached to this room."

He smirked. "With your brothers spoiling you so much, your future husband is going to have a hard time keeping up."

She continued to blush, not looking at him, and Frisk sighed.

He headed for the door. "I'll see you in a little bit."
Frederick woke up somewhere in the night and sat up to stretch. The living room couch had made for a comfortable bed, having not been willing to take one of the brothers' beds for the night. While the living room was dark and warm, a greenish glow emanated from under the shut window curtains. Frowning, he crept up to the side of the window and carefully peeked through where the curtain didn't quite meet the wall.

The ghostly pirates of the ship haunted the dark streets of the town. Every house along the street was dark, curtains firmly drawn shut. The first mate, who now appeared to be captain, led the remains of the crew down the street. The mutinous fight had taken more than a few chunks out of him and he was now missing the flesh around his right eye, which hung on his cheek.

"Here it is, boys! The Featherstone abode! The girlie and her pretty prince will be inside. Grab them both!"

As the pirates made for the house, Frederick pulled out his his pocket knife, hitting the enchanted jewel set in the side to turn it into a sword.

He needn't have bothered.

A circle of glowing, blue bones appeared around the pirates, trapping them before a set of orange ones shot out of the ground skewering all the undead. A burst of energy pulsed through the pirates and all that was left when the light faded was a group of brittle bodies turning to dust as the glowing bones disappeared.

Frederick breathed a sigh of relief only to jump as Sans, wearing a brown, leather duster over a dark shirt and trousers rather than his normal royal guard armor, kicked the door open. At least he was still wearing his blue scarf.

"WHERE IS MY SISTER?!!" He spotted Frederick and gave him a wide smile. "Oh! Hello, Your Highness!"

Frederick caught his breath and touched the jewel on the pommel of his sword, returning it to its pocket knife form. "Please stop yelling. It is the middle of the night."

Papyrus, dressed in his strange, orange and brown suit, stepped into the house. "Where is my sister?"

Frederick nodded toward the stairs. "Sleeping…" He trailed off.

Charlotte stood at the top of the stairs in a long, white, lace nightgown, her long hair loose down her back. Unlike traditional gowns that went up to the neck, this one dropped low and was something on the sheer side, having been intended to be covered by a heavier robe. Frederick quickly looked away as she ran down the stairs, throwing herself into her brothers' arms.

"Sans! Papyrus!"

Both held her tightly.

"CHARA! I'M SO GLAD THAT YOU'RE ALL RIGHT!"
Papyrus held her face in his boney hands. "You had us scared pretty good, kiddo."

Nacarat fluttered down the stairs, yawning as she dropped into Frederick's hands. She curled up in the palm of one hand and continued to sleep.

"I'm all right, thanks to Frisk."

Frederick shrugged. Careful to keep his eyes on the fairy in his hand, he lifted Chara's hands to place Nacarat in them. "Take her and head on back to bed. It's still very early."

Charlotte frowned deeply at him. "Oh no you don't! You don't get to send me off to bed so you can speak to my brother's without me."

"Fine. Then take her back up and put on a robe before you come back down."

"All right." She paused for a moment to kiss Sans' skull before running back up the stairs.

The white pinpricks of Papyrus' eyes watched Chara disappear into the second floor hallway. "Is she all right?"

Frederick sighed and nodded. "Besides a few scratches, she's physically okay. The worst of it was her terror catching up to her."

Sans pointed to Frederick's forehead. "It does appear that you were hurt." He pressed a boney finger to the cut on the prince's forehead.

Frederick stiffened for a moment before the rush of magic spilled over him and he had the strangest feeling as the skin knit back together.

Sans smiled proudly. "MUCH BETTER!"

"Thank you." He looked between the two. "How did you find us?"

Papyrus' brow bone rose. "When you opened the door to the house, it alerted us."

Frederick gestured to the house. "So what is this place, exactly? It looks like a replica of the house in New Home."

Charlotte came down the stairs in a long blue robe with a wide, floral ribbon decorating the collar, cuffs, hems, and front where it buttoned closed. "I'd like to know that as well. I didn't even know Snowdin existed!"

Papyrus shrugged and gestured for them to sit. Chara plopped down on the couch next to Frisk, Sans taking a chair, while Papyrus went to lean against the stonework of the fireplace.

"This is not a replica of the house in New Home. The house in New Home is a replica of this one. There are replicas in all the major cities and a few of towns. Sans and I made them all while deciding where you should live. When your skill as an engineer was obvious, we simply remained in New Home."

Frederick raised an eyebrow. "So you've always had a luxurious, third room for her?"

"Chara's room is a recent addition to the house."

"YOU'VE BEEN IN MY SISTER'S ROOM?! YOU CAD!"
Charlotte waved Sans off. "Hush! He only saw it because we were having a look around." She pointed at him. "And before you start, he was sleeping down here on the couch." She turned to Papyrus. "Does that mean that I could have opened the door to any of those places?"

The tall skeleton nodded. "You are a Featherstone and those houses are yours as much as they belong to Sans and I." He stepped away from the fireplace to sit down in one of the leather chairs. "How did you end up down here?"

Frederick shrugged. "Pure luck. The pirates took us to the abandoned city that's above us. We made an escape when they started arguing over whether or not they should hold me for ransom. We found a doorway in one of the bridge tower foundations and when we climbed down the staircase inside, we ended up here."

Papyrus tapped his mandible thoughtfully. "So they took you to Old Home, huh?"

"Old Home?" Frederick blinked. "That was Old Home? I've been to Old Home. I've never seen the place we were."

Papyrus nodded. "There are three parts to Old Home: the residential area, the 'new' downtown, and the original city, which is a couple miles from the other two. The old Dreemurr house is in the 'Ruins' area of the original city, and you've seen there plenty of times with your family."

Sans stood suddenly. "SPEAKING OF WHICH! We should let them know we found you." He dashed out the front door.

Papyrus shook his skull, smiling a little. "But why did they take you to Old Home?"

Charlotte frowned. "They were taking us to see a 'Madam Glass.' They didn't say anything else about it."

Papyrus frowned viciously. "And they won't be saying anything else again." He smiled darkly. "Unless they left crew members behind on their ship."

The implication hit her and Charlotte clutched at Frederick's arm. "They were here?!"

Frederick patted her hand. "Emphasis on 'were.' Papyrus and Sans ended them pretty quickly."

"Even if we hadn't been here, you would have been fine." Papyrus looked around the cabin with a proud smile. "These houses are made to protect those within." He frowned. "Still, someone wanted your engine enough to hire ghost pirates to attack the *Dalion*. After this failure, they may decide to come after you directly."

Frederick looked to Charlotte. "Then we need to move you somewhere beyond reach."

Charlotte sighed, shaking her head. "We don't even know where this Madam Glass is located. Putting me out of reach might put me directly into harm's way. It makes more sense to go about life as normal. If someone were to come after me, we'd have more leads in their capture by simply waiting." She yawned.

Frederick patted her hand. "Why don't you go and lay back down. It's still hours from dawn."

She glared at him. "So you two can come up with how you're going to secret me away somewhere ridiculous without my protest? You're going to have to try harder than that, Frederick Dreemurr."

Papyrus sighed and looked to Frederick. "Take her to the surface."
Charlotte's jaw dropped. "What?!

Frederick nodded. "All right."

"No, 'all right!' This is most certainly not 'all right!'" Charlotte looked between the two. "Are you both insane? Not only do I refuse to go, there is no way that you could convince Queen Toriel to let that happen." She grabbed Frederick's sleeve, shaking him a little. "What's gotten into you? Why would you do that to your mother?"

Both remained silent, simply looking at her.

She moved so that she looked at them both. "You know who Madam Glass is, don't you?"

Frederick sighed. "I don't. But if Papyrus is suggesting that I should take you top side, then I assume he does and that it's dangerous enough that you need to be anywhere but Agartha."

"I..." She blinked, another thought occurring to her. "You've been back to the surface."

He said nothing. He only watched her.

Stonewalled, Charlotte turned to her brother. "Who is Madam Glass?"

The skeleton ran a boney hand over the face of his skull. "We don't have much information on her. What we do know is not comforting. Victoria Glass is a human of at least two hundred years of age, despite only looking to be in her twenties. She relies on a mystical artifact to stay alive. She's taken over several Dero areas, completely wiping them out and claiming their slaves for her own. Since doing so, she's been using the Dero's cave network to steal items and occasionally kidnap people from all over Agartha. I've tried on multiple occasions to apprehend her, if not outright kill her, and have never managed it."

Papyrus gave her his full attention. "I do not know why she would want your engine, but whatever the reason, it's dangerous. You have her attention and while it is within my power to do so, I will put you far from her reach."

Charlotte sighed, looking at her hands in her lap.

Frederick put his arms around her. "Hey. You said that you missed real french fries, right? Think of it as a vacation where you get to have some of the things you miss again."

Charlotte stood. "I'm going back to bed."

Frederick frowned. "You don't want to know where we'll be going or how we'll get there?"

A deep sadness crept into her eyes and she sniffed softly. "I don't want to leave so, no. Not really." She ascended the stairs, her head hanging, and disappeared into the hall.

Frederick groaned. "Damn it all!" He looked to Papyrus. "Is it really that bad?"

Papyrus nodded, but his eyes began to glow a strange orange. "We picked up one of Glass' spies on the Dalion. She wants Chara, but wasn't aware that Chara was onboard when the pirates made for the engine. The pirates did exactly what Glass wanted without knowing it when they took my sister." He frowned. "You've been to the surface since your fall."

Frederick glared. "Stop acting like you don't know my father sends me up for reconnaissance."

"You misunderstand. I want to know that you can keep Charlotte safe when she's far from my
protection."

He sat back and stared up at the ceiling. "She'll be fine. We'll head up through Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. It's summer time, so lots of music and arts festivals. Lots of craft fairs. Water and amusement parks will be in full operation. Lots of things Chara enjoys doing. It'll feel more like a vacation than an expulsion after a few days." He looked over at the skeleton. "When should we return?"

"I'll find you after I've dealt with Glass in a permanent manner."

Frederick nodded. "Just make sure you're wearing skin when you do it. No need to freak out the surface dwellers."

Papyrus chuckled. "Get some sleep. I need to speak to your father about the trip and this time, you're mother is going to have to know about it. We've been able to keep her in the dark for quite some time, but she's going to want to keep you close after the kidnapping, and I need you to be with Chara." He stood, eyes still glowing a deadly orange. "And another thing: my sister's honor better be intact when she returns or you won't be."

Frederick rolled his eyes before laying back down, his hands behind his head. "You need better threats, Papyrus. Besides, I don't know that I like her enough for that."

Papyrus walked to the door and paused, his hand resting on the knob. "You are a poor liar, Frederick Dreemurr." He sighed. "I'll be back in the morning with arrangements for you both to head to Telos." He left, the door clicking shut behind him.

Frederick woke the next morning to the smell of fresh cinnamon rolls coming out of the oven. He sat up and stretched before heading into the kitchen. Chara had traded her bed clothes for a simple, knee length, brown dress over brown trousers and a white, short sleeved blouse: her typical work attire. Which meant she was also carrying her tools and other equipment under her skirt. She'd made one, long, loose braid of her hair and pinned it up in a bun on the back of her head. She closed the oven door and gave him a small smile.

"You have circles under your eyes."

Her smile fell. "Good morning to you too."

Walking around her, he put the kettle on for tea, spotting Nacarat still sleeping in a pocket on Chara's dress. "It takes a while to prep cinnamon rolls, so I take it that you didn't sleep." He leaned back against the counter. "Listen. It's okay. You aren't being exiled and I'll be there with you. We'll have some fun and be back before you even know it."

Charlotte stared down at the cinnamon rolls. "Please stop."

The kettle went off, shrieking as it spewed hot steam, and Frederick pulled it from the stove.

She walked over to the table and sat down, staring at the kitchen wall. "The rolls are for you."

"Peace offering, huh?"

She sighed. "I don't want to sound ungrateful. It makes me really happy that you are not only willing, but want to protect me. I just…"

Frederick came around and put his hands on her shoulders. "You're afraid that when you go up, you might not want to come back. That surface life will lure you away. I understand. I felt the same way
"the first time I went up."

Charlotte looked up at him.

"I didn't want to go, but we'd had a sudden influx of surface dwellers appearing when you did five years ago. My father wanted to be sure that they were flukes and accidents, and not a sign of something much more dangerous." He placed a hand on her head, gently petting the top, hand running gently over her hair.

"Your clothing…" Chara reached over, gently touching the clean white button down under the gray vest. "None of that belongs to my brothers. Where did you…?"

Frisk smirked. "Didn't I say I was always prepared?" He reached under his shirt and pulled out a simple, heart locket, made of platinum. He opened it, revealing a photo of him and Asriel, and a black hole to nothing.

"My toiletries, please."

A black, leather, shaving bag appeared on the table in front of him. He lifted it up and touched it to the locket.

"Thank you."

The bag disappeared.

"So long as I have my locket, I have everything I need."

Chara gave him a cheeky smile. "Unless you lose it."

Frisk shrugged. "I can't actually take it off. Asriel cursed it when he made it so it would stay on me until death." He eyed the locket. "Living with pooka…" He frowned. "Speaking of which, I'm surprised he hasn't appeared yet. He surely knows where we are by now."

As if on cue, a mass of green vines and leaves appeared in a seat across the table, swirling up to take the form of a large, and very fit, goat pooka. The vines disappeared and Asriel sat across from them with a satisfied smile on his snout.

He waved. "Hello, Brother!" He reached over and took Charlotte's hand in his. "Good morning, Chara." He kissed her knuckles. "I hope my brother has been on his best behavior."

"He's forced me to defend my own honor multiple times."

Frisk's jaw dropped. "Chara!"

She put her head down and laughed as Asriel gave him a wave of the finger and a mock glare.

"Frisk! How could you?! Is this what happens when I put a lovely lady of high esteem and intelligence in front of you?"

Frederick's eyes narrowed. "Oh don't you start."

Asriel smiled deviously. He lifted his snout and inhaled deeply. "What is that heavenly aroma?"

Charlotte gestured to the countertop behind her. "Cinnamon rolls. Would you like one?"

Frisk crossed his arms over his chest. "I thought you said those were for me."
Chara glanced at him before looking away and lifting her nose. "And I thought it was the man's job to make a lady breakfast the morning after an evening's dalliance."

Asriel snorted.

A tiny, little smile curled the edge of Frederick's mouth. He leaned over to whisper in her ear. "So what do you want, Chara?"

The goat prince's head hit the table, shoulders heaving with his mirth.

Her expression turned to shock. "Frisk!"

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. "Not teasing. Would you like me to make you breakfast?"

Chara blushed brightly, her hand coming up to touch her cheek. She quickly shook her head, looking like a rabbit in search of escape from a particularly hungry wolf. "I've already eaten."

He nodded. "Why don't you get a few things together and I'll put them in my locket. It'll make it easier for travel."

She frowned and stood, heading out of the kitchen.

Asriel sat up, leaning back in the chair a little. "You two are getting along well."

Frederick glared at him. "I didn't suspect a thing when Chara arrived because you were the one who presented her."

Asriel smiled, large and all teeth in his joy. "And when did you start suspecting?"

"When her cabin was next to mine on the Dalion and then her seating arrangement at dinner every night also happened to be with me."

"You were only on the ship one night!"

Frisk snorted. "I checked the master itinerary."

Asriel tapped his chin with one, sharp-nailed finger. "So two months of visits and chance encounters didn't tip you off first? I must be much better at matchmaking than I thought."

"Traitor."

Asriel rolled his eyes. "Oh please. I found you a more than acceptable mate: she is intelligent, shares a similar background to your own, and beautiful by human standards." He waved his brother off. "Now hurry up and make me some nieces and nephews."

Frisk sighed and cut himself a roll from the pan. "I take it that Papyrus is already speaking to mom and dad."

Nacarat sleepily flew into the room to sit on Frisk's shoulder.

Asriel frowned. "It wasn't going well when I left. To say that mom is livid doesn't even begin to describe it."

"What's she the most angry about? This trip or all the ones in the past?"

The goat pooka sighed. "She was going on about being right that Charlotte would lead you away to
"Well that's where mom's being hysterical again. Chara doesn't want to leave. And I'm the one leading her away."

Asriel nodded and waved his hand, a cup of golden flower tea appearing in front of him on the table. "I understand." He took a breath and let it out slowly. "Do you really like her, Frederick? Will you take this one? I need to know before I butt heads with mom about it."

Frisk sat down across the table from his brother. "I'll take this one."

Asriel nodded once. "Good." He sipped his tea. "So what will you two be doing on the surface?"

"There's a bed and breakfast near the entrance I like to use. We'll stay there and use it as a base from which to explore a bit." He poked at the roll. "She'll feel better after she's had a little fun."

"I hope so."

"Hope what?" Charlotte asked as she came in.

Asriel looked up at her. "That you'll feel better about going to the surface after being there a little bit." He smiled softly. "It's not forever. You'll be home so soon, it'll just be a happy memory. And one spent with Frisk."

Frederick looked at the bag in her hand. "That's a little small."

She frowned. "We're going topside. That means I'll need completely different clothing." She sat next to him. "What will we do for money?"

Frederick smiled. "She asks the man who's gone up several times now. It's fine." He pointed to the roll on his plate. "This is delicious by the way. Thank you."

Chara nodded, but still frowned deeply. "I'm not sure I like the idea of owing you so much. What do you want in return for all of this?"

Frisk shook his head. "Nothing. You owe me nothing."

Charlotte raised an eyebrow, suspicious. "Nothing?"


Asriel smiled. "My brother can be quite the ass, but when he gives, he gives fully and freely. You can trust him."

The front door of the house opened and Papyrus strode in, still wearing his strange, orange suit jacket. "I have passage for both of you on a train from here to Shamballah. From there, you will make a transfer to another train to Telos. Both are rocket trains, so you will get to Telos in time to bed down for the night at the house there."

Chara nodded. "Where's the train station?"

"Down Main Street."

Frederick stood. "How'd you get my mother to agree?"
Papyrus frowned. "She'll be joining you on the trip from Shamballah to Telos."

Asriel grimaced before smiling sympathetically. "At least that leg of the trip will be short?"

Frederick sighed. "Fine. We'll deal with it when we get there."

Papyrus leaned over and nuzzled the side of his skull against Charlotte's cheek. She turned her head and gave him a quick kiss on the edge of his mandible, before turning to hug him.

"Do I really have to go?" she whispered.

Boney arms wrapped around her. "I'm so sorry, Charlotte."

She nodded.

"Hurry along. I'll handle any dishes or cleaning."

Charlotte closed her eyes before nodding. Frederick stood and took her hand, leading her out the front door.

Asriel reached across the table and nabbed a bite of the roll. "Oh that is good."

Papyrus crossed his arms over his chest. "Your mother is a disaster."

Asriel pointed the fork at the skeleton. "Of course she's a disaster. I'm her only biological child out of five to have made it to adulthood. And I'm old enough to remember Astelle's death. It was horrifying. I still occasionally have nightmares about it. Now the only son she didn't have to worry about suddenly dying on her may disappear too. She's absolutely terrified. " He smiled a little. "Once this is all behind us, and she's helping Charlotte pick out a wedding dress, she'll be fine. It's just up to Dad to keep her from stewing in her own fears, and he's become expert at that."

"I'm not going to have kind words for her if she's less than civil on that train."

The goat pooka smiled brightly. "Frederick knows how to handle Mom."

"And I don't appreciate you going through the protections on this house just to avoid using the front door."

Asriel waved him off. "Oh come on! The only reason I can do it is because of what you did to vouchsafe me from the fate my siblings suffered." He stared at his hand for a moment and a long, green vine slithered up from under the cuff of his suit jacket. "I still don't know all I can do, but the untapped potential is terrifying."

A thought occurred to him and his head slowly turned to the skeleton, eyes a bit wide. "You did something to Chara as well, didn't you? It's why she can enter a Featherstone house, isn't it?" He stood suddenly, knocking his chair to the floor. "You have best not put my brother in danger-"

The skeleton's eyes burned a bright orange. "Stand down, boy." The flames in his eye sockets quieted as Asriel scowled. "Chara is of no danger to anyone. I simply made her a member of my family."

Asriel righted the chair. "Is she still human?"

"She is."

The goat pooka sat down, staring hard at the skeleton, before sighing deeply. "You're lying by
omission." He held up a hand. "Don't argue the point. I've known you for over a hundred years. I know when you're doing it." He looked away. "Just tell me that, whatever you did, it will not prevent Frisk from having a happy life with her."

"It will not."

"That's good enough then." He finished off the cinnamon roll.
Chapter 5

Queen Toriel sat in a chair in a private train car, staring out the window with her hand holding up her chin, fingers covering her mouth, elbow resting on the arm of the chair. Being so close to Shamballah proper, she wore the violet, royal robes rather than a proper dress, appearing as if she was a supplicant entering the holy city. Rather than seeming angry, she simply seemed sad, and a little lost. Her yellow eyes searched the landscape before her, but whatever she hoped to find there, it eluded her.

The holy city of Shamballah lay before her, a city painted bright yellow so as to appear golden in the light of the sun. The rooftops of every building shined a rainbow of hues to match the rainbow of flags hanging between buildings. It lay in the middle of a wide canyon that cupped the city with waterfalls covering most of the canyon wall and giving off spectacular rainbows in the dazzling mists. Pilgrims of all sorts: fae, human, chimera, and monster, wandered the endless bridges and gardens to pray in the many temples, bath in the mystical waters, and be renewed in spirit and flesh.

The queen watched as this supplicant or that wander by the train, heading down the green fields of wild flowers for the city proper. On occasion, a someone would notice her at the car window and give her a happy wave or a proper bow. A smile would tug at her lips as she waved back.

Charlotte frowned deeply as she and Frederick approached the Queen. "I'm still not sure about this."

"And yet, here you are."

"She doesn't like me for the exact reason that she's here right now," Charlotte managed through clenched teeth and a forced smile.

While the journey by train to Shamballah had been short, it'd been filled with so much dread for Charlotte that she hadn't spoken. She'd spent the entire ride clutching at her crochet in frustration, unable to get her hands to work the yarn. Now that they had made the transfer to the train on which they'd ride to Telos, Frederick waited on Charlotte's courage to meet with his mother. Seeing that courage wasn't coming anytime soon, he simply took Charlotte's arm and led her forward.

"Greetings, Mother."

Toriel inhaled deeply before standing with a quick spin to loom over them both, a terrifying scowl on her snout. Frederick, having seen worse, was not impressed. Charlotte looked simply miserable.

The harsh expression softened and the goat pooka reached out to touch Charlotte's face gently. "You truly do not want to leave, do you, child?"

"No, Your Majesty."

Toriel frowned, her hand dropping. "I had not considered that you would be against this."

Frederick glared at his mother. "And why the hell not?! This is Agartha! I literal paradise! Why would anyone choose to leave it?"

Toriel raised an eyebrow at her son. "And yet, you have. On multiple occasions."

He scowled. "Oh yes. I was just, oh so happy to walk through miles of claustrophobic caves in order
to make sure that everyone who thought the Earth was hollow was perceived to be a complete crackpot." He huffed. "Best vacation ever." He eyed his mother. "Where's the 'Oh Frederick! Thank God you're safe from those wicked, undead pirates'?"

"I do not like your tone, young man."

Frederick lifted his nose. "I'm not going to let you treat Chara poorly for something that is completely beyond her control. No one is happy with this situation. Least of all her."

The train whistle blew, and Toriel sighed. The three sat as the train moved forward and gathered speed toward the crystal city of Telos.

Toriel continued to regard her son suspiciously even as she took Charlotte's hands in her own. "Are you confident in my son's ability to guide you, and comfortable in his protection?"

The prince rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"He did not attempt to impinge on your honor during your distress?"

Frederick jaw dropped. "Mother!"

Charlotte, feeling more comfortable, smiled deviously at him.

His eyes narrowed. "Oh, don't you dare."

She turned to Toriel. "He was a perfect gentleman, Your Majesty."

The train lurched as an explosion hit the side. Frederick shoved Nacarat into his shirt before wrapping his arms around Chara, protecting her as the train came to a sudden stop and threw them forward to the floor. Toriel found her feet first, a glowing red trident appearing in her hand and magical armor appearing over her robes as she disappeared through the door of the car. Nacarat crawled out from Frederick's collar and dove for the open pocket on Charlotte's dress, hiding inside.

Charlotte scrambled to her feet. "Queen Toriel!"

Frederick grabbed her arm. "Don't try to stop her! An angry pooka of her power is not something you want to be around. She'll be fine. If this is Glass, it's you they're after." He took her hand. "Come on."

Charlotte followed him out of the car, slowing to have a look at the wreck. The front three cars remained on the track, but the back five had completely derailed into a zig-zag pattern across the tracks. Several members of the royal guard were engaged in combat with a massive, metal automaton while the Queen directed the passengers escaping the train. The automaton's thick metal legs supported a large chest with long metal arms that ended in three fingered hands. What appeared to be a human sat in the chest cavity, directing the machine's motion.

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The train's passengers ran in any direction away from the fight, carrying the injured with them. Frederick hopped down from the car and held out his arms to help Charlotte down, only to shoved to the ground by a group of passengers. They grabbed Charlotte, one clamping a hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming as they dragged her off. She kicked at her captors, managing to slam one in the face hard enough to break his nose. The one with his hand over her mouth put a sweet smelling rag over her face. She went limp and one of the captors threw her over his shoulder.
Frederick rolled to his feet, running after them. He grabbed the first one he caught up too and slammed a fist in the man's face, knocking him flat. When Frederick jumped over him to continue after the others, the man rolled over, grasped Frederick's ankle, and sent the prince to the ground. Pulling his knife from his pocket Frederick rolled over and slashed at the man's face, catching him with a long slice. Blood spurted from between the man's fingers as he clutched at his face. The prince found his feet and continued after the others.

The kidnappers ran for an opening in the ground, an area of sod that appeared a natural part of the landscape until the hatch was opened to reveal a tunnel. The first one jumped in and turned, taking Charlotte's limp form from one of the men above. The rest jumped in and the tunnel opening disappeared as it dropped.

Frederick got to the opening, feeling around on the ground for the finger hold that would open it. When he found it, he paused and put his ear to the ground, listening to see if any of the men remained behind for an ambush, and heard a someone breathing loudly. He looked behind him and saw the automaton on the ground, it's pilot being dragged from the cockpit by a member of the royal guard. Frowning, he stood and popped open the heart shaped locket around his neck.

"Equipment, please."

A heavy, wood and metal, traveling trunk appeared at his feet. He popped open the top, pulling off his blood stained vest, and discarding it in favor of a leather one made to take a beating. He pulled out his leather hip bag, snapping it tight to his belt before filling it with the things he wanted to have on hand. He stopped for a moment and patted his shirt.

"Nacarat?"

He inhaled sharply, unbuttoning his collar to look inside. Not seeing her, he closed his eyes, inhaling deeply and letting his breath escape slowly. He felt her, underground and moving away.

He sighed, relieved. "She's with Chara. Good."

His mother ran to him as he went through the trunk, arming himself.

"That's a Dero cave." Toriel frowned deeply. "I did not know any were this close to Shamballah."

"We can deal with filling it in later. I'm following them."

Toriel grasped her son's arm. "Do not do this! Let Papyrus find her!"

He frowned up at her. "If Dad were carried off, would you sit around, and hope someone else saved him?"

She inhaled sharply, taken aback. "Absolutely not!"

"Well then. You'll have to pardon me, Mother. My future wife needs me about now." He closed the trunk and touched his locket to it. "Thank you." The trunk disappeared.

Laying down again, Frederick listened at the entrance. He couldn't hear the loud breathing, but he could hear something. He frowned as he stood.

"Is there someone there?"

He nodded. "Yeah."
"Stand back then." Toriel hooked her trident in the grip of the trap door and flung it open in a smooth movement. The tawny man who waited just below was shocked, not expecting the force behind the opening. She hooked his brown shirt on the ends of her trident and spun the weapon, tangling his clothing before lifting him out of the tunnel and flinging him to the ground.

Frederick dropped into the tunnel as the royal guard surrounded the man.

"Wait!" Toriel called.

He turned back to his mother.

"Take one of the guard with you."

Frederick shook his head. "I don't have time to wait for a guardsman to be outfitted."

She growled. "Take someone!"

Frederick threw up his hands. "Just send Asriel. He can find me anywhere."

Toriel rolled her head on her neck. "Oh, so instead of just one child going into danger, you'd have me send your brother with you?"

He smiled brightly at her, and pulled the hatch shut, ending the conversation. Inside, he found a passage with bricked walls, meaning that it'd been here for a very long time. There wasn't any light in the tunnel, but that wasn't all that surprising. That degenerate race of Dero with their thick, orangey skin, and aardvark noses preferred the dark, and their slaves were bred to be sightless. Checking his flashlights, he pulled the dimmer of the two out, attaching it to his belt. The second, a small, super bright, light emitting diode flashlight remained in his pocket as a self defense mechanism. Dero and any of their sighted servants would be blinded for a full twenty seconds if he flashed it in their eyes.

Frederick closed his eyes, inhaling deeply and breathing out slowly. He felt Nacarat far ahead, but not out of reach. He moved swiftly, but quietly through the tunnel, shielding his light so that he could see by it, but it would not alert anyone to his presence.

He needn't have bothered.

The tunnel opened into a large gallery filled with the ruins of a Dero slave town. Rectangular buildings with arched doorways, carved from the brown stone of the cave, filled the floor of the gallery and ran along paths on the upper reaches of the cavern. While no one appeared to currently occupy the defunct town, light from Agartha's interior sun still filtered down through gaps in the cavern walls, casting a warm glow and encouraging the growth of plants where the light touched.

Frederick looked around for the men who'd taken Charlotte, and not seeing them, reached out to find Nacarat. His fairy companion was straight ahead, though that wasn't exactly a helpful direction. From the tunnel, he stood above the town and would need to descend to follow. Pulling out his binoculars, he trained them on Nacarat's direction, and found two men disappearing into a passage just beyond the town. Putting away his binoculars, he found a set of stairs carved into the cavern wall and descended to the cave floor.

He smelled food cooking over a stove halfway down the stairs before he saw the house it came from. He peeked inside the arched doorway to see one of the Dero's pale, sightless, human slaves working at it alone. He frowned. The area was less abandoned than he'd assumed. He quietly snuck past the doorless archway so as not to alert her. A fight with any Dero slave was not something he wanted, and not just because they could hurt him badly. He didn't want to hurt them. They weren't
responsible for their condition. Once he was sure he was far enough away, he ran down the stairs and down to the main road.

A howl went up from the house next to him and he cursed under his breath, booking it as fast as possible for the passage. Buildings he thought dormant came alive as the pale kind came out, listening for his echoing footsteps. He got to the middle of town before they had him surrounded, but they didn't touch him. Instead, they sniffed at him repeatedly before turning around, and heading back to their homes.

Frederick looked around. "What the hell?"

"You smell of the surface. That's why they aren't bothering you."

He looked up and saw a severe looking, human woman in a long, black dress reminiscent of surface world; corporate attire. "You're from the surface."

She ignored his comment. "I suppose I should thank you for not attacking them. You do look capable of defending yourself. Why are you here?"

Frederick paused and looked around. "Thank me for not attacking them? Did you liberate them from the Dero?"

The woman inhaled impatiently. "Why are you here?"

"My friend was kidnapped and taken through the passage over there."

The overly thin face frowned and doing so accented the scar that ran from the bottom of her left eye down to the corner of her mouth. "Then the ones who took your friend weren't human. That passage leads to a drop into nothing. Only wings will get you across."

Frederick frowned. "Is there another way around?"

The woman folded thin arms over a thin chest. "It depends on where they are taking her."

"They're taking her to Madam Glass."

The woman's eyes narrowed and she scowled. "Come around the stairs on the right and follow me."

Frederick took the stairs and reached the top just in time to see the woman disappear down a narrow passage of slick, still living stone. Up close, she was much taller than he suspected and her thin, gray hair was wound into a bun on the back of her head. "Where are we going?"

The woman ignored his question. "What is your friend's name?"

"Charlotte."

"A full name, boy."

Frederick gritted his teeth. "Charlotte Amelia Featherstone."

The woman stopped dead in her tracks standing stiffly. "Featherstone?" She turned around slowly to look down on him. "And who might she call family?"

The hairs on the back of his neck pricked up and he stepped back. "Who are you?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Dr. Lucida Gaster." She smiled thinly. "Now. Who does the girl call
family?"

Frederick frowned, unsure how much he could trust her. "Her older brothers are Sans and Papyrus Featherstone."

Surprise lighted Dr. Gaster's eyes. "Papyrus took a human as family? How very interesting!" She smiled fully. "Well then, I suppose if I want to meet this Charlotte, you'll be needing my help." She turned around and walked swiftly on.

The prince rushed after her. "You made them. They're your homunculi. How is that possible? They're male and you're female."

"Isn't it obvious? I birthed them."

Frederick froze, the color draining from his face. "You experimented on your own children."

She waved him off. "They were experiments before they were even placed in my womb. Now hurry along, boy."

He swallowed hard and walked a little faster to keep up. They came to a steel door in the wall of the passage and Dr. Gaster pushed it open. Inside was an ultra clean, modern laboratory of steel and glass the size of a small house. Medical equipment of all kinds filled the tables and cabinets. Jars and tanks of random sizes bubbled away with strange creatures swimming in them. A traditional homunculus with its tiny size, but awfully large hands and head gawked at him with strange yellow eyes from its tank. A large computer took up one entire wall, it's flat screen monitor taller than Dr. Gaster.

A voice filled the room, flowing from the speakers set in the corners. "What was the commotion, Lucida?"

She nodded to Frederick. "The boy. He's looking to rescue a friend." She walked up to the computer and leaned in toward the screen, tapping it to wake the screen from hibernation. "Papyrus has taken a human as family, Wing Dings! A sister! Can you believe that?"

An avatar of a male human in a black suit and white lab coat with ridiculous, white and black striped, short, anime hair appeared on the screen. Where Lucida appeared severe, he seemed warm and friendly, a smile coming easily to the face made of pixels. "Impossible. Our son never cared for anyone other than his little brother."

"An A.I." Frederick whispered. "And a smart one." He frowned. "When did you die? The real you."

The avatar appeared quizzical, thinking about that for a few moments while tapping his chin with a gloved hand. "I don't really remember. Well, I obviously had a body when Lucida and I made Papyrus and Sans, being that I was the…" He coughed. "…donor. But I don't remember exactly when I transferred to the computer. It was a terrible decision really. The computer that holds my brain just isn't powerful enough. Are you sure that Papyrus took a human as family?"

Frederick nodded. "He named her his sister five years ago. He even took her name and gave her a new one."

The face of the avatar appeared deeply satisfied. "Fascinating!"

Dr. Gaster smiled happily, her shoulders drawing up toward her ears. "I do so wish to meet this girl. But there is the issue of Glass."
"That woman?" The avatar turned to Frederick. "What would she want with the girl?"

"Charlotte is a genius engineer. Based on a previous attempt to steal an airship engine that Charlotte created, I believe Glass wants Charlotte to build her an engine for some reason."

Both the doctor and the AI frowned.

"He'll need a guide, but it cannot be you, Lucida. You are not capable of traversing the way."

Dr. Gaster mused on that for a moment. "We'll send Loren with him." She looked to the back of the laboratory. "Loren? I have work for you."

A ginger haired, young woman in a cream colored, low cut blouse, short brown skirt with a lace fringe, and a tight, leather apron hurried over. Her face had a beautiful innocence to it made all the more lovely by her vapid expression. "Yes, Doctor?"

Lucida pointed to Frisk. "Take him to Gerson and be of assistance to him."

Frederick looked between the two. "Gerson?"

She turned to him. "He's some sort of strange, sentient turtle creature. And he knows more about these caves than anyone." Reaching out, she smoothed thin fingers over Loren's hair before cupping her cheek. "Loren will take you to Gerson and then accompany you to rescue Charlotte. Unlike Sans and Papyrus, she is only of a normal intelligence and very docile. She is physically as strong as her older brothers, but you'll find that she understands her own strength, and is surprisingly gentle. Feel free to make use of her however you like."

Dr. Gaster thought about that for a moment. "In fact, I would appreciate it if you made use of her in a sexual manner."

Frisk's jaw dropped. "What?!"

"When molding her flesh, I took care to make sure she was capable of such actions. Something her older brothers are incapable of. I wish to know how she'll react to the intrusion on her person, so be careful to note that."

Frisk glared at her. "I will do no such thing!"

The doctor shrugged, disappointed but not overly so. "Very well then." She put a hand on Loren's shoulder. "Do you understand what to do?"

"Yes, Doctor. Take him to Gerson and help him free my sister from Madam Glass."

Lucida ran a hand along Loren's shoulder. "Good girl. So very attentive."

"Am I to disregard the last task?" There was something of annoyance in Loren's tone, though it may have just been Frederick's imagination.

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Hmmm..." She thought about it for a moment. "Yes. If the young man is uninterested then it really wouldn't be helpful to force the subject."

Loren turned to him, gray eyes watching him with little interest. "Follow me, Sir."

Frederick frowned but followed after her as she walked to the back of the lab. Pushing open a door between a set of cabinets revealed a hallway much like you would find in a hospital with a tiled floor and walls painted in a soothing blue. The air smelled heavily of disinfectant. They passed several
doors with windows and inside, revealing multiple sightless humans resting in beds.

"What is this place?"

"Do you mean this specific place? It is a hospital. The doctor takes care of the pale kind, though Madam Glass has been taking many of them as slaves of her own."

He frowned. "Why does she care? Or is that where she gets the parts for her experiments?"

Loren shrugged. "She does not take from them. We homunculi are made from her flesh and what remained of Father's flesh."

"What remained?"

Loren nodded once. "His body was kept in a special container that kept it alive and functioning many years after his brain was transferred to the computer. But it did eventually decay after the muscles atrophied. All that is left is DNA samples and those are preserved in the laboratory."

He thought about that for a moment. "All right. So why are you flesh and blood while Sans and Papyrus are skeletal?"

They reached the end of the hallway and Loren looked up at him with her dead expression. "It is my understanding that they have skin and choose to appear otherwise."

She opened a door and led him out into a cavern. Electricity had been strung through this part of the cave and it gave the white and yellow rock a warm glow. Stalactites like a thousand broadswords hung together in a tight formation off to the right of a wood plank walkway with railing on both sides. Loren traversed the walkway, her boots clicking against the wood as they passed between thick stalactites to find a staircase leading to a platform closer to the white and yellow sword-like stalactites.

Ascending to the platform revealed a small, slant roofed shrine on a pole, painted baby blue. Inside was a white statue of the Virgin Mary, her hands held in prayer, eyes closed. Several beaded rosaries were draped over the shrine, the glass and metal shining softly in the golden light. Loren stopped and looked at the shrine for a few moments, before moving along to an opening in the ceiling. Grabbing the rope that dangled down, she climbed up easily, hand over hand, her legs dangling behind her. When Frederick grabbed the rope, she pulled, drawing him up in one swift motion.

He blinked at her. "Thank you."

She nodded once and turned, continuing to lead him into a cave that grew dark for a few moments before being overtaken by a blue glow. The sound of rushing water filled Frisk's ears and they stepped into a system of underground rivers and streams filled with glowing blue waters. Glowing blue flowers and crystals lined the walls. Frederick stopped for a moment and wished he could photograph it. Chara and Asriel would both find this place fascinating.

He frowned and turned to Loren. "Do you understand what Dr. Gaster was asking me to do to you?"

Even as her face remained expressionless, Loren sighed. "She said that I'm of average intelligence." She looked to him with that beautiful, blank face. "I am not an idiot, Prince Frederick. I know who you are. I know who Madam Glass is, and the danger she represents. And I do know what intercourse is though I lack that experience personally." She looked away. "I am well aware that the doctor will want me to return to her with Charlotte. She will want to see my sister."

Frederick peered at her in the glowing dark. "You're quick to call her a sister."
"My brothers, who are much more intelligent than I, call her sister. It is only appropriate that I do as well." Loren stopped along the path at a dark cave entrance. "Gerson is in here."
Charlotte woke with a groan. Everything felt stiff and her neck burned with a sharp pain. She attempted to touch her head and found her wrists bound to the arms of a sturdy, wooden, wheelchair, her ankles tied to the foot rests.

"It's about time you woke up. I was getting rather bored."

Charlotte blinked rapidly, attempting to clear the fuzziness from her eyes. Once her vision cleared she saw a red haired woman in a white, short sleeved blouse with a lace collar, and a long black skirt with a fascinator of silk flowers in her hair. A pretty, little, carved shell cameo brooch held the lace collar tightly closed around her neck. She could not have been older than twenty five and she sat with her legs crossed in front of Charlotte. The pain in her neck crawled up to her head and she squeezed her eyes shut against stabbing sensation.

"I'm not one for drawn out monologues explaining my reasons for things, so I'll get to the point. You're going to build me a replica of the engine you designed for the Dalion."

Charlotte grimaced and gritted out, "Why?" She let out a pained breath. "Do you have a ship as massive as that?"

Madam Glass shook her head. "Oh, no no no. I have no interest in airships. What I do have interest in is the surface world. The ground underneath us is merely the interior crust of a planet. We live in a massive underground cavern. I intend to blow that crust open and reveal the true sky."

Chara lifted her nose, glaring through the pain. "You're insane. We're not in some cave. The sky is plainly above us."

"Interesting words… coming from someone from the surface world."

Chara scowled at her before squeezing her eyes shut against the pain in her head. "Oh please."

Glass stood and leaned over Charlotte. Using one long, gloved finger, she lifted Chara's chin so that their eyes met. "A fifteen year old girl in synthetic blend clothing, washed up from a river of Aqua Vitæ in Faduwan, a village outside the crystal city of Telos, speaking a foreign tongue that very few in Agartha understand, and talking about a world above five years ago." Glass turned to Charlotte. "Isn't that right, Jane?"

Chara swallowed hard, and frowned. "Who?"

Glass smiled in a softly amused way. "You're a bad liar, Jane Smith." The woman smiled slowly. "Don't you want to know what's happened to your parents since you fell into Agartha? Your friends?"

Charlotte's eyes narrowed. "I never knew my parents."

Glass chuckled as she stood. "Well, I suppose that's true. They left you alone, often for weeks on end, to fend for yourself. You never knew when they'd be home or if they'd remember that you existed."

Charlotte shook her head, trying to shake away the words.
"You forged their signatures on every piece of schoolwork because if you reminded them you were there, that never went well for you. Your bed sat in a closet because a home office was more important than a bedroom for you."

Tears squeezed their way out of Charlotte's eyes. "Stop..." she whispered.

"As neurosurgeons, they were rather wealthy and wore the best clothing, drove the best cars, and ate the best food. But they never thought to do simple things like buy clothing or toiletries for you. You did odd jobs for neighbors to get just enough money to buy the things you needed at the nearest store. The only reason you survived infancy is because your late grandmother cared for you."

Charlotte shivered, tears dripping down her cheeks. "Stop..."

Glass began to walk in a circle around her captive. "She died when you were, what? Seven? Eight? And you spent that last year caring for her. You're not even sure there was a funeral. If there was, you certainly weren't taken to it."

Charlotte whined softly, desperate to halt the flow of her tears.

"But that wasn't the worst, was it? Your parents left you alone for three months while on a book tour, and to feed yourself, you arranged to stay over with this schoolmate or that until you couldn't do it without being suspicious. And then you resorted to waiting until the local grocery store would throw out old food, which you would dig out of the trash."

Charlotte glared up at the woman, shaking against her bonds. " Shut up. Just shut up."

Glass smiled as she leaned over, eye to eye. "And even though you try to forget, you still hear your mother's voice in your dreams at night, still see your father's smile." Glass smiled, her angelic face glowing just a little. "You still want their love and wouldn't they be proud of you now? Their little girl grew up to be a beautiful genius. Don't you want to go to the surface and show them?"

Charlotte spit in her face.

Glass frowned and pulled a lace handkerchief from a pocket hidden in the folds of her skirt. "Well, I'd hoped that would be enough to spur you to my cause, but I suppose not." She daintily wiped the spittle from her face. "I could threaten to cut off your legs. As someone who enjoys her morning runs, that would be a special kind of hell for you to have your mobility stripped. But my research on you indicates that such a threat would get me nowhere, and were I to actually carry out such a torture, you'd commit suicide to spite me. And a corpse is less than useful to me."

She folded the handkerchief and put it back in the hidden pocket. "There is, however, another method at my disposal that will force you to work." She walked over to a curtain covering the wall behind her. "My research shows that you will not break if I threaten you. However, you will do anything if it means the lives of others. Even complete strangers."

Glass reached over and pulled on a thick, decorative rope, drawing the curtain back to reveal a window into an adjacent room. What appeared to be a family of four was surrounded by black painted, weaponized automatons. The father, a man in a fine, dark red, suit coat very fashionable in New Home, stood as protectively as he could over the mother, an uncorseted woman in a very plain dress, and two small, pale girls in the simple, pale shifts that Dero slaves wore.

Glass pressed a button, activating a square communications device mounted on the wall. "Dispose of the man."

One automaton skewered the father in a red flash, blood splattering the mother and daughters. Their
screams were muffled as the curtain came back down, and the father's limp body was dragged away.

"NO!" Chara screamed. She stared at Glass, wide eyed and panicked. "Why?! Why did you kill him?!"

Glass walked back over to Charlotte and leaned over so they were eye to eye. "So that you understand that I am serious in my intentions. Build me my engine and the other three live."

Charlotte's head dropped, tears in her eyes.

"And be on your best behavior while you work, Miss Smith. Or I will be giving you pieces of those little girls as presents. Do we understand each other?"

Charlotte nodded, tears dripping from her eyes.

"Good." Glass stood and came around to the back of the wheelchair. She pushed Charlotte out of the room and down a long, white, and brightly lit hallway. Making a sharp left turn into a swinging door they came into a room that looked like an exact replica of her workshop back in the Royal Laboratory. Two long, thin, cherry wood tables lined the room on both sides. On one table lay drafting materials: long rolls of paper, pencils, rulers, and slide rules. On the other lay manufacturing materials: various lengths of metal wire, pieces of wood, and tools. The tables stood on top of a thick, floral patterned carpet of reds and greens. Paintings like the ones in her workshop back in New Home graced the walls.

Glass leaned in, her mouth at Charlotte's ear. "What do you think? It looks just like home, doesn't it?"

Charlotte closed her eyes and breathed slowly to keep from vomiting.

Glass stepped away and pushed on a door to the left, revealing a water closet with a sink and cabinet next to the toilet. "Here is the washroom." She walked a few steps to another door and pushed it open as well, revealing a small bedroom with a comfortable looking blue and yellow quilt over a single bed, and a dark wood chest of drawers. "Here is the bedroom." She walked over to a curtain hanging on the wall and pulled it back to reveal the mother and her two girls on the other side, still surrounded by automatons. The one that had stabbed the father was back in place, though blood and chunkier bits of flesh still clung to the arm that had done the impaling. "And here is your incentive."

Charlotte inhaled quickly.

Glass walked back over to Charlotte, pulling a small knife from her pocket. "Now, let's talk about what your continued good behavior will net you besides the lives and whole bodiedness of the woman and the girls."

She knelt and carefully cut the bounds from Charlotte's ankles. "The chest of drawers in the bedroom is supplied with clothing that will fit you. The washroom has various toiletries. You will be brought three meals a day as well as tea and cake in the afternoon. With each meal will be a menu for the next. Be sure to mark your preferences on the menu for the kitchen staff. Good behavior will net you access to the bath house, the library, and time in the regular dining room as opposed to taking your meals in the workshop. Extra good behavior will net you crochet hooks and yarn."

She cut the bounds from Charlotte's wrists. "Though I expect you to complete this project quickly, I understand that quickly will mean at least two weeks depending on whether or not I have the materials you need. So your first task will be to give me a list of the things you will need to build the engine including the manpower, and what skills that manpower will need."
Glass pocketed her knife before she stood and held out both hands to Charlotte. Charlotte rubbed her wrists for a moment before attempting to stand on her own. Her knees buckled and Madam Glass quickly caught her, cradling Charlotte in a loving manner.

"Now, now. The drug that knocked you out was rather powerful. You'll feel better tomorrow morning, but until then, accept the assistance. I'm sure your head is pounding, but a cup of tea will set that to rights."

Glass walked Charlotte over to the table set up with drafting materials and helped her to sit at a chair. Charlotte's head began to pound full force again, and she rested her forehead on the table. Madam Glass gently petted Charlotte's hair before reaching for a ceramic teapot and pouring a cup of golden flower tea.

"Drink this. It will settle the headache. As soon as you feel well enough to do so, write your needs on the paper. Your dinner will be arriving soon."

Charlotte lifted the teacup and swallowed the hot liquid quickly, uncaring as to the burn on her tongue and throat. There was a commotion in the next room and Charlotte dropped the cup. She turned quickly, falling out of the chair to the floor as her legs betrayed her. Even so, she was able to see the woman and children being led out of the room.

"What are you doing to them?!"

Madam Glass smiled and lifted Charlotte from the floor. "I can't keep them in there all the time, now can I?" She sat Charlotte back in the chair. "The woman and children will be under threat from just after breakfast until a little after tea time every day until the engine is complete. I do not expect you to work after dinner or before breakfast, though doing so will net you privileges faster."

Glass set a pencil in her hand and she stared at it for a moment, before writing out the list of needs.

"Oh very good." Glass smiled happily. "Tomorrow I will come by with the plans for the device that will blow open the crust so that you can draw up the necessary connections to the engine."

Charlotte handed her list. "I may need more or different materials depending on the connection to your device."

Glass took the list with a self satisfied smile. "I understand. If such is the case, simply give me a list of those needs."

zone of the pale kind, a sightless, human male in plain, linen trousers and a plain, linen shirt with a short brown hair came in the workshop, pushing a cart with a domed platter. The human stopped, listening carefully for a moment before carefully maneuvering the cart over to the table. He lifted the dome lid to reveal a bowl of vegetable soup, a plate filled with roasted chicken and mashed potatoes covered with a side of gravy, a plate of bread and cheese, a slice of cake, a glass of wine, and a pot of tea. He carefully placed each item in front of Charlotte before lifting a piece of paper from his pocket and laying it next to her silverware.

Charlotte pressed her lips together, but refused to be rude. "Thank you."

The sightless eyes could not see her, but his head still turned in her direction. A voice like honeyed brandy flowed from his lips. "You are very welcome, Miss. Please remember to make your selections on the paper menu for breakfast. I will be back in an hour for your dishes." He turned and pushed the cart out of the workshop.

"Well, Miss Smith. I'll leave you to dinner. I had the staff bring you something more substantial than
usual since you did not have lunch. By the time you finish it, your legs should be steady enough to get you to bed."

Charlotte frowned. "Featherstone. My name is Charlotte Featherstone."

Madam Glass tapped her chin with one finger. "I suppose Charlotte does suit you better. For a girl as beautiful as you are, you certainly didn't deserve a name as plain as 'Jane.'" Madam Glass sighed, but not in an exasperated manner. "Very well. If it means that I'll see good work out of you, Miss Featherstone it is." Her smile turned awful. "Even if it is a lie."

Glass turned, pushing open the door, and Charlotte watched to see where the key to the door was hidden. A key did not appear.

"You aren't going to lock the door?"

"Of course not." Glass turned and smiled warmly. "Consider it the first test of your good behavior."

The door swung shut and Charlotte was left alone with her meal.

Charlotte stared at the food for a few moments before her stomach kicked in with the growling. The food was delicious and she wasn't sure how she felt about that. She looked at the breakfast menu and took a pencil to it quickly, doing her best not to think to hard about her compliance. When she'd finished eating, she stacked her dishes before using the table to lift herself up carefully. Her legs were still wobbly, but she could manage to walk if she went slowly.

Heading for the water closet first, she looked at herself in the mirror, carefully checking her head and neck in the mirror. She didn't appear to have any injuries, and the pain in both places was now a dull ache. Partially undressing, she checked places she couldn't see on herself without the mirror. Finding no strange devices or weird marks, she stumbled into the bedroom and passed out on top of the quilt.

She woke to the sound of someone in the workshop. Rolling to her feet, and she found she felt much better, the pain in her head and neck gone. Her legs appeared to be working properly as well. Taking a peek into the room, she found one of the pale kind dusting the room, a female. This one's eyes were a dark brown, indicating that she could see.

Charlotte opened the top drawer on the chest and found several pieces of under clothing: panties, chemises, corset liners, bras, socks, and one set of stays, though they needed to be 'seasoned.' The second drawer was filled with blouses and jackets, all neatly folded. The third drawer held carefully folded skirts. The fourth drawer held trousers. The final drawer on the bottom held extra blankets.

Pulling off her blouse and skirt she saw that her little leather tool pouch had not been discovered where it was tied to her leg. Finding the contents intact, she smiled a little. After checking the clothing for foreign devices, she changed into a new pair of green trousers, white blouse, and green vest.

Checking on the woman and finding her at the task of sweeping, Charlotte went into the bathroom. She found the cabinet arranged exactly as it was with her things at home. A jar of coconut oil rested next to a small hour glass that counted twenty minutes. A toothbrush and remineralizing toothpaste waited next to that. A jar of dark, unfiltered honey and a floral, sugar scrub rested on the shelf below the toothpaste. A jar of deodorant paste sat next to the scrub.

Charlotte shivered and wondered who among the few people allowed at the house was the one to reveal such personal preferences. She opened the coconut oil, spooning out a bit, and swished it around in her mouth after flipping the hour glass. While she swished, she washed her faced with the
sugar scrub and opened her blouse enough to reach in and apply the deodorant paste. As she brushed out her hair and rebraided it, the sand ran out, and Charlotte spit the oil in the wastebasket, rinsed her mouth with warm water, and brushed her teeth.

Coming out of the bathroom, she found the pale girl had gone. The room through the window was still empty but for the automatons, though it appeared the one that had been covered in gore was now clean. The blood spray that had covered the room and the other automatons had been scrubbed away. The clock over the window indicated that it was only a little after eight.

Walking over to the tables, Charlotte flipped through the long sheaves of paper and found them all blank and ready for use. She frowned, wondering if Glass had a copy of the original plans, and so would be able to tell if she was creating a falsified design. She thought about that for a moment. This engine would be hooked up to a device, not a ship, so the design would need to be altered. She wondered how much altering she could get away with to make it so that the device could not be run at all.

Rather than sitting down to draw out a set of plans, she went over to the second table and began cutting lengths of the wood to build a model. The door opened, and another sightless, human male, this one with translucent skin and little hair from his ancestors having been bred for generations in the dark, pushed in a cart with breakfast. Charlotte couldn't make out an age on him, his face being strangely smooth in some parts and heavily wrinkled in others. He carefully stopped the care at the drafting table and laid out the breakfast along with a paper menu.

"Thank you."

He paused as he pushed the cart out of the room and nodded, before leaving her alone.

Charlotte sat to eat, but her stomach soured as the woman and two girls were herded into the room behind her, the children whimpering as they clung to each other. Sighing, she took a quick pencil to the menu, which appeared to be for the entire day this time, and left the rest of her breakfast untouched. Instead, she sat back and looked around the room, this time with a different eye. An eye that'd grown up in a world where she was constantly monitored by teachers, authority figures, and security cameras, if not her own parents.

Without moving her head, her eyes checked every corner and niche, every surface and painting. She saw none of the tell tale reflective surfaces. She stood and walked back to the wood lengths on the next table, and while cutting the wood, she looked again. Charlotte frowned. Glass wanted to open the crust, but why? None of the technology that made the surface so dangerous to Agartha appeared anywhere. How did Glass know so much about her? So many little tidbits that she'd never spoken of to anyone, not even Sans. She continued to cut lengths from the wood and began setting them with the epoxy left behind.

The door swung open and Glass came into the room wearing a long, dusty blue, work apron with large pockets over a simple blouse and skirt. Her hair was still perfectly coiffed with its floral fascinator and the cameo brooch was still pinned at her neck. She placed a rolled up paper on the drafting table and glanced at the uneaten breakfast.

"Not hungry, Miss Featherstone? I see you've been working early. That does please me."

Charlotte frowned and went over to the drafting table. "Would these be the plans for your device?"

"Oh yes. Please have a look. I'm sure you'll find them brilliant."

Charlotte unrolled the paper and found the plans for a large machine that would burrow through the
ground by way of an energy beam. The machine was elegant in design, but flawed, using the wrong wiring for the wrong components. It would produce the desired burrowing effect, just not very well. Adding more power to it in the form of her engine would make it more powerful for a few seconds before it exploded from the overload.

"This is brilliant. Did you design this?"

Instantly pleased, Madam Glass smiled, eyes completely shut, and rolling her shoulders a little. "I did."

Charlotte bit her tongue to keep her face neutral. Pressing her luck a little, Charlotte traced a finger along one of the wiring lines with the alchemical symbol for copper over it. "This wiring is mercury filled, correct?"

There was a moment of panic on Glass’ face before it smoothed over with a smile. "Of course!"

Charlotte smiled like she’d found a friend, letting it reach and crinkle around her eyes. "Have you built it yet?"

"Oh no! I was waiting until I was sure it could be connected to the engine for power." Another lie.

Charlotte tapped the paper. "The coupling design here is too small. If you widen it, it will allow more power to enter the device and increase the energy beam's output."

"Excellent! I can handle that. Is there anything else about the design I should change or correct?"

If Charlotte hadn't been sure that Glass was lying about having created the device, she was now. Was the other person a captive like her? The design of the machine certainly gave the impression that that was the case. Then again, what might be in front of her was a test. Pointing out the flaws would give away the other engineer. If the other engineer was on Madam Glass’ side, not pointing them out would give her away as attempting to sabotage the endeavor. But if this was a test, there was more than one way to subvert it.

Charlotte smiled. "Give me a moment."

She sat down at the drafting table, pulled out a sheaf of paper, and drew one of the preliminary versions of her engine. Diving into the detail, she left multiple mistakes very similar to the earliest drafts of the engine design before she figured out the way to harness the perpetual loop. This engine would work, but it would fail after the third use from overload. Pulling over the draft of the device, she made multiple notes on the coupling size before pointing at part of the wiring.

"This wiring is inefficient." She pointed to a modulator in the device. "Arrange it away from the modulator." Rolling up both papers together, she handed them to Glass. "With that you should be able to make some adjustments for efficiency."

Glass took the rolled up papers in both hands. "My dear, I think you've just earned yourself a little privilege." She shivered, like she was holding something of great pleasure as she smiled. "I'll look this over and be back after lunch. Until then, you are allowed to enter the hallway outside this room and make use of the library across the hall." Her smiled turned dark. "Do not attempt to leave the hall by either exit or one of your pieces of incentive will also be making an exit."

Charlotte frowned and Glass turned, almost skipping out of the room. Letting out a held breath, she looked to the window and the girls with their mother, all three partially obscured by an automaton. Either the engineer on the other end was working for Madam Glass, at which point they would have to concur that Charlotte was helping by pointing out issues in the device, or they would be captive as
well and attempt to up the ante. She'd find out after lunch.

But for now, she was interested in exploring the library. Entering the overly white hallway she saw the exits on either end. Two doors were positioned a good fifteen feet from each other, one marked 'bath' and the other 'library.' She chose the door on the right, opening it easily, and finding that library was indeed the word to describe it.

The room was three stories tall with three floors of bookshelves arranged against the walls with two, beautifully carved, spiraling staircases at the front of the room to take you to each of the two room spanning balconies that made the second and third floor books accessible. The books on the first floor stopped at a large, stone fireplace, the wood in it's hearth glowing warmly. The books on the two levels above stopped at a very old and massive map of the earth depicted as two circles. As was common from these old maps, it was meant to be decorative and so lacked large pieces of functional information as well as being inaccurate to the modern world.

The ceiling above was covered by a huge piece of stained glass worked in a floral pattern, and though light shone through it, it appeared to be from lamps and not from the light of Agartha's sun. The middle of the floor welcomed a comfortable couch and several comfortable chairs arranged around a long and wide coffee table. Two display cases flanked the little 'living room' in the center of the floor.

Walking over to the display case on the left, Charlotte looked over the contents. Inside where historical artifacts of the surface each with a little card explaining the history and significance of the item. A small, golden statue of a goddess from Ancient Egypt stood next to a set of coins from Rome. An illuminated bible lay next to a set of ancient Greek pottery. In the case on the other side lay a piece of armor from a some long dead knight's uniform next to Native American arrowheads. A small replica of a much larger totem pole rested next to a set of crumbling jewelry.

Items from Japan, or any part of Asia for that matter, were nowhere to be found, which Charlotte found a bit odd. There was also nothing even remotely modern. No cellphones, no game consoles, no computers, no televisions. It was like the world stopped around 1900. Frowning, Charlotte took a closer look at the artifacts and quickly reasoned why. They were all taken from the same museum, likely a small college one with items found by faculty and students. They even had the original display cards, in American English, the typeface on the paper a Helvetica derivative and nothing like what you would find in Agartha.

Charlotte snorted and climbed up to look at the shelves upon shelves of books just as a knock was heard at the door.

"Miss Charlotte?" a small voice called.

She came down the stairs to find a pale, sightless woman in a simple dress wringing her hands nervously. "I'm here."

The woman instantly brightened. "Oh good! Your lunch is ready." She turned and Charlotte followed her back into the workshop. Breakfast had been cleared away and a robust lunch of turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes with gravy waited for her. A plate with bread still warm from the oven and a glass of white wine completed the meal. Her hunger finally catching up to her, Charlotte sat and ate, finishing as Madam Glass rushed into the workshop, laying the papers down on the drafting table.

Glass pointed to the draft of Charlotte's engine. It was covered in notes and multiple alchemical symbols in the same handwriting as on the device. "This is not the engine you used on the Dalion."
Charlotte blinked. "Of course not. The engine of the Dalion would completely destroy the device by overload the first time you ran it. That engine was made for that monstrosity of a ship." Charlotte stood and forcefully pointed at the paper. "This engine has the same power core design, but made to work with your device. Your device needs more power, but too much will undo all your work. You would never break through a Dero made cave wall let alone the crust of the surface."

Charlotte crossed her arms over her chest and huffed. "You designed the device. You should know how capable it is of handling an overload."

Glass paused, any fury that might have been in her suddenly blown away. The idea that Charlotte would have started by making something specifically for her having never occurred to her. She took a breath and the prim, in control woman returned. "What do you think of these modifications?"

Charlotte pulled the chair over and sat to look over the drafts. The notes all over her engine were not pointing out the flaws, but doing them one better. With the design altered as such, the engine itself would detonate. She looked at the draft of the device. A circle was made next to to her notes with a check mark inside it. A sign that her adjustment had been made. Meaning that the device had already been completed and only awaited a power source.

"The device and the engine both need adjustment so they can work together." She sat down and wrote a list. "I need these materials to make a small scale test of the engine design. I'll also want to test it in a large room with a clear shield so if it explodes, I'm not dealing with being laid up for a few weeks because of shrapnel."

Madam Glass took the list and looked it over. "I can have these items to you tomorrow morning." She looked over the paper at Charlotte, expression carefully composed. "Will the hallway outside the door be enough room to work with?"

Charlotte nodded. "The doors at the end where the device will be will need to be sealed for the test and we'll need a clear shield to the other side, but it can happen as soon as I have three test engines ready."

Glass smiled and touched the cameo at her neck. She walked over to the window and pushed a part of the curtain aside to reveal a communication box like the one in the other room. Charlotte gasped. "No! Don't hurt them!"

Glass chuckled. "Oh no, dear. I have no intention of doing that. I am, in fact, very pleased." She pressed the button on the box. "The girls are free for the rest of the day."

The door into the room opened and the three rushed out quickly.

Glass turned back to Charlotte. "Now, I believe you have earned a special privilege and, since you cannot work on the test engines until tomorrow, it is one I insist you use this instant."

She took Chara's hand and led her out the door and into the one labelled 'Bath.' Inside was not a bath. It was a bathhouse. The front lobby was carpeted in a lovely green with white, ivy wrapped pillars making a corridor of the room. In the middle stood a green and blue tiled fountain on top of which sat three naked and beautiful, stone mermaid statues in the act of lovingly grooming each other. Behind that stood a cherry wood desk stained a dark red. A fish woman in a simple, blue dress sat behind the desk with her bare, webbed feet resting in a decorative bucket of water.

"Darya, this is Charlotte Featherstone, and you are to give her the full treatment."

Darya lifted her dark blue, webbed feet from the bucket, and stood. "Yes, Madam Glass." She
motioned for Charlotte to follow her. "This way, Miss Charlotte."

Charlotte followed the fish woman into a comfortable dressing room painted a soft beige and decorated with paintings of beautiful women relaxing. Seven women, some sightless and some with faded blue eyes sat in a set of chairs to the side, talking quietly. The eldest two women wore short, white dresses while the younger ones wore a pair of panties or nothing at all.

"This is Miss Featherstone and she is to be given the full treatment. Since we only do a full treatment on rare occasions, I will give you run down of the procedure. She is to be bathed, and after she is relaxed to be given a sugar polish. By the time that is finished, it will be tea time. After tea she is to receive a massage, followed by a facial. You will then wash and dry her hair, followed by styling it. A manicure and pedicure with yet another massage will finish the treatment."

The women stood and surrounded her as Darya stepped away. Soft hands and nimble fingers gently lifted her clothing. The vest and blouse were off quickly and neatly folded before being laid on a table. Her corset came unlaced, the front busk opened as she was lifted off the floor to remove her trousers and panties. Suddenly naked, Charlotte attempted to cover herself with her arms.

Madam Glass chuckled from the door. "Relax, dear. The women of the bath will take good care of you."

A hand reached up, massaging the back of her neck while another pulled her hand away from her chest. The women moved her as one into the bath area proper.
Chapter 7

Frederick peered into the dark cave. "Hello?"

A humongous turtle head shot out of the cave, knocking Frederick to the ground. A deep voice rumbled from the turtle, chuckling at the prince. "Well, hello!"

One large eye rolled over to Loren. "Your mother letting you out and about today?"

Loren nodded once. "I'm to accompany Prince Frederick to find my sister. Madam Glass kidnapped her and the most direct route to Glass' base of operations is impassable."

"Sister? Your mother birth another one?"

Loren shook her head. "Papyrus adopted her."

"No kidding!"

Frederick sat up, brushing himself off, and remained sitting as he regarded the turtle. "Would you happen to know a way there?"

The turtle smacked its large mouth a little, the wet sound echoing. "The only way from here is through an ancient... temple..." The turtle's large eyes blinked a few times and he yawned widely. "Apologies..." He yawned again, resting his chin on the ground. "You woke me..." He gasped suddenly, eyes opening wide in an attempt at alertness, before a blissful smile took his mouth and his eyes closed fully. He was snoring in an instant.

Loren's face remained emotionless, but she snorted, humored. She sat down next to the turtle's head and leaned back against it, closing her eyes.

Frederick sighed. "Passing out already?"

 Without opening her eyes, Loren rolled her shoulders, getting comfortable. "He won't wake for a while. It is best to rest."

Frederick crawled over to her. Sitting next to her, he leaned back against the turtle. "Will we be safe here?"

She nodded. "No one will attack while Gerson is here. If he feels the need to move the consequences are, well, devastating."

"How'd he get like this?"

Loren turned her head and the first expression he'd seen on her face appeared: disappointment.
Frederick rolled his eyes. "He fell asleep."

"For a thousand or so years."

Frederick put his head back, said a prayer for Chara and Nacarat's safety, and went to sleep.

He woke up hours later when Gerson moved, his stomach rumbling. Sitting up properly, he opened his locket. "Food basket, please."

A picnic basket appeared in front of him and he popped it open, looking at the contents. He wasn't sure how, but the basket was always full, always fresh, and refilled itself after use. Inside was a selection of sandwich meats, cheeses, breads, spreads, hard boiled eggs, and a few bottles of various liquids. He reached over, putting a hand and Loren's shoulder, and gently shook her awake. She yawned and sat up.

"Hungry?"

She nodded and scooted over to look in the basket. "Where did this come from?"

"My bag of holding. What are you hungry for?"

"Bread, cheese, and a hard boiled egg will be enough."

Frederick pulled out a napkin and handed it to her before handing her the food. He made himself a sandwich and chewed thoughtfully while they waited on Gerson to wake up. Checking his pocket watch, he found it to be the next morning, and said another prayer for Chara and Nacarat's safety.

After cleaning up breakfast and putting the basket away, Gerson snorted. A slow smile curled his lips and he yawned happily. Smacking his mouth, his large eyes opened and rolled over to look at Loren.

"Now, where was I? Ah yes. Madam Glass' lair. You'll need to go through the ancient temple of Charn. Way back in the day it connected the old part of Telos to the surface. Ascending or descending was considered a spiritual act so you had to work your way through lots of puzzles."

Frederick raised an eyebrow. "We're under Mount Shasta?"

The turtle blinked. "Well, we are under part of what used to be Mt. Shasta. You know that pesky fault line up there? Tends to move things around a lot!"

Frederick snorted. "You mean YOU tend to move things around a lot."

The turtle chuckled and the cavern rumbled a little with his mirth.

"So the stories of the spiritual journeys associated with the mountain top side are true, huh?" He pulled his journal from the leather bag on his hip, and made notes in it. "The elders in Telos always have stories of a temple into the sky, but they seemed to think it was Agartha's sky, not the actual one. I assumed from that the temple of Charn decayed to nothing. I should have dug around a little harder to find it. I didn't think its placement would be so far from current day Telos since so much of Agartha stays in place."

The turtle eyed him. "Isn't that why you used the mountain to fall?"

Frederick gave Gerson a wry smile. "I didn't know Agartha existed. So I wasn't trying to get anywhere when I jumped." He frowned. "How did you know that?"

The turtle smiled large and wide. "When you fell, you landed in my hand. I'm the one who put you
in the aqua vitae."

"Did you catch Chara too? She fell five years after me."

"Oh no, boy! She didn't fall!"

Frederick shook his head. "I know. She was pushed. So you are aware of your extremities? Where are your other three feet?"

The turtle thought about that for a moment. "Oh, they're around here somewhere! Wa ha ha ha!"

Gerson twisted his neck a little stretching it. "You'll enter the temple through the front doors and need to climb to the top. It's been abandoned for quite some time so it's a mess of ruins, and it won't be easy. You'll still need to solve the puzzles the entire way up and in some cases, repair the mechanism so the puzzle works properly. At the top where it used to open up into Mt. Shasta is a storage area used by Glass' many servants. You can enter her base through there. Though I suggest you exit a different way."

Frederick nodded. "Got it. How do we get to the temple entrance?"

The turtle eyed Loren. "Keep going from here until you get to the lake. Instead of going around it, take one of the boats, and row straight across the lake from the dock. The temple will appear on the other side."

Loren nodded once. She turned and walked away.

Frederick groaned. "Wait! We still haven't thanked him for the information or asked what he wanted in return for it!"

Loren continued on.

Gerson chuckled. "Oh don't you mind that. She's just like her mum. All action and no time for courtesies."

Frederick turned and bowed. "Thank you, Gerson. What would you like in return?"

"Well, if you can get Madam Glass off of my shell on the one side, I'd appreciate it. The machine she's been building is digging into me."

He nodded. "I'll see what I can do about that."

Turning, Frederick hurried after Loren and found her walking along a path of glowing crystals, further into the dark. "How far are we from the lake?"

She shrugged. "Not far. Maybe a few minutes. Even with rowing, it won't take us long to get to the temple. You can see it from the lake edge."

"You've been there before?"

Loren shook her head. "I've just seen it while on errands for the doctor."

"Do you know what causes the crystals to glow?"

Loren shrugged. "I don't know. They just do. It's not a harmful radiation and it allows the glowing flowers here to grow without sunlight."

They reached the lake and the cavern opened, the ceiling disappearing with only the twinkling of
water dripping from stalactites being the only indication that sky was not above. They found the boats easily enough. Four flat bottom rowboats, all seaworthy, moored to a stone work dock that appeared to be in good repair. Someone obviously cared for them, but who, Frederick could not tell. No boathouse or nearby lodging gave that person away.

Across the way was what appeared to be a castle, lit up by the glow of the lake. Four white towers flanked a wide, arched doorway, reaching up, and disappearing into the roof of the cavern. A larger, thicker tower seemed to make up the middle behind the arched door. A circular, stained glass window of various hues rested in the stonework above the door, but it was dark and only a bit of the glow from the lake revealed some of the former beauty.

Frederick looked over the row boats, found one he liked, and held it steady for Loren to get on. He sat to row and she frowned at him.

"What are you doing?"

Frederick raised an eyebrow. "Rowing. These aren't magic boats."

"You're a prince. A prince does not engage in manual labor."

He sputtered and then burst out laughing, doubling over. "Oh God. That's actually funny! Do you think, with a mother like mine, that I could ever get away with not working?" He pointed to himself. "I'm human. You don't get a physique as nice as mine sitting on your ass all day. You work for it." He sniffed and wiped his eyes on one sleeve. "I don't even have a maid for my apartment in the palace."

He turned, still chuckling as he unmoored the boat, and cast them off. Rowing with only one oar, he turned them around in the water, and began rowing with both oars in earnest for the temple.

"I don't understand. You live a life a privilege, do you not?"

Frederick leaned back into the rowing. "Just because I'm a prince doesn't mean I work for a living. While my parents' wealth initially allowed me to pursue my interests, I am responsible for my own income and make a good amount between writing and teaching."

Loren thought about that for a moment. "It is not all you do though."

A smile tugged at his lips. "No. It is not all I do."

As predicted, they'd reached the temple quickly. Frederick had barely broken a sweat as the boat bumped gently against the temple's little dock. As he moored the boat, Loren nimbly leaped over him to the dock, walking up to the temple doors.

From across the lake, the temple looked whole, a glowing and beautiful place of spiritual enlightenment. Up close it was decayed. The doors that had shined from the other side of the lake only did so because of the luminous lichen that ate the original wood. Carefully pushing them open revealed a red marble, tiled corridor into the thick tower that made up the middle of the temple. The circular room opened on a long, rectangular gazing pool long grown fetid and overgrown with strange moss. Walking around it led to two stairways on either side of the pool. The stairways connected a moss covered bridge and two more stairways walking up to a stylized, owl face in the wall. The mouth of the stone owl hung open, and by the water that softly trickled from it, was once the entry for an indoor waterfall.

Frederick pulled out his journal, taking the time to sketch the owl's face, and take some notes. "It looks like it doesn't matter which staircase we take. Both lead to the same place, though I'm betting
one was for entrance and the other egress. I'm just trying to imagine a time when enough people to fill this place would be traveling up and down."

Loren offered no insights, instead climbing up the stairs on the right side of the owl's face, and entering a room with a dirt floor. The plant life that once filled the room was now dead. The long dead branches of gnarled trees and leafless bushes lined an obvious path up to a wall with three massive circles in it, one stacked on top of the next. The wall itself was filled with tons of tiny circles cut in it. Light shone through from the other side, but it wasn't a natural light. Climbing through the bottom most circle revealed a room with a single, electrical light hanging to one side among more dead trees.

Frederick looked up at the single, incandescent bulb. "Okay. That's just weird."

Loren shrugged like it didn't matter, walking the path to another set of stairs. He followed her up into the remains of a puzzle room. Four, tall, stone pillars stood in a row on a set of gears. Each pillar held up a set of stairs and manipulating the pillars would move the stairs around in such a way as to make a path up to the next floor. The pillars and the gears appeared to be in working condition, but the wooden stairs themselves were a rotted mess.

Frederick frowned at the mess. "We'll try lining up the stairs. The wood's rotted, but the stonework handrails appear to be intact. We can use those to climb."

Loren nodded. "Tell me what to do."

Frederick knelt down, looking over the gears. "It looks to be a matter of twisting them around, but moving one pillar will move another. A little trial and error should have it together." He pointed to a pillar near her. "You take that third pillar in the row and I'll take the first one." He ran his hand over the stone. "There are handholds along the side." He grabbed one of the holds on his pillar and turned it. The pillar he turned swung the first set of stairs forward and the second set away.

Frederick frowned at the mess. "Okay. If you turn your pillar three times and I turn mine four, they should come together."

Loren nodded and turned her pillar swinging both sets of stairs forward. Frederick swung his around, completing the stairs.

"That wasn't so bad."

Frederick frowned. "It's likely that the puzzles get harder as you get higher up." He tested the stonework handrail. "It seems stable. I'll go up first."

"How galant."

He resisted the urge to flip her off and climbed the stone work of the handrail. Half way up to the top, the handrail gave way underneath him and he jumped to grab the handrail further up only to have the third pillar collapse with it. He plummeted to the floor as a mass of vines and yellow flowers erupted up toward him. He landed in a tall goat pooka's arms.

Asriel, in his green shirted, leather vested, brown trousered glory, gave him a big, toothy grin. "Howdy, Brother!"

"Thanks for the save, Az."
"No problem!" Asriel jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "There's this crazy big turtle stuck in the rock down here."

"Yeah. He told us about this place."

Asriel set his brother down. "He told me he sent you this way." He gave Loren a bow. "And who might you be, my lady?"

"Loren. I'm the youngest of Dr. Gaster's homunculi children."

Frederick frowned. "What about all the ones in the jars?"

Loren shrugged. "She did not gestate them in her womb. They are other experiments birthed from animal wombs or hatched from eggs. Not siblings."

Frederick grimaced. "Okay." He looked up at Asriel. "What took you so long? Did mom try to keep you in New Home?"

"Nah. It's the caves. It's something about the crystals. It made homing in on you all wonky. Where's Nacarat?"

"With Chara. Hopefully, when we get up to the top of this temple, we'll find them together. But knowing Nacarat, she's probably been all over the base, trying to find a way out." Frederick turned back to the stairs. "Would you give us a hand with that?"

Asriel nodded and walked around the to first set of stairs. He knelt and vines flowed out from underneath his shirt sleeves, crawling up the handrails. The rotted wood of the stairs deaged, growing young, supple, and whole. When Asriel stepped back, the way up was passable again.

He held his arms over his puffed out chest, a proud smile on his face. "How's that?"

Frederick patted him on the shoulder. "Perfect."

They climbed up to the next room which contained multiple pillars in a circle around large fire pit that blazed merrily, the wood cracking. There was no visible exit to the room.

Asriel leaned over to Frederick. "What do you think?"

"I think it's weird that the fire there is bright and blazing like someone tends it."

"Me too."

The brothers looked over at Loren, but she wasn't paying attention to them. She was looking at a star chart on a wall with an inscription underneath it. She reached up, touching the star patterns, her gloved fingers gently brushing against them. The brothers joined her, though Frederick was far more interested in the script.

Asriel frowned at the words. "What language is this?"

"Lemurian. The language that the original inhabitants of Telos spoke."

Asriel touched the script. "Can you translate it?"

"Yeah." Frederick pulled his journal out of the leather bag on his hip, flipping it to a page covered in Lemurian script and the equivalent in Agarthan. He stood for a minute, looking over the letters and putting the words together. "The sun and the moon, but never a star."
Asriel turned to his brother. "Well, we aren't seeing the sun or the moon in here. Either of them."

"I'm pretty sure it's the clue to the room's puzzle." He pointed at each of the pillars. "Look. There are lots of pillars with stars, but only one sun, one moon, and one eclipse. There's your proof that whoever created the temple was from the surface. Stars and eclipses don't happen down here."

Frederick approached the four pillars, looking them over. "The Sun, Moon, Stars, and Eclipse are buttons."

Loren stared at the cluster of stone carved stars. "What is a star? Can you touch it? Can you eat it?" She frowned and looked at Frederick. "Are you a star?"

Frederick smiled at her sudden wonder and began to sing,

"A star is a mass of incandescent gas,
A gigantic nuclear furnace,
Where hydrogen is built into helium,
At a temperature of millions of degrees."

He chuckled a little. "I'm not a star. But, oh man! Even after all these years, I can't believe I still remember that song."

Putting his hands on Loren's shoulders, Frederick walked her over to the moon switch. Asriel took the sun switch, and Frederick went to the eclipse switch.

"On the count of three, we'll all push the buttons in at the same time. One. Two. Three."

All three pushed the buttons. Some mechanism turned somewhere and a wall slid away to reveal a set of stairs upward. As the brothers headed for the stairs, Loren paused, still looking at all the stars.

Frederick turned back. "Hey. Are you all right?"

"I..." The expressionless face twisted into a mask of sorrow. "I want to see the stars." She turned to him. "Why? Why do I want to see them?"

Frederick took her gloved hand in his, drawing her along. "Because you're human."

Loren shook her head. "I'm not human."

He pressed his lips together. "Your parents did something weird to conceive you, but that doesn't negate the fact that you are the offspring of two human parents. That makes you human. That you long for things you don't understand is okay. It's normal." He pulled her along. "Come on. If you want to see the stars that much, I can arrange taking you to see them. Until then, we need to find Chara."

Loren nodded, and as they ascended to the next room, the expressionless face fell back into place.

The next room was dominated by a massive, golden statue of a twenty armed woman seated with her legs crossed on the floor. Each of the twenty golden hands were empty and held out flat. The expression on her face was serene, the painted eyes gazing down on them with a great and unknowable wisdom. The doorway out rested in the crown on her head.

The rest of the room was falling apart. The, plaster peeled away from the walls to reveal a broken
mechanical system. The metal bars that acted as support beams and some corner pieces were all that was left of a set of mezzanines that would allow the potential puzzle solver to get a better view of certain parts of the statue. The puzzle mechanism in the floor in front of the statue had been pulled apart, and the pieces that were intact appeared to have decayed beyond repair.

Asriel elbowed his brother. "How much do you want to bet that all those hands are the steps and we have to get the arms to swing forward?"

"I'm not dumb enough to take that action." Frederick ran over to the wall, climbing up a ladder. "I'm going to get a closer look at this."

Asriel snorted, going to stand next to Loren. "Sure, we'll just wait right here."

Frederick rolled his eyes as he jumped from the top of the ladder to grab one of the support bars. Swinging himself along the bars, he monkeyed his way over to the statue.

Asriel sighed, arms crossed over his chest. "I'm exhausted just looking at you."

Frederick reached a corner where the masonry was still intact and paused to catch his breath. "Admit it, Az. You're impressed."

Asriel's wide smile returned. "I am! I'll throw you a banana."

Frederick snorted and looked along the back of the statue. "The whole mechanism in the wall behind the statue is completely gone. It looks like every arm was attached to it at some point, but we're out of luck."

Asriel lifted a brow. "Do you think I could pulled the arms into place then?"

Frederick nodded. "I think you could. Let me get down first in case moving the arms causes something to collapse. So how did you manage to get here without having Captain Alphys all over you?"

Asriel watched his brother swing back over to the ladder and slide down. "Oh, the usual. I turned into a tree and leafed."

Loren frowned at him. "I'm not sure you're joking."

Frederick rejoined them. "He is and he isn't."

"I did not know pooka had such powers. Typically you are beings of fire."

Asriel smiled wryly. "I needed a bit of 'punching up,' as it were, when I was born. I wasn't exactly a healthy newborn." He turned to the statue and knelt before it, hands touching the ground. Multiple vines spring out of the ground under the arms of the statue, carefully wrapping around the arms at the joints. Asriel stood, arms outstretched, and brought his arms together slowly. The vines slowly pulled inward, pulling the statues hands around. Once halfway through the pull, the arms swung into place, creating a stairway of golden hands up into the next room. Asriel left the vines in place as they walked up the hands, keeping the structure steady.

They ascended into the next room and stared at the wreckage that greeted them. The upper floors above them had almost completely fallen in. Puzzle parts and gear pieces littered the floor they stood on and what remained of the floors above was dark, foreboding. A series of metal ladders, that appeared to be in good condition, were attached to the wall.
Frederick frowned as he looked over the wreckage. "This is wrong. A floor or two falling in is not out of the ordinary, but there is a lot of debris missing for that to have been completely the case." He pointed to the ladders. "Those look new and well maintained."

"You think there's someone in here?" Asriel asked, looking around.

Frederick shook his head. "No. I think Glass has been cannibalizing the temple. All the good stuff is gone, leaving the debris behind."

"But what would she need all of these things for-"

Loren covered both of their mouths with her gloved hands and pointed up. A light had appeared above them and someone appeared to be climbing down the metal ladders between the floors. Quickly hiding behind a pile of debris, they waited as three men descended. All three were so pale as to have translucent skin under their workman's overalls, boots, and heavy gloves. One was sighted while the other two lacked eyes completely.

The one that still had eyes squinted at the paper in his hand. "The list says we need copper wire and sheet metal. We've really stripped this room down, we'll go into the side towers and see what we can find before heading into the room with the goddess statue."

One of the sightless ones reached out, touching the near wallin a familiar way. "We're getting really low on supplies and I don't feel right taking from this place. Just what is the Madam building?"

The second of the sightless shrugged. "You know how she's always going on about there being another sky and that we're actually underground? She says she's going to open the earth and reveal the 'true' sky."

"Do you believe that?" the sighted one asked.

The second sightless one shrugged. "The newer ones the Dero brought before the Madam came, they talk about a true sky. It's why they were so quick to pledge servitude to her. They want to go back."

"I suppose anything is better than these caves," the first sightless one commented. "Though, I don't know how welcome a bunch of blind rats will be in that place. From what a few of them said, they kill their young in the womb if they have even the slightest hint of deformity." His head shook. "No. I don't think it would be good for us at all."

The three walked over to a wall and pushed on it, revealing a hidden door, and an entrance into one of the thinner towers that flanked the temple. Beyond the door appeared to be beds and the remains of an old kitchen, a place for the weary to rest between puzzles. As soon as the men were out of earshot, they climbed up the ladders. At the top was a hatch that opened into a small cave. The cave had multiple shelves carved into the walls and each shelf was well labelled as to the contents with carved, raised letters. The storage area seemed to go on forever and they plodded through it, each step coming slower and slower.

Frederick stumbled, bumping into Asriel. The goat pooka stopped, putting an arm around his brother. He leaned down and whispered, "Forget to eat lunch and dinner again?"

Frederick frowned at his brother. "We're here."

"We have no idea how close we actually are. We've been walking through here for half an hour. And we have a lady with us, homunculus or not. Let's find a convenient place and eat at the very
Frederick frowned but nodded.

Loren pointed. "That set of shelving is false. There's a door behind it."

Asriel nodded. "Give me a moment to check it for safety." A vine slid under the false shelving and Asriel closed his eyes. "It's empty, and very dusty. It's not been used for a long time."

The sound of voices caught their attention. Frederick quickly found the switch to open the door and they hid inside a room carved out of the rock. Inside was a single, wooden table pushed against one wall. Frederick sat on the floor and summoned the food basket. All three built themselves sandwiches of meat and cheese, filling themselves.

Asriel swallowed a bite. "Any idea how close we are to Nacarat?"

Frederick nodded. "She's down the way we were heading and above us. So we're close." He checked his pocket watch. "Oh for the love of…" He huffed. "It's midnight."

He looked to Loren to ask her if she was tired and found her asleep, the last bites of her sandwich resting in the hand on her chest.

Asriel smiled. "We'll take that as our cue to sleep. Chara will be okay. We'll find her in the morning."
Charlotte shivered, a heavy jacket she'd found in the drawers wrapped around her shoulders, her corset pulled tighter than it needed to be. She worked to build three, small, test engines, but the materials kept slipping through her trembling fingers. Shaking, she poured herself a cup of tea, hoping it would steady her, but it only made the jitteriness worse. She glanced back and caught sight of the mother and children in the room behind her and turned away, eyes squeezed shut.

She supposed, in a detached way, that yesterday's treatment would have felt amazing had the circumstances been different. Even now, she could feel all those nimble hands on her, crawling over her skin, and leaving her cold. When they'd finished with her, she'd been wrapped up in a warm robe and placed in her bed. She'd fallen asleep at some point hours later, holding her hands between her legs to keep herself from scraping the polish from her fingernails, and reveal to Glass that she'd not been happy about the 'gift.'

Now, all she wanted was to be held, hence the heavy jacket and tight corset. And she was embarrassed to admit that, rather than Sans or Papyrus, she wished for Frederick's arms to be around her. Frederick was likely in New Home. At least, she hoped he was, and wasn't hurt or worse. And depending on where she'd been taken, Papyrus could be anywhere searching for her. She'd attempt escape on her own, but... She looked behind her again at the room of murderous automatons. Other lives depended on her.

At least she'd figured out Glass' weakness quickly enough. The woman liked it when people tailored things specifically for her. To the point that thinking of her without any sort of prompting made her happy enough to forget, momentarily, that you were her captive. Then again, if the bath had been any indication, the woman had no idea how to reward people. She only gave them what she liked, because, why would you like something else? Either that or she understood exactly how unrelaxing the treatment would be for a prisoner.

During the treatment, Glass had joined her, obviously enjoying the pampering. But even when completely naked, she'd kept the cameo on her. It'd been pinned in her hair rather than pinned to clothing. Charlotte frowned. Was that the mystical artifact she was using to keep her youth and vitality? If she snatched it away, would Glass age to dust before her eyes? In case it was the artifact, Charlotte was determined not to comment on it. It was easier to let it slide beneath notice and leave Glass vulnerable. Especially if it turned out to simply be a favorite piece of jewelry.

Charlotte sat at the crafting table, her head in her hands, sniffing a little as she attempted to calm herself.

"Hush, hush, Chara. It's okay." The tiniest hand in the world rested on her cheek.

Charlotte's eyes snapped open and she stared, wide eyed, at Nacarat, who stood on the table, her mask lifted from her tiny, elfin face.

"It's okay. I found a couple ways out."

Charlotte sat up, scooping the fae of flame up in one hand. "You've been here the whole time?!"

The little fairy nodded, smiling brightly. "Of course!"

"You must be famished."
Nacarat snorted. "Oh no. I'm fine. I snuck into your pocket just after you got off the train and snuck out of your pocket just after you got here. I've been wandering the place and found the kitchen pretty quick. This place is huge and looks like an old Dero facility that's been converted to Glass' use."

Charlotte frowned deeply. "But if you're here, Frisk will be coming for you. That will put him in danger."

The fae of flame smiled softly. "Oh Chara. That's why I'm here. So he can find you."

Charlotte shook her head. "That was foolish! You should have stayed with him."

Nacarat looked back toward the door. "He's getting close. Keep working as normal. I'll find him and guide him to you."

"No. Guide him away."

The fairy's face fell, and she reached out to touch Charlotte. "You want to be abandoned? But why? Why would you want that?"

Charlotte sighed. "Frisk is looking for you. Not for me. If you'd not come, he'd be safe in New Home right now. I'm not in danger here, but others are." She turned to the window. "See the woman and her children in the next room? If I leave or refuse to do the work, they will die. Glass has already killed their father."

Nacarat frowned, looking at the window for a moment. She flew over, looking through the glass at the room, noting the interior. "If we can safely free them, will you willingly leave?"

Charlotte frowned, her eyes looking over the new drafts Glass had dropped on her just after breakfast. The other engineer, whoever they were, had noted adjustments that would guarantee the explosion of the engine and the device. It'd kill them. But it would also kill Glass. If she escaped before that, would Glass complete the engine and finish herself off in the process?

Charlotte turned back to the tiny engine she'd been working on. She'd completed two and told Glass that they could test them that afternoon, which had the woman deliriously happy. The first of the three was designed to fail, but not catastrophically so, letting her pretend to make adjustments to the second and third. The second would also fail, leading to more 'adjustments.' The third would work and do so well. It would be enough to convince her to build the larger engine which would explode under the smaller, test engine's design.

She sighed. "If we can free them, I will willingly go."

Nacarat nodded, she flitted back over to Charlotte's hand. "Lunch is coming. Be sure to eat well. I'm going to find Frederick." She hopped from Charlotte's hand, her wings opening, and flew for the door, easily sliding through the gap between the door and the door jamb. Flying up high, she sped through the rafters, out of earshot of the sightless workers, and out of view of the sighted ones.

The ceilings were very high in these corridors, which made sense. The degenerate Dero were very tall and often very wide, using their tremendous sizes to intimidate their slaves. This made for easy passage for Nacarat as she'd flown from place to place. It had also made it easy to find hiding spots since she could spot them from high up. She'd spent the last two days following Glass' slaves around the facility, learning all the entrances and exits.

Glass' base of operations was very long, but not very wide, consisting of four long hallways stacked on top of each other with various rooms carved into the rock on either side of the hallways as needed. The bottom level was nothing but storage. The second level consisted of sleeping areas,
kitchens, and work areas for the slaves. The third level was filled with work and leisure areas, offices and work rooms often sat next to break areas. This level is where Charlotte was kept, on the far opposite end away from the engineer who'd been working on the device. The fourth level was Glass' personal luxury villa, having taken everything that was of real value and beauty from the original Dero space and appropriating it to her use.

Nacarat flew to the other end of the third level, sneaking a peek at the other engineer. He was a tall fellow, a dark red suited, professor type, even if he looked young for the part with his blonde hair and smooth face. By the lived in-ness of the his room, he'd been captive for a while, though it seemed no one was under threat for his compliance. He talked aloud to himself, as if he was instructing a class on the device he'd built, occasionally walking around it, gesturing to this or that piece.

Satisfied that he was safe, Nacarat flew to the nearby stairs, homing in on Frederick. He was two levels down in the storage area, having come up inside it. Finding the storage area, she flew along, homing in on Frederick, her heart lifting as she sped closer and closer to family. Finding him, she slammed hard against his neck, which felt more like a slap to him, hugging him tightly.

"I found you!"

Frederick's hand came up, cupping her against his neck. "You're safe." He let out long breath. "Are you well?"

"Yes! They don't know I'm here. Chara didn't even know I was here until a few minutes ago!"

His breath caught in his chest. "Is she all right?"

Nacarat frowned. "She's physically okay. Glass did something to her yesterday. It caused her to have nightmares all of last night and she's been shivering all morning." She hugged Frederick's neck again. "Glass has a woman and two children trapped in a room with automatons used for construction. It's incentive to make Chara work. Chara won't leave until they are safe. We'll need to free them."

Asriel nodded. "Is there anything else we should know?"

Nacarat leaned back to nod and caught sight of Loren. "Oh! Hello! Who are you?"

Frederick nodded to the expressionless homunculus. "This is Loren. She's Papyrus and Sans younger sister."

"Really?"

Loren nodded once. "I am born of the same womb. That makes me their sister, though I have not met them."

Nacarat looked up at Frederick and he shrugged.

The fae of flame smiled. "It is nice to meet you." She looked to Asriel. "A second engineer is also imprisoned here. He's two levels up, just above us. I'm pretty sure that he thinks he's having a contest with Chara about who can do the best job messing up Glass' plans. It's lunch time and if Glass follows her usual schedule, she will be in her private rooms to eat. The staff delivers food to Glass, Chara, and the other engineer before sitting down themselves to eat. The whole place just goes dead for a while, so we'll be able to get around without trouble."

Asriel smiled widely. "Excellent! Lead the way."
Nacarat nodded once before jumping backwards from Frederick's chest, wings opening. She flew ahead of them, leading them to the stairs. Waving for them to wait, she flew out of the stairwell, and checked on the second engineer. Lunch had been laid out for him, but he ignored it, writing away in a journal. Nacarat flew back and waved everyone up. She led them to the door of the second engineer's workroom.

Asriel and Frederick both looked in on him, before pushing open the door.

The man looked up from his meal and his jaw dropped. "Well, now I know I've gone insane. There is no way that the royal brothers Dreemurr would be standing in front of me."

Frederick snorted. "I can't speak for your sanity, but we are standing in front of you."

The man quickly bowed. "Heats Flamesman, at your service!" He frowned. "Did that woman kidnap you as well?"

Asriel shook his head. "We're here to rescue a friend, but we're happy to take you with us."

"Would your friend be the other engineer? I would be most pleased to meet him. He's a genius!"

Frederick frowned. "She. She is a genius."

"Oh. I beg your pardon!" He gestured to the door. "Shall we? I'm very interested in leaving as quickly as possible." He paused, suddenly worried. "You do know a way out, right?"

Nacarat nodded. "I know several!"

He nodded furtively. "Oh good!"

"Where is your device located?" Frederick asked.

Flamesman shook his head. "I have no idea. It was originally in the next room over, but Glass moved it after having me adjust it when the new engineer was brought in. She comes back and forth with the plans for my device and the engine to power it. I think she's trying to get us to give each other away for saboteurs."

Nacarat flew over to him. "Is she holding someone hostage to keep you here?"

"No. She, uh, didn't need such a severe persuasion to keep me in line." He frowned deeply, as if that fact embarrassed him.

Asriel looked to Nacarat. "Lead us to Chara."

The fae of flame saluted and flew out of the room and down the hall, heading through several sets of doors. Even going quickly, it took a solid half hour to get to the other end of the corridor and the workroom Charlotte was quartered in. Frederick looked in the window in the door, spying Charlotte as she paced the room, her lunch barely touched. He pushed the door open, stepping inside.

Charlotte froze, staring at him, breath caught in her throat before she sobbed in relief. "Frisk!" She ran into his arms, went up on her toes, and kissed him, her lips pressing against his. She froze, face paling as a squeak escaped her, and she stepped back, eyes on her feet. "I'm so very sorry! I got carried away."

Frederick smiled a little as he slid one arm around Charlotte's waist, other hand coming up to her chin, lifting her face to his. His mouth gently claimed hers. Charlotte stepped into him, her arms
sliding around his neck even as her cheeks flushed a bright red. The hand on her chin slid around to
the nape of her neck. Charlotte sighed, her mouth opening to his.

Asriel held a hand over his mouth to hide his smile. "Hey there, love birds. I don't mean to interrupt,
but we need to get moving if we want out of here.'

Charlotte pulled back, cheeks red, hands resting on Frederick's chest. "There's a family here. A
mother and two girls. Glass is holding them hostage. We need to get them out. She's already
murdered the father."

Nacarat pointed. "They are in the room there. I know how to get to the door. Follow me."

Loren stepped around the princes as they followed Nacarat to the door. She pulled off her gloves
before reaching up to cup Charlotte's face in her hands. They stared at each other for a few moments,
Loren's eyes searching Charlotte's face for a moment, before her hands ran down Charlotte's neck,
over the shoulders, and down the arms to her hands, squeezing them tightly for a moment. "You are
my sister. You are not of my mother's womb, but you are my sister."

"Sister?" Charlotte lifted Loren's hands, looking them over, before smiling a little. "You're Papyrus
and Sans sibling."

Loren smiled genuinely, face truly expressive for a moment before the face returned to its blank state.
She pulled her hands away and put her gloves on.

Charlotte noticed Flamesman and he bowed energetically.

"Heats Flamesman. I take it that you are the engineer behind the engine."

"Yes. Are you the one who developed the burrowing ray device?"

"Yes! What do you think of it?"

Charlotte smiled. "I almost want to be there when it explodes in her face. Almost."

His lips quirked weirdly for a moment, before he hooked his arm in hers with a friendly smile. "To
freedom!"

Charlotte frowned suddenly. "Do I know you from somewhere? I think we've met, but I can't
remember."

He smiled slyly. "Well, I'll never forget that you forgot."

The five followed Nacarat as she flew through the doors at the end of the hall and into a stairwell.
Instead of going up or down the stairs, she turned left through a door into a rough cut hallway in the
wall. It wrapped around to the room and a flimsy door.

Frederick and Asriel frowned. Opening the door, the three inside looked up. The two little girls, now
close enough to see, were clearly the offspring of pale kind. The woman was not an Agarthan by any
stretch of the imagination. Her clothing was polyester. The automatons were unpowered, none of
them active. The girls looked happy, playing together, while the woman looked annoyed.

The girls ran up to Asriel. "Are we free for the day? Can we go back to mommy now?"

Charlotte's jaw dropped. These people weren't captive at all. She shook her head and turned to the
woman. "Who are you?"
"God damnit!" the woman growled.

"Who are you?" Frederick's eyes narrowed.

Charlotte stepped back, fists shaking. "You're no prisoner," she hissed. "Who was the man who died to protect you?"

The woman stood. "Died? He's not dead!" Her eyes slid over the group.

"Then why the charade?" Asriel asked.

"Glass promised to take me back to the surface in exchange for being a damsel in distress. Look the part so the girl builds the engine."

Chara let out a half choked sob. "All that fear… for nothing…" Frederick put his arms around her.

Asriel's mood turned black. "The surface, huh? So you're a recently acquired Dero slave. And still knowing the pain and fear of a person forced into slavery, you freely chose to put someone else in that position for your own benefit."

The woman pointed at Charlotte. "What does some nameless woman mean to me? I want to go home!"

Asriel drew himself up to his full height, towering over all in the room. "As punishment for helping a dangerous criminal in kidnapping and forced labor, you will never see the surface for as long as you live."

The woman frowned viciously, leaning towards the goat pooka. "And what gives you the right to decide such a thing?"

Asriel smiled darkly, his eyes glowing a strange violet-red. He snapped his fingers and woman gasped, holding her hand to her chest. "And there's a curse you'll never break. The only sky you will ever see, for the rest of your life, is Agartha's." He looked down at the two children. "Do you know where your mother is?"

They both nodded.

"Run along to her."

The woman watched as the children left and the group turned to leave, Frederick guiding Charlotte away. "What about me?"

Asriel raised an eyebrow. "You are free to go." He turned away, following his brother, uncaring that the cursed woman followed behind them. "If I were you, I wouldn't mention that you are from the surface. People in Agartha aren't exactly friendly to the idea. Then again, you could just stay among the pale kind. The ones who remember the surface will believe you."

Nacarat flew ahead of everyone, leading them back to the stairs and down to the second level. "We can exit from this level in several places."

A cry went up, filling the hall with sound. The pale skinned, Dero slaves were sounding the alarm. While they didn't attempt to stop the group as they ran down the hall, their cries only grew louder. Glass came down the hall, several men behind her. Unlike the pale slaves, they were the strong and hardy men who'd kidnapped Charlotte. Glass came to a full stop and the men flowed around her like water still heading for them.
"Grab Featherstone! Kill the extras!"

Frederick put Charlotte behind him as the men launched at them, the cursed woman cowering behind Asriel. The faces of the men elongated, becoming long, brown furred snouts as leathery wings burst from their clothing, skin turning a tan brown. They screeched as they flew for the group, sharp teeth dripping with spittle and razor claws swinging through the air with their wing beats.

Asriel knelt, hand touching the ground as four vines came up impaling the first one of the werebats to reach them. Frederick's knife came out and lengthened into a sword. The second bat creature reached for him, and Frederick turned, his sword slicing off the hand that came at his face. The creature screamed in pain and Frederick slammed the sword deep into the thing's face.

Loren ran past the brothers, grabbing one of the bat creatures and tearing it's head from the body. While the body flopped on the ground, she turned and threw the head with all of her strength in Glass' direction, causing the woman to dodge to the side and pull a sword from where it had been hidden in her skirt.

Glass charged forward behind the remaining two bat men. Nacarat threw both arms out in front of her and let loose a blast of fire ten times as big as she was, catching both of the bat men and igniting the remains of their clothing and the leathery parts of their wings. Both screamed, thrashing about in agony as Glass leapt over them, sword swinging for Frederick.

Charlotte moved in front of Frederick, taking the hit, the sword slicing through her corset. Frederick caught her as she groaned, eyes squeezing shut against the pain. A thick, black liquid seeped from the wound in her stomach, dripping from the corner of her mouth, and weeping from her eyes. Asriel's vines whipped out, piercing Glass' chest. She coughed blood before hitting the floor, eyes going blank as the light in them died.

Frederick lifted Charlotte, holding her close. "She needs healing!"

Asriel turned, looking over the wound, and his eyes grew wide with panic. "This is not blood. I have no idea what this is." He ripped the sleeve from his button down, using it to stem the flow.

Loren reached out to touch, only to pull her hand back. "I know what this is. We have to take her back to the doctor and quickly."

Frederick took a breath, holding it to calm his panic. "The quickest way is missing the bridge."

Asriel looked between them. "How large is the gap?"

Loren looked up at him. "Fifty yards."

"I can bridge that."

Frederick hefted Charlotte a little, shifting her to make it easier to carry her. "Then let's go."

They turned to follow Nacarat and noticed that Flamesman wasn't following.

Flamesman leaned over Glass, observing calmly as the hair turned black with the exception of a single red streak, her pale skin slowly becoming an ebony that appeared to be carved from the night sky itself. Flamesman reached down, unpinning the cameo from her neck, looking it over as if being sure it wasn't damaged. He gestured to the pale slaves watching from the doorways, beckoning.

One of the pale women came forward, her hand reaching out to touch the cameo Flamesman held out to her. Her hand wrapped around the brooch, her face turning toward it. She stared at it, the pale,
sightless eyes turning brown, the pale hair on her head turning red. Her translucent skin took on a pink glow and a familiar smile curled her lips.

"Holy shit," Frederick whispered.

"You…” Charlotte choked, staring at Flamesman with black filled eyes. "You were the man she 'killed.'"

Flamesman smiled. "Oh yes! It's seems that you do remember! And it was so very kind of you to point out that my design was flawed!" His smile turned dark. "And now that I have your plans, I can make a lovely machine to open the crust of the earth for my beloved Victoria!"

Loren slammed into him, knocking him backward into Glass and sending them both to the floor with groans.

"Follow me!" Nacarat cried.

They followed the fae of flame as she led them out of the base.
Chapter 9

Loren gently cleaned away the black ichor from Charlotte's sleeping face, while Dr. Gaster tended the wound in her stomach.

"My, my, Papyrus. It seems you were very determined to make this girl your family. I wonder why?"

Frederick watched from the other side of the table. "What is this? Did he replace her blood?"

"Oh no. That would have killed her. No, this," Lucida held up a hand stretching a bit of the black stuff between her fingers. "This is a protection. A viscous shield that flows just under the skin. All of my children have this protection."

Asriel raised an eyebrow, the cursed woman standing just behind him, staring at a what appeared to be a very tiny mermaid swimming in a green liquid. "All of them? Sans and Papyrus don't exactly have skin."

Lucida snorted, annoyed. "Oh yes they do! Just because they choose not to wear it, doesn't mean they don't have it." She smiled lovingly at the computer screen. "Sans looks just like his father."

The goat pooka hummed thoughtfully. "So then Papyrus takes after you?"

The AI's voice filled the room. "In more ways than one if you are any indication. Do you know what process he used on you?"

Asriel shrugged. "I don't know the specifics. But from what I understand it is an unrepeatable trick. I was still in my mother's womb when he performed an operation that bound the magic in my soul with the magic of the mystical Golden Flowers on Mt. Ebott."

"Fascinating! Why did you need such a procedure?"

The goat pooka shook his head, refusing to answer. "Will Chara be all right?"

Dr. Gaster waved the question off. "She'll be fine. The wound is not deep and the fluid is already healing her. She'll need some rest, but will be back on her feet in the morning."

Frederick sighed, squeezing Charlotte's hand in relief.

Lucida eyed him, amused. "You told me she was a friend."

The AI's voice crawled around the room. "Don't tease him, my darling."

"I'm not teasing, my love. I just find it fascinating how reticent men can be about their feelings."

Frederick frowned and changed the subject. "How was Papyrus able to do this?"

Dr. Gaster smiled. "I'd be interested in knowing that as well. Care to enlighten us?"

Frederick, Asriel, and Loren's eyes immediately went to the door where Sans and Papyrus both stood, neither looking happy. Loren looked away, back to the sister she'd gained, face still expressionless as she worked.
"The prodigal sons return home," Dr. Gaster mused, continuing to clean the wound and help it seal shut.

Papyrus frowned deeply. "Hardly."

"CHARA!" Sans rushed over to the table, gently taking her hand. "WHAT HAPPENED?"

Frederick sighed, looking down at Charlotte. "She jumped in front of me when Madam Glass attacked us."

"Of course she did," Sans groaned.

Papyrus walked around the table, looking at Loren as she ignored him, her hands still at work on Charlotte. He looked to his mother. "You made another one of us. How many more are there?"

"Oh, just her. All that remains of your father's genetic material is his brain and a few DNA samples, and I'm too much of a dried out husk to attempt another gestation, so you four are all the children I'll ever have."

"Four?" Frederick looked up at her. "You're counting Charlotte. Why?"

The doctor sniffed, a bit offended. "She may not be of my flesh, but my sons have given her my name and the protection unique to my children, so I take her as one of mine."

"She is not your experiment," Papyrus growled.

Lucida smiled slyly. "Oh, but she is yours."

A boney hand came up and Loren immediately caught it. "You will not strike her."

The two stared each other down, Loren's expressionless eyes unblinking in the face of Papyrus' fury. He lowered his hand.

The cursed woman hiding behind Asriel looked between them all. "But I thought your last name was Gaster."

Lucida ignored her children to lift an eyebrow. "Do women in western countries no longer take their husband's last names?" She looked to Frederick. "Was that something that was going on before you jumped?"

Frederick gaped at her. "I don't even want to know how you know that." He sighed. "But yes. Family and family names don't mean much anymore. It makes it all the weirder that genealogy has become a huge deal. People trying to find themselves through family of the past while ignoring the family of the present."

The doctor looked at the woman. "My maiden name is Featherstone, dear. And you are?"

"Ella Rhodes."

Lucida smiled. "And how did you find your way into this group?"

Frederick glared at Ella. "She made a few poor life choices and now she's cursed. I suppose you followed us to avoid Glass' wrath."

Ella nodded.
Asriel looked to her, arms folded over his chest. "And the little girls?"

Ella shook her head. "They are pale kind. Glass is never unkind to them. They won't be in any danger."

Asriel turned his back on her. "Good." He sighed, looking at Papyrus. "So now what?"

Charlotte's voice, a little rough from waking up, caught their attention. "We need to go back and dismantle Flamesman's burrowing device." She blinked at the remaining ichor in her eyes and Loren gently wiped it away, clearing her vision. "He didn't know before that it was flawed and now he does. If he fixes it, he may be able to get it to work long enough to open a hole in the crust."

"But it will still need a power source, won't it?" Nacarat asked.

Charlotte nodded. "Yes. It will take them time to build a large enough one, but they'll be able to using the design of the test engines I made. Flamesman will be careful in the building as well. The test engine was designed to fail and destroy the entire mechanism. And while I'm not sure that he's good enough to come up with something on his own, I am sure that he's capable enough an engineer to figure out the problems I built into the structure." She gently took Loren's hand in hers, and kissed the gloved fingers. "Thank you."

A smile tugged at Loren's lips. "I did not save you."

"That's not what I'm thanking you for."

Papyrus sighed. "I'll go. Just tell me what to do."

Charlotte shook her head. "Dismantling the machine is not as easy as just pulling it apart. It might well explode in your face, especially if it's hooked up to a powerful enough energy source." She tried to sit up and groaned.

Dr. Gaster put her hand on Charlotte's forehead, pushing the girl back on the table. "You aren't ready yet to be up, Charlotte. Stay still."

Charlotte let out a shuddering breath and looked up at Dr. Gaster. "I'm sorry. I don't think we've been introduced."

"She's not important," Papyrus growled.

"PAPYRUS!" Sans and the AI barked at the same time, creating an echo in the room.

Lucida huffed. "You were always such an impudent child."

Papyrus was not deterred. "And you were always a poor excuse for a mother."

The doctor sniffed, nose lifted. "I only said I was your mother, not that I was a good one." She wiped the last of the black, ink-like ichor from Charlotte's stomach before lifting a blanket to cover the exposed skin. "You'll be able to get up and walk around in the morning. Until then, stay in bed. Loren, take your sister down the hall and put her in room number-"

"Can she stay in my room?" Loren asked.

Dr. Gaster thought this over for a moment before nodding. "That will be fine. See that your sister is fed."

Loren nodded and gently lifted Charlotte from the table.
Frederick turned to follow only to stop short for a moment. "We saw why you haven't been able to capture or kill Glass."

Papyrus turned to him. "Go on."

"Glass isn't the body. Glass is the cameo that she wears. If she dies, the cameo can be given to another who is transformed into her. Asriel speared her through the chest with several vines, only to have one of the pale kind take up the cameo. The transformation took a minute, if that."

Sans looked to Papyrus. "That explains how she was always able to escape!"

Papyrus frowned. "And why a random woman was always left in her place."

Frederick turned, following Loren, Nacarat flying after him.

Going down the hall filled with rooms for the pale kind who were sick or injured, Loren turned right, going backwards through a set of swinging doors to protect Charlotte. The new hallway was carpeted in a dark brown and the walls were painted a warm cream, an obvious home as opposed to the sterile, hospital conditions behind them. After a few steps, Loren entered a room with an open doorway. The pale green painted bedroom inside had two matching beds with white headboards and patchwork quilts of various fabrics printed with pink roses. Two white painted chests of drawers flanked a white painted wardrobe.

Loren gestured to the bed farthest from the door and Frederick turned the quilt down. After laying Charlotte in the bed, she paused and looked to the prince.

"Please avert your gaze for a moment."

Frederick turned around and Loren gently eased Charlotte onto her side.

"Your stays need to come off. The sword ruined them." She gently lifted Charlotte's shirt to unlace the corset and removed pieces. "I don't believe that any of my stays will fit you. I'll say something to Sans and Papyrus. They can bring you something from house in Telos."

Charlotte chuckled a little. "You know about their homes? Am I the only person who didn't?"

Frederick raised his hand even as he stared out the door. "I'm right there with you, Chara."

Loren walked over to the chest of drawers and pulled out a long, pink nightgown. "It is strange that I know more about someone whom I have never met than someone who has lived with them for years." She turned with the gown. "This should fit you and be comfortable enough for the night."

Charlotte looked at the second bed. "There are two beds here. Was this Sans and Papyrus room?"

Loren shook her head. "No. Their room is across the hall. I think…" She paused for a moment, staring into nothing. "I think the doctor was trying to have a second girl." Loren turned and helped Charlotte out of her clothing and into the nightgown. Once the nightgown was secure, she looked to Frederick. "You may turn back around now."

Frederick came over to bed, sitting on the edge. He took Charlotte's hand in his, gently kissing her knuckles. "Please don't ever do that again. It's not your job to protect me."

Charlotte sighed, smiling sadly as she looked at their joined hands. "What else was I supposed to do?"
He smiled. "Let me protect you." Leaning over, Frederick kissed her forehead. Seeing her frown, he pulled back. "What's wrong?"

Charlotte managed a small smile. "It's nothing."

Frisk frowned, but before he could press it, Papyrus knocked on the door.

"May I come in?"

Charlotte looked to Loren and the woman nodded.

Papyrus shooed Frederick aside and sat down. "I'm sorry. When I sent you off, I thought I was sending you to safety, not directly into danger."

Charlotte shook her head. "It's not your fault." She looked to Frederick and Loren. "I'd like to have a word with my brother in private, please."

Frederick nodded, gently grasping Nacarat out of the air and placing her on his shoulder as he left.

Loren looked between them for a moment. "I'll fetch you dinner."

Charlotte waited until Loren had disappeared through the door before she took a deep breath and looked up at Papyrus. "You put me in front of Frederick in the hopes that I'd fall for him."

Papyrus blinked. "This and not the black ink disturbs you?"

She frowned. "I knew that you had given me some piece of yourself when you named me your sister. Sans explained it to me years ago after I'd cut myself badly enough in the kitchen while you were away. Do not dodge my real concern."

Papyrus looked away, white pin prick eyes searching the room. "I'd hoped that Asriel whisking you off would make it seem more natural. What made it suspicious?"

Charlotte glared at him. "I am not an idiot." A sob caught her throat. "Why? You always said you'd find a match for me. Is being the mistress of a prince the only match I'm good for? Am I not good enough to have a real husband? That the best I can hope for is to play second fiddle to someone else's wife?"

She sucked in another breath, this one pained as her eyes squeezed shut, tears in the corners. She pressed her hands to her face, shuddering, desperate to keep from crying.

Papyrus groaned harshly, rubbing his brow bone. "Charlotte…" He shook his skull and took her hands in his boney ones, gently pulling them from a face turned red with her effort to avoid the tears that trickled down her face anyway. "Chara, I arranged for you to marry Frederick long before you met him."

Charlotte blinked. "You what?!"

He smiled a little. "I know that, on the surface, love comes before marriage, not after. And knowing how many women Frederick had flat out rejected in the past, I wanted you both to have the space to grow on each other, without pressure."

Anger suddenly mixed with her tears, Charlotte shook her head, pulling her hands from his to point at the door. "Frisk has been deeply unhappy about his parents attempts to marry him off, which is why he's rejected every woman put in front of him. When he finds out that I'm yet another of those
women, he'll reject me too. And that's completely separate from the issue of him being a prince! I have no pedigree!"

"Frederick is a prince, but he is not Asgore and Toriel's biological child. He is an ineligible heir to the throne, and so free to marry whomever he chooses." The skeleton frowned. "Do you really believe he'd reject you? Do you have so little faith in him?"

"It's a plot! A trap in which I am the bait!" She choked back a sob. "This is not far to him. Not in the least."

Papyrus threw up his hands. "And all the danger he went through to find you means nothing?"

"That only make it worse! To sacrifice only to find that it was a lie?" She sniffed, voice growing quiet. "I finally had a friend I could talk too. Someone I didn't have to lie to about where I came from. Who understood my silly jokes and references. Who..." She trailed off, wiping at her eyes with her hands. Taking a few deep breaths to compose herself. "I'll tell him now. I don't want him to be deceived any longer."

"Chara..." He flinched at her glare and stood. "I'll send him in." Walking out of the room, he found Frederick leaning back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, Nacarat sitting on his shoulder, both looking very put out.

"Why is she crying, Papyrus?"

Papyrus shook his skull. "Just get in there."

Frederick's mouth pressed into a straight line and he entered the room. Charlotte lay there, staring at a painting on the wall of a group of girls dancing in a ring on a sunlit day. Despite having wiped her face with her sleeve, the tracks of her tears still clung to her face. He sat on the edge of the bed, taking her hand in his.

"Chara?"

She sniffed. "I..." Her voice failed and she closed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly, and looked at him. "I am yet another woman put in front of you."

Frederick lifted an eyebrow and swallowed a chuckle, unwilling to laugh when tears dripped from her eyes. "Nacarat let it slip after the pirates kidnapped us."

Charlotte shook her head. "But... then why... why did you kiss me?"

He lifted his nose a little. "I suppose I like you enough for that." A smile curled his lips, catching his eyes, and he leaned down to rub his nose against hers. "I don't care that you were put in front of me. Unlike the women who came before you, you weren't a party to the plan. You weren't interested in marrying 'Prince Frederick.' You smiled at me and saw me, not my title."

Frederick slid down to kneel on the floor next to the bed and pulled Charlotte against him, using his warmth to quiet her trembling. Her hands rested on his chest, letting her head rest on his arm even as her forehead touched his chest. The fingers of his hand ran through her hair gently, before cupping the nape of her neck and turning her lips up to his. She sighed against his chest, mouth opening when his tongue sought hers.

Frederick pulled back, giving her a soft smile before leaning in to rub noses. "I don't know what you and Papyrus were talking about, but if it was this..." He held her hand to his heart. "You have no need to fear."
Charlotte snorted softly. "What? Not taking advantage of me? What kind of Californian boy are you?"

He ran his fingers down the side of her face. "Since a good Agarthan man would never think to do such a thing, I guess I've gone native too."

Charlotte smiled a little. "We should not be alone like this. We are not formally engaged."

Frederick kissed the tip of her nose. "And yet, you aren't shoving me away."

Nacarat coughed politely. "Uh. Loren's waiting with some dinner for Chara. And I do believe that if this goes any further, I am required to set you on fire."

Frederick groaned as he stood. "No familial loyalty, huh?" He looked at his fae companion. "You do understand that I'm never going to be intimate with Chara in front of you, right?"

The fae of flame rolled her eyes. "Of course!"

Frederick gave Charlotte's hand a squeeze. "Get some food in you and get some sleep. I promise not to let Papyrus leave without talking to you."

Charlotte shook her head. "He may already be gone. He's cagey like that." She sighed. "Glass will not move the device. I'm not sure it can be moved from where ever she has it. The draft she showed me so I could make an engine for it indicated a huge machine."

Frederick thought about that for a moment. "Flamesman said that it was moved, and Gerson said it was against part of his shell. Though those maybe two completely separate things."

"Gerson?"

"Yeah. Massive freaking turtle. His head is bigger than Papyrus is tall. She told us how to get into Glass' base and said that the thing Glass was working on was leaning on his shell."

Charlotte licked her lips. "If he can tell us a way to get to that part of his shell, we can get to the device, and dismantle it." She frowned. "We need to be quick about it. I don't know that Glass will take the time to build an engine. She knows we're on to her. She'll steal something first and use it in the hope that she can open the crust before we get there."

Frederick sighed. "Get some rest." He turned and found Loren standing with a tray in front of him, her face very close to his.

"Do not be intimate with my sister in our room."

Frederick leaned back slightly. "Woah." He held up both hands in surrender. "I apologize and swear not to do so again." He eyed her as his hands dropped. "You are real quick on the family loyalty. Does that extend to Papyrus?"

Loren's face betrayed no emotion. "I understand his anger. I simply wish he was more forgiving." She walked around him and set the tray down on the nightstand before helping Charlotte sit up to eat.

Frederick wandered back into the laboratory to find Sans chatting amiably with the AI at the screen while Asriel sipped a cup of tea with Dr. Gaster. Ella Rhodes sat quietly behind Asriel, poking at a plate of food in her lap with a fork.
"Where's Papyrus?"

Asriel smiled at him. "He's gone to the nearest house to get Chara some of her things. Is she resting comfortably?"

Frederick nodded and sat down with them. "Chara said that she believes Glass will attempt to find another energy source rather than build her own. Opting for expediency."

Sans turned from the computer. "I AGREE! The reason we have been able to capture Madam Glass in the past has been that she is very impatient, especially at the end of a long plan."

Lucida turned to look at her son. "Exactly how long has she been on wanting to open a way to the surface?"

Sans shrugged and came to sit with them. "I have no idea. It appears to be recent, something she's been working on for the past two to three years. Her last plot was an attempt to steal all the gold in the royal treasury in order to use it to power a machine." He frowned. "You mentioned a man named Flamesman. Would that be Heats Flamesman?"

Frederick nodded. "Yes."

Sans frowned. "He's new to her operation, though by new I mean that his involvement started about fifty years ago. Since then, her plots have involved insane devices to do unusual things. He is a mechanical engineer, and his skill is nothing to sniff at."

Frederick raised a hand. "Chara doesn't seem to think that he's all that competent."

Sans shook his head. "The man is an extraordinary genius. And he's very good at presenting himself as less than capable so he would appear innocent or beneath notice. He's fooled the guard and our experts more than once with the act." He tapped his boney chin, thinking back. "Glass' men once did a smash and grab on the patent office to steal large amounts of engineering blue prints. When we'd captured Flamesman and retaken the blueprints, he revealed that he wasn't interested in the devices specifically. He was interested in making them better. He's not very good about coming up with his own ideas, but he is extraordinary in making improvements on design."

Sans frowned, stars appearing in his eye sockets. "Let's put it this way. The flawed drafts Chara made to derail Glass' plans? Flamesman is more than capable of figuring out the flaws and making a workable engine."

Dr. Gaster reached out, petting the top of Sans' skull like she was ruffling hair he did not appear to have.

He sighed, his smile apologetic. "Please don't do that, Doctor. I'm over a hundred years old. Even if I don't always act like it." The stars in his eye sockets disappeared and he regarded his mother evenly. "Why did you make Loren? I doubt it was to make up for your past mistakes. You don't exactly see what you did to Papyrus and I as wrong."

"She doesn't see what she does to Loren as wrong either," Frederick muttered.

Sans' skulled whipped around to him. "What do you mean?"

Frederick glared at the doctor. "She asked me to use Loren in a sexual manner and document her reaction. Worse still was that Loren was fine with that."

Lucida waved him off. "Oh, I'm sure that you would not have damaged her."
"That isn't the point!"

Ella looked around Asriel to peer at the doctor. "You're very terrifying."

Lucida sniffed. "I am a scientist, Ms. Rhodes."

Sans glowered at her. "I don't care what you intended, we aren't your experiments. WE ARE YOUR CHILDREN!" The pin prick eyes turned red. "Treat Loren with dignity or let her go."

Dr. Gaster rolled her eyes. "And where would she go?"

Papyrus walked through the door with a traveling trunk easily hefted over his shoulder, only two boney fingers through a loop on one side. "With us, naturally."

Frederick snorted. "Does Chara really need that much?"

The skeleton shrugged. "I like to give her options."

Asriel elbowed his brother with a sly smile. "It's a good thing you have that locket. You'll be needing it to carry her things."

Frederick shrugged. "Whatever."

Papyrus set the trunk down. "How is she?"

"Chara's fine." Frederick accepted a cup of tea from his brother. "Or at least she appears to be. Nacarat said that Glass did something to her yesterday and it left her pretty disturbed, but it doesn't seem to be an issue as of this moment."

The goat pooka looked at his pocket watch. "It's getting late. We should be abed soon."

"Speaking of that," Frederick looked to Papyrus, "Do not attempt to leave until you've spoken to Chara. If you get yourself blown up trying to solve this alone, we'll just be stuck with worrying about when Glass is going to kidnap Chara next."

Papyrus nodded. "Understood."
Chapter 10

Charlotte shivered in her sleep, moaning like a wounded animal. Nacarat rolled over on the pillow, sitting up to look at Charlotte's unusually pale face. Caught in a nightmare, Charlotte's eyes were squeezed shut and her mouth pressed together tightly. She gently touched Charlotte's cheek, pulling her hand back slowly at the feel of cold, clammy skin. She looked around for a moment, unsure what to do, when Loren reached over from the other bed. The homunculus' un gloved hand gently brushed Charlotte's hair before resting on her shoulder.

"It's all right, little sister. You're safe. Everyone is here with you. Your lover is only a room away. Rest."

Charlotte shuddered hard, grasping at Loren's hand like a woman drowning and desperate for help. The homunculus rolled from her bed and slipped under the quilt next to Charlotte, holding her tightly.

"You're safe. Frederick and Asriel are next door. Sans and Papyrus are across the hall. You're surrounded by your family. You're safe."

Charlotte turned over, hugging Loren tightly before sighing. Her trembling stopped and Loren's head settled against the pillow, returning to sleep. Nacarat reached out again, her tiny hand touching Charlotte's cheek, and found it slowly warming. Sliding down the pillow to the bed, she crawled under the covers and leaned up against Charlotte's back. The fae of flame's eyes took on a red glow as her aura expanded and spread warmth all over Charlotte's body. Earning a happy hum from the human, Nacarat smiled before crawling back up to the pillow and closing her eyes.

The next morning, Loren snuck a peek to be sure the hall was clear so she and Charlotte, still in their nightgowns with their hair down, could sneak to the kitchen. The coast clear, and the door to the boys' room shut, Loren led Charlotte down the hall a little ways and in an open doorway. The kitchen was a room carved from the cavern's rock with tall, arched ceilings. A set of warm stained, pine wood cabinets, with an inset white sink, and white stove top lined one wall. A fridge, obviously from the surface, rested against the wall near the pine wood table.

Ella Rhodes sat at the table in a long green tunic and blue jeans, poking at a slice of quiche with a fork, not looking particularly hungry. She glanced up at the girls as they came in before staring at the food listlessly. "Hey."

Charlotte attempted to smile but couldn't manage it. "Good morning." She sat down across from the woman, watching the endless poking of the quiche. "That looks like Sans' recipe."

Ella nodded. "I guess? He put it in front of me before heading wherever he went. Is he really just a skeleton?"

"He has skin, though I've only seen him wear it once."

She looked at Charlotte. "Does he take it off like it has a zipper or something?"

Ella nodded. "I guess? He put it in front of me before heading wherever he went. Is he really just a skeleton?"

"He has skin, though I've only seen him wear it once."

She looked at Charlotte. "Does he take it off like it has a zipper or something?"

Charlotte shook her head. "It's magic."

Ella frowned deeply. "So, magic is real? I mean, I've seen it plenty of times but... I really am cursed..." Her expression cracked and tears dripped down her cheeks. "After they took you back to
your room, I tried to leave. Asriel took me to place that would lead to the surface and I tried to go up. But no matter what I tried, I ended up turned around and going back down." She put her head down on the table, resting her forehead on her arms in defeat. "Can I never really go home? Am I doomed to live forever in this endless cavern?"

"There's more to this place than just this cavern. Agartha is beautiful and full of incredible wonders once you leave the Dero's caves. Living under the surface is not a bad life." Charlotte reached out, touching Ella's head. "You speak Agarthan so well, it's like you were born to it. Do you even remember how to speak English?"

Ella nodded without lifting her head. "I'm not American, so it's my second language. Glass and Flamesman insisted I teach them. They're really fascinated with the surface, but they don't understand it all that well. The idea that there were several languages spoken above ground didn't register." She lifted her head enough to look at Charlotte. "Asriel watched me attempt to leave, amused by it the entire time. What gives him the right to do this to me? Why didn't anyone stop it?"

Charlotte shook her head. "He's not 'Asriel.' He is His Royal Highness, Prince Asriel Dreemurr, heir to the throne of Agartha. None of us have the authority to stop him."

Ella blinked at Charlotte, mouth hanging open. "A prince? He's a prince? He looks like a goat!"

Charlotte nodded. "The royal family Dreemurr, with the exception of their adopted son, are goat pooka. A type of fae."

Asriel's voice carried from the hall, amused. "My ears are burning! Is someone talking about me?"

His head popped into view at the door, his smile sly.

Charlotte stood. "Yes, we're talking about you."

Loren turned from the fridge. "It is highly inappropriate for a gentleman to look on an unrelated woman in her bedclothes."

Asriel waved it off, nose up. "I am not interested in a human mate in the least, and it is only a matter of time before we are related by marriage."

Charlotte walked up to Asriel, taking his hands in hers. "Please release Miss Rhodes."

His snout dropped to look at Charlotte, smile softened. "And why should I do that?"

Charlotte gently squeezed his hands. "Because I'm asking."

Asriel pulled one hand from hers and laid against it her cheek, cupping her head. "That you, the victim of the crime, ask for mercy, I will grant it."

His hand left her cheek to snap his fingers, the sound filling the room.

His hand rested against her cheek again. "You are merciful, even unto your own undoing. Understand that I will not always be so willing to grant such things. I must protect my people." He smiled. "And my family."

Charlotte nodded.

Asriel lifted his head to look on Ella. "You are free to return to the surface should you so choose. Be careful that you do not act so selfishly again. I will not be willing to act kindly a second time." He leaned down to boop his nose against Charlotte's. "My brother and I will avoid the kitchen until
you're done eating."

Charlotte smiled, watching him leave. When she turned back to the table she saw Ella frowning.

"What did he mean about being related by marriage? He said he wasn't interested in humans."

Charlotte joined Loren at the counter, taking up a paring knife to cut some fruit. "I am to marry his younger brother."

Ella's jaw dropped. "You're going to marry a goat?!"

Loren snorted, face still expressionless.

Charlotte chuckled. "Frederick is the adopted, human son of the Dreemurr family. Though the arrangements were made a while ago, the formal proposal and exchange of gifts has yet to happen."

"An arranged marriage? That's horrible! Why are you letting that happen?!!"

Charlotte sighed, shaking her head. "So what do I do instead? Sleep with multiple men in the hopes that one of them likes me enough to stick around, risking multiple sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy? And then after I find one willing to stick around, hope that he's willing to marry me when he'll very likely treat me poorly and leave the first moment I discuss a commitment?"

She turned to look at Ella. "Yes, my marriage is arranged. And it is a relief that I do not need to hunt for a husband. That I need not set a trap or dress in a way as to advertise myself as available to for illicit intercourse."

"And what about love?"

Charlotte's eyes saddened. "And what about hooking up with someone is about love?"

Ella frowned. "Oh what would you know? You're not from the surface."

Her ire rose and her fist hit the counter top. "I was fifteen when I fell into Agartha, so I know damn well what I'm talking about! Even at fifteen boys expected me to dress like a whore and perform sexual acts. And when I refused, I was labelled a lesbian at best and would just have boys that lied about me having sex with them at worst! If you think it's gotten any better, you're delusional!"

She turned back to the cutting board. "I'll stay here where even if my future husband may not love me, he will treat me with kindness and respect. As a partner and not as an object with which to sate his sexual desires."

Loren reached over, rubbing Charlotte's shoulder with one hand while stirring the oatmeal in the pot over the stove with the other. "But he does love you," she whispered.

Charlotte blushed a bright red. "That he does." She returned to the fruit. "When did the Dero take you? How old were you?"

Ella frowned. "Eight. They took my mother and I both."

"And when Glass took you?"

Ella thought about it. "Twelve."

"And now?"
"I'm eighteen."

"Where's your mother?"

Ella shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't seen her since we were taken. The Dero separated us."

Loren spooned oatmeal into three bowls, one for Charlotte, Nacarat, and herself. "When you get to the surface, what will you do? Where will you go? Will you find your father?"

Ella frowned. "I don't know my father. He left my mother when she was pregnant with me."

Loren took some of the fruit Charlotte had cut and tossed it in her bowl. "Do you have any other family? Someone to go back too?"

"No. I…"

Loren turned, setting her and Nacarat's bowls on the table before sitting to eat, the fairy floating down to sit on the table. "Your mother's family was unhappy with your birth as well, correct? Then my sister's point is proven and you have nothing but a memory to return too. It is best to stay in Agartha. You are more than old enough to work and an apprenticeship is easy enough to find. There are several places of quality that will give you a roof over your head and a meal in your belly until you have enough money to be on your own. In a year or two, you will have made a life for yourself and have several potential suitors."

Loren lifted a spoonful of the oatmeal and blew on it to cool it down. "If you are determined to leave, the best passage is the well of aqua vitae that spills into the rivers surrounding Telos. I can take you to the well and you can swim up from there."

Charlotte sat across from Loren and began to eat while Ella stared at her quiche, tears dripping from her cheeks.

Ella sobbed. "I just want to go home!"

Loren stirred her oatmeal before lifting the next spoonful. "You never had one. If you had, you would not have shrugged at the loss of your mother."

Ella put her face in her hands, weeping.

Charlotte reached across the table, taking Loren's hand in hers, and squeezing it. "Let it go. Like most women from the surface, Miss Rhodes doesn't know what she wants let alone what she needs. Or how to properly procure either without damaging herself in the process."

Loren nodded. Charlotte reached over, pulling Ella into a hug, and holding her while the tears fell.

The whole room shook, cookbooks falling from shelves, and the pot of oatmeal hitting the floor. Ella clutched at Charlotte in fear, screaming. Loren gasped and found her feet, looking terrified.

"Father!" The homunculus ran from the room, heedless of only being in a nightgown. Charlotte pulled Ella to her feet, half dragging her as they ran for the lab, Nacarat flying after them.

They rounded the hallway as Frederick and Asriel came out of their room and into the lab. Several of the glass jars had fallen and the small homunculi inside were scattered all over the floor. Some splashed around, attempting to move while others lay still, unable to live outside of their liquid or dead by being impaled on broken glass. Ella quickly grabbed at the tables, trying to hold the remaining jars in place. One of the larger containment units had broken open and the Frankenstein-
ish monster inside was being helped to a table by Sans, it's legs giving out underneath it from never having walked before. Papyrus was at the computer with his mother, working to keep the machinery around the AI's human brain intact.

Dr. Gaster spared them a glance from the computer, her thin fingers carefully working with the wires under the screen. "Your father is fine. Go out to the cavern and see what's causing the earthquake."

Frederick braced himself in the doorway. "Is it Gerson?"

Loren shook her head. "No. When Gerson moves, it's different." She rushed for the door and into the narrow passageway that let out into the large gallery and the pale kind village.

They all stared as the *Dalion* flew by overhead, its massive haul blocking the light of Agartha's interior sun in the places that light still managed in the cavern. Behind it was the hole it'd made coming through a larger entrance to the gallery, causing it to cave in partially on that side.

"Oh my God," Charlotte breathed. "She went back to stealing the ship."

Loren, still in her pink nightgown, ran down to the rock landing over the town. She opened her mouth wide and a clear, high, and beautiful tone emanated from deep inside her, filling the gallery with sound. The pale kind, hiding in their homes, quickly gathered their children, and ran for Loren. The homunculus directed them all into the lab.

As the last of the pale kind came up to the landing, the *Dalion* lined up with the passage with the gap that now had a bridge thanks to Asriel's vines. It rammed passage, causing everyone to hit the floor, Frederick catching Loren and Asriel catching Charlotte before the girls hit the ground. The ship drew back before ramming the passage again, causing a rain of stalactites and a shower of other various rock. Asriel summoned a mass of vines over them to deflect what he could as they all scrambled for the narrow passage and back into the lab.

Inside the lab, Sans was shuffling the pale kind through to the hospital wing though several of them stayed behind to help secure the glass jars that hadn't tumbled, relieving some of the pressure on Ella.

Papyrus looked up from his task, yelling over the din, "What's going on?"

Frederick quickly pulled Charlotte against him. "They stole the *Dalion* and are ramming it through the cavern!"

Another quake jarred the room, this one rumbling for a long time before it stopped. Frederick held Charlotte, leaning against a door jamb while they waited for the vibration to pass. Going back out to look found the little town reduced to ruins, and a massive, *Dalion* shaped hole in the far wall.

Charlotte turned to Loren. "Where can the ship get to from there?"

Loren's expressionless mask had returned as she stared at the hole. "That passage goes both up and down. At the bottom is a well of aqua vitae, but the top opens up into another cavern system above this one. Glass' base is connected to it."

Charlotte nodded before looking Loren and herself up and down. "We need to get dressed."

"Woah, woah, woah, woah!" Frederick shook his head. "You're staying here. We aren't even sure you're well enough to be moving about yet. That cut-"

Charlotte lifted the nightgown, revealing a pair of pale, peach, lace panties and an unblemished stomach before dropping it. "I'm fine and I'm going."
Frederick blinked and shook himself before looking Charlotte in the eyes. "No. Let us handle it."

Charlotte leaned in, putting her face in his. "You don't know what you're doing! The Dalion's engine is powerful and if even just one of its parts is hooked up to Flamesman's device, you won't be able to stop it. It will explode and I'll never see you again. And that doesn't even consider the ship itself. There are likely passengers on board who've been kidnapped. The aether engines won't explode but they will power a chain reaction if the rest of the ship goes up."

"Dammit!" Frederick cursed. "Fine. Get dressed."

Asriel stared at the hole. "Do we go for the ship?"

Frederick shook his head. "We go see Gerson and find out if the device is still against his shell. And if it is, the best way to get to it."

Loren grabbed Charlotte's hand. "Come on."

The girls ran back into the lab only to be stopped by Lucida. "Loren! I need you!"

Loren frowned deeply, expressionless face becoming strangely animated. "You said he was fine."

"His brain is fine, but the computer is not connecting to it. I don't know why, but it is your speciality."

Loren pointed Charlotte to the door. "Get some clothing for me."

Charlotte nodded and ran back through to the home and their room. She threw open the lid of her travel trunk and found her favorite corset sitting on top right next to a leather equipment pouch. Sighing relief, she pulled the nightgown off and pulled on a short chemise to go under her stays. Dressing quickly, she opted for a sturdy, black and white striped, work blouse, heavy black trousers, and heavy work boots under her work apron. Charlotte wrapped her hair up into a bun before opening Loren's wardrobe. She quickly chose some clothing for her sister, folding everything over her arm. Running out the door and into the hallway, she found Frederick, Asriel, and Papyrus waiting for her.

Papyrus pointed at the floor. "You will stay here."

"I will do no such thing!" Charlotte snarled as she ran past him and back to the lab.

Lucida was carefully lifting the remains of the dead homunculi from the floor, placing them neatly on a tray. Sans was busy clearing away broken glass while Ella and one of the pale kind mopped the floor. The Frankenstein style homunculus quietly watched everyone work from the table he sat on.

Loren sat before the computer, its screen completely black, listlessly poking at the keyboard without actually hitting any of the keys. Her father's brain, resting in a tub of fluid connected to several wires and small devices, sat on the desk next to her.

Charlotte reached out. "Loren?"

The expressionless face betrayed nothing. "I can't reconnect him to the computer."

Papyrus frowned. "Is he too damaged?"

She shook her head. "No. Father's brain is fine and functioning properly. It's the computer itself. I don't have the materials to fix it or the interface. I have it set up so he can hear us, but he can't
Frederick crossed his arms over his chest. "So now what?"

Loren continued to tap. "We wait."

"Wait for what?"

"For one of the clone bodies I made from his stored genetic material to develop enough in the petri dish to be transferred into one of the tanks." She sighed. "I'll put his brain back in a body." She glared at the brain suddenly. "I'm not going to be happy if you ask to go back into the computer after that. You're lucky you survived the transfer the first time."

Frederick turned to Dr. Gaster. "She's cloning a new body for her father and you say that she's only of average intelligence?"

Lucida raised an eyebrow at him. "She is incapable of half of the mental feats I expect of her brothers."

Frederick rolled his eyes. "Your bar for average intelligence is so high, birds would have trouble clearing it."

Loren pulled her nightgown off in front of them, and Frederick and Asriel quickly averted their eyes. She pulled on the white tunic, brown vest, and leggings Charlotte had brought her before stopping to braid her ginger hair and pin it up.

Charlotte put a hand on her shoulder. "We'll be back soon."

Loren spun suddenly, hugging Charlotte tightly. "I'll be waiting."

Charlotte hugged Loren back, kissing her cheek. The homunculus pulled away slowly before turning back to the tank, adjusting the devices attached to it.

Papyrus turned to Charlotte. "You stay as well."

Charlotte crossed her arms over her chest. "No."

"Charlotte-"

She stepped up to the skeleton, grabbed ahold of his bottom most ribs and yanked him down so they were eye to eye socket. "Don't you dare start with me! If they hook the Dalion up to the device, anyone on the ship is in danger and you won't be able to help them." She let go of her brother and stepped back to look at the three.

"We'll find out from Gerson how to get up to where the device is. If it hasn't been connected to the ship, we'll render it inoperable. If it is connected and I cannot disconnect it, we'll split up. Asriel and Papyrus, you'll both keep Glass and Flamesman from using the device. Frederick and I will head for the engines and turn them off. Once they are off, the device will be useless and can be dismantled."

"Is there nothing we can do to convince you to stay behind?" Asriel asked.

Charlotte laughed. "Oh! Of course there is! Be a genius engineer who's created a engine type that no one's ever seen before!" Her smile fell and she rolled her eyes at the three of them. "Let's go. I want to get to the device before they hook the Dalion up to it." She turned, heading over to Sans and kissing him on the side of his skull before heading out of the lab.
Lucida frowned for a moment before continuing to pull her expired specimens from the floor.

Papyrus raised an eyebrow at her. "Is something wrong?"

"She forgot to hug me."
Chapter 11

Gerson yawned, eyes opening when the group climbed up into the part of the cavern his head poked out of. "Well! Back again? You haven't done anything about the machine leaning against my shell."

Frederick smiled. "That's why we're here. We need to know where it is so we can get rid of it."

"Hmm…" Gerson's deep throated hum filled the cavern. His large, black eye rolled. "Hey there, Papyrus! Long time, no see. Is this your little sister?"

Papyrus nodded. "It is."

Charlotte went up to the turtle's head, gently touching the scaly jaw before smiling brightly. "Oh wow. You are gigantic!"

"Wah ha ha ha! So I am!" His head settled on the floor of the cavern. "So what was all that ruckus about earlier?"

"Madam Glass stole an airship and made it go through several places it didn't actually fit."

Gerson frowned. "Is your dad all right?"

Charlotte shook her head. "We don't know yet. Loren's working on it."

"Welp. If there's anyone who can make it work, she certainly can. Your mum gives her too little credit." He breathed in deeply, eyes closing.

Frederick frowned. "Don't go to sleep on us yet. We need to know how to get to the part of your shell Glass' device is leaning against."

Gerson opened one eye. "I'm not sleeping, whippersnapper. I'm feeling around. It's hard to do that without moving and you don't exactly want me to move."

Frederick put up both hands. "I apologize."

"Ah, you don't have too. For all you knew, I was falling asleep!" His eyes closed again. "The best way up is by the Blook Family Farm. Do you remember how to get there, Papyrus?"

The skeleton nodded once. "I do."

"Good. Go into the glowing marsh. It's raining in there, so grab an umbrella. It also gets pretty dark, so remember to touch the mushrooms. They'll light up. At the end of the way, you'll find a stone bridge over magma. When you see the bridge, look around for a set of stairs. That will take you into the part of the Temple of Charn from which surface dwellers descended into Agartha. My shell abuts the side so just keep looking for my scaly behind and you'll find Glass' machine."

"So more puzzles then?" Frederick huffed. "Great. That's my favorite," he grumbled.

Asriel put an arm around his shoulders. "Oh please. I know it's your favorite. You see a puzzle and you get this little gleam in your eye. Your journal comes out and your notes start flying on the paper!" He gestured to Charlotte. "And this time, we have an engineer with us. It'll go just fine."
"And you have Papyrus," Gerson noted. "He's been climbing around in these caves since he was a youngin."

Papyrus shrugged. "Anything else we should know?"

"Not really." He smiled. "I mean, I assume you are prepared to fight your way through Madam Glass' cadre of werebats. Wah ha ha ha!"

Frederick looked to Charlotte. "We see danger, you stay behind me. Got it?"

Rather than be petulant about it, she simply smiled. "Yes, Frisk."

"Good." He took her hand. "Lead the way, Papyrus."

Papyrus turned, taking them into the cavern. Instead of going by the glowing lake, he led them down to a large waterway filled with slow moving rivers of blue, glowing water. A group of boulders floated in the air, climbing the face of a luminous waterfall as if they were a stairway. Papyrus jumped onto the first one and the second as if the hovering rocks were not unusual in the least.

Charlotte went next, jumping after him. "How are these boulders just floating in the air?"

Papyrus turned to help her jump to the next rock. "They remember the bridge they used to be part of hard enough that they have stayed in place even as the rest of the bridge has faded away."

She looked back at Frederick. "Have you seen this kind of thing before?"

Frederick jumped to the next rock. "The old Lemurians, specifically the giant blond haired, blue eyed, elvish looking ones from thousands of years ago, imbued their construction with memory. It was meant to keep buildings, roads, and other structures intact and in good repair without needing to maintain it often. It's why the old parts of Telos are still in use. The buildings last as long as the memory does." He jumped for the landing at the top of the waterfall and turned to take Charlotte's hand. "I suppose what remains of this bridge will be here so long as someone remembers it."

He gave her a smile. "Would you like to see more things like this?"

Charlotte smiled brightly. "Yes!"

Asriel jumped up to the landing. "Move along, Love Birds."

Charlotte blushed, cheeks turning a bright red, and she turned to follow after Papyrus. In the next gallery, rain dripped from the heavy clouds that drifted overhead and Charlotte grabbed an umbrella from a helpful basket full.

"Who leaves these here?"

Papyrus shrugged. "There are people who live in these caves besides the Dero, their slaves, and the freed pale kind."

She popped open the umbrella and leaned into Frederick, sharing it with him. "When Gerson said the Blook Family Farm, did he mean Napstablook and Mettaton? Do they have family here?"

"He did mean them, but the family doesn't live on the farm anymore. The snails they used to raise pretty much have the run of the place."

And they did. Hundreds of thousands of snails crawled all over the farmhouse, paddocks, and walls of the cave, their shells shiny and variegated with myriad colors.
Asriel shivered a little. "That's vaguely terrifying."

Frederick threw up his hands. "You pop those things like their candy!"

"Yes, I do. They're delicious." Asriel grimaced. "But there's enough here that they could swarm me, and I don't know how I feel about that."

"It would take them a very, very, very long time to do that, Az." Frederick patted his shoulder. "I'm pretty sure you could get away."

Papyrus chuckled while Charlotte politely looked away so as not to show her smile. She placed her umbrella in the next basket, which was just as full of umbrellas as the first. Going past the farm, they entered a dark part of the cavern filled with water. Little paths, gently illuminated by tiny mushrooms wandered this way and that. They followed Papyrus through the maze of paths, letting him lead them through the dark until the cavern began to glow a warm orange.

They entered a passage and the heat of the magma far below washed over them in a wave. Turning from the stone bridge across the magma flow, a large staircase ascended before them.

"He said to look around for a set of stairs." Frederick pointed. "You can't miss them!"

Charlotte shrugged. "He is big enough that I'm sure these would seem tiny to him and easily missed."

At the top of the stairs stood the back entrance of the Temple of Charn. As the temple meant for ascension consisted of four thin spires and one thick, central tower, so did this one. But instead of stone, the entire structure was a gleaming, white crystal. Here, the doors were still intact and walking inside revealed an overgrown garden among the remains of crystal fountains that once delighted the senses of those who’d made it to Agartha, a sweet reprieve after the journey.

Frederick looked around. "I'm pretty sure that in order to go up, we'll have to solve the puzzle above us to open the way." He looked at Papyrus. "Did you happen to climb around in here as a kid?"

"A bit, but that was two hundred or so years ago."

Frederick turned to the skeleton. "Then how is Dr. Gaster still alive? She looks human."

Charlotte looked to her brother, wanting the answer as well.

"She's still alive for the same reason her homunculi children are still around." He paused for a moment, looking at Charlotte. "The full story is better than a brief explanation. Our father is Agarthan, but he frequently went to the surface via a route in Staffordshire, England. He was fascinated by the alchemists of the era, meeting with them and trading knowledge with them. It was during this time that he met Lucida Featherstone. Our mother was barely sixteen, but she was desperate the learn the alchemical mysteries that the men of the era kept from her because of her sex. She became a very willing test subject for our father's experiments in exchange for the knowledge denied her."

He frowned. "As I'm sure you noticed from the lab, she loves her work to the detriment of all else, including herself. I'm not sure when it was decided that she would act as the womb for their homunculi creations, but, being a true Agarthan, our father married her first." He sighed, looking away. "I won't go into detail about the way she was physically prepared for the experiments. If you ask her, she'll talk about a terrifying experience in a very clinical manner, like it happened to someone else. I'm not sure how she survived it, but that process gave her a sort of immortality. It also left her barren. The only children she could produce after that were homunculi."
Charlotte frowned. "They tried to have children."

Papyrus nodded. "I've only ever seen her cry twice. Once when I asked her for siblings. She'd been in the midst of experimenting on me and this look of incredible horror dawned in her eyes. She stared at me like she was really seeing me for the first time before looking at her hands. She dropped her tools and ran from the lab. Father found her hiding in a wardrobe, weeping. That led to the second time I'd ever seen her cry, and that was after the fifth miscarriage in a row, when it was obvious that she couldn't have children. That the process that made her a womb for truly human homunculus meant she could produce no others. Sans was created after that. And I suppose Loren was created after Sans and I left."

Asriel shook his head. "That sounds like she actually wants to be a mother."

Papyrus sighed. "She does. And that part of her battles with the part that wants to simply be a scientist. She's never figured out how to be both."

He turned and headed for a set of stairs that led up into the next room. But instead of a room waiting for the puzzle above to be solved, the crystal floor above had caved in, creating a blue and white glowing mess like the interior of a glacier. Everything glittered or shined in some way, even in the parts that had grown dark. The ceiling two floors above appeared intact, but incredibly distant.

"Wait here a minute." Frederick picked his way through the fallen crystal, finding a passage he could slip through. On the other side of the broken flooring he found the remains of two large, stone steps. Climbing up them got him into the remains of a second room and another set of large stairs.

"Come on through!" He waited until everyone had caught up before climbing the next set of steps. Here, mineral rich water had seeped through the crystal and was beginning to lay stalactite deposits. Looking around, he found a doorway that appeared to lead into one of the adjacent spires with no way to it.

"Hey, Az. Think you could give a bridge across here?"

A mass of vines slid across the open air, creating natural bridge. "Oh sure. Make me work."

Frederick laughed. "You're so lazy, I have to make you work just so you keep in shape."

Asriel walked across his own bridge, the vines clinging to his feet as he went. "Yeah, yeah."

Charlotte hurried after him and they came into the still intact spire. The room appeared to be a way station, similar to the one they'd seen on the other side of the temple though this one was carpeted in blue. Charlotte walked around the room, carefully testing the floor as she went.

Asriel followed her. "What are you looking for?"

"This is a rest area and I'm willing to bet that back in the day, people maintained it. In order to do that, they wouldn't use the main temple to get up and down. There has to be a hidden way around." Working her way around the room, Charlotte found a seam in the wall. Digging her fingers in, she felt it move a little. "Found it! I need some help getting it open."

Papyrus reached in and pulled, opening a hidden door into a spiraling stone stairwell. Light from the cavern illuminated the stairs by thin, rectangular windows cut in the wall.

Asriel clapped Charlotte on the shoulder. "Well done!"

Frederick went in first, carefully testing the steps. "It seems to be intact."
Asriel looked up inside. "How far up do you think it goes?"

"We won't know till we climb." Charlotte blinked. "Where's Nacarat?"

The fae of flame's mask covered head popped out of Frederick's collar. "Here I am!"

Charlotte smiled. "Oh good. Up we go then."

The four climbed the stairs, Frederick in the lead. As they ascended, each way station was clearly marked with a platform and a doorway from the stairwell's interior. The stairs were in good condition the entire way up, if a little dusty. Reaching the top landing, Frederick immediately waved for everyone to stop and be still. He crept to the door, listening.

A voice carried through the hidden door. "Do you hear that? It sounds like it's coming from inside the wall."

Another voice huffed. "Are you insane? There's nothing but stone behind these walls! I've torn out enough of them looking for all sorts of things to know."

"I smell… the surface."

"Well, of course you do! This temple was how surface dwellers came down to us! The whole place reeks of the surface." There was the sound of something being dragged. "Come on. Let's get the crystal shards we came for and hurry back up. It's almost lunch time."

Frederick waited a minute or two after the noise died away before opening the hidden door. There was no sound as it slid aside. He looked around the room before stepping out, noting that the entire way station had been completely stripped. Even the carpeting had been pulled from the stone floor. Stepping carefully around discarded pieces of wood, metal, and crystal, the group carefully closed the door behind them, keeping it secret, and giving them an unknown to the enemy escape route.

Heading for the doorway into the main tower of the temple they saw an interior completely stripped of all building materials. The wall had been pulled away on one side to reveal a large section of turtle shell that rose up and away from the wall, creating a crawl space into an area above the shell. Frederick peeked out, making sure that they were alone and found the room empty.

Charlotte went to the shell, reaching out to touch it. It felt warm under her hand and she patted it gently before looking above it. She leaned back and the boys leaned forward to hear her whisper. "It looks like we can climb up the side if we're careful."

"Let me go first," Frederick murmured.

She nodded and stepped aside. Reaching up, Frederick pulled himself up along the shell, finding it easy to get his feet in on the ridges. A length of green vines creeped up along next to him, and he looked back to see Charlotte using them to help herself climb up after him and Papyrus behind her. The vines coalesced into his brother, sitting up above him. Asriel waved from them to stop and wait while he looked around. The sound of a door banging shut carried down to them and Asriel waved them up.

The goat pooka sat underneath a set of wood planks that made up a floor. His vines cut up through them, making a perfect circle and pushing it open like a hatch. Inside was a vast, warehouse of a room cut from cavern rock and abutting Gerson's shell. A wide, red, cylindrical machine took up half of the room's length, its 'nose' pointed up toward the ceiling. Various, brass dials lined the side, several next to the place where the power line would be connected. On the floor underneath where the nose pointed was a large opening surrounded by a railing to keep anyone from falling down the
long shaft below.

Charlotte stared at the machine, mouth hanging open, face ashen.

Frederick put a hand on her shoulder. "Chara…?"

She reached out, hand touching the side. "This is not the device I saw the plans for," she breathed, hand trembling.

All three of the boys turned to her. "What?"

Charlotte's hands moved along the side, finding the release lever and lifting the side panel. "This is a completely different machine!"

Papyrus reached up to hold the side panel open. "What does it do?"

Charlotte ran her hands along the wiring, pushing parts of it aside to look in and through the mechanism. "The same thing as the plans I saw. This will shoot an energy beam meant to burrow through the ground." She turned, pointing to the ceiling. "The beam will hit there." She pointed to the hole. "And the excess dirt will fall down the shaft there." She turned back to the device. "The difference is that this is not a flawed mechanism and it is made to work with any aether engine type, including any of mine."

She pounded her fist on the haul. "God dammit! They played me like a fiddle! It didn't matter how flawed the engine designs I produced in draft were! Flamesman is more than capable of adapting it to this machine! The only reason they hijacked the Dalion was to speed up the process!" She started digging through the wiring again. "This is bad. This is very, very bad. This machine is super efficient. It won't take much to have it run full strength. We have to shut down the Dalion's engines before the hook up is completed. If we can't, this thing will fire, and it is strong enough to open a huge hole in the crust very quickly."

Papyrus frowned. "Is there anything you can do to lower the power output on the beam?"

Charlotte paused. "Yes." She looked over her shoulders. "I can reroute the wiring through the overload inhibitor twice, that should cut the output by half." She pointed to a tool box. "Get that for me please."

Frederick grabbed the box and held it open for her. "Why can't you just pull the machine apart?"

Charlotte pointed to a large, metal box. "Because this is a pressure bomb and if we start pulling this thing apart, the pressure inside the box will dissipate, causing an explosion. And I don't think that today is a good day to die."

Her hands pulled on the wires, happy they were so long inside the machine itself and twisted them back around to the small crystal that acted as the inhibitor. She took a deep breath. "Papyrus? I need you to press on the pressure bomb on this side. That should keep it stable while I rewire."

Papyrus grabbed her hand instead. "The three of you leave. I'll dismantle it."

Charlotte shook her head. "If this explodes, it will hurt Gerson and there's no way we could get far enough away." She glared at him. "I always trust you to look out for me. Trust me to do the same for you."

Papyrus smiled a little and reached a boney hand around the pressure bomb.
Asriel leaned back a little. "Why are you having Papyrus do that?"

Charlotte grabbed a pair of pliers from the tool box. "Because my brother is insanely strong and you need to be to hold the pressure without a machine." She carefully cut the section, quickly drew it through the inhibitor, and reconnected it on the other side.

Stepping back, she pulled Papyrus away, letting the panel slide shut. Nothing happened and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh thank goodness."

The cold steel of a knife was pressed to her neck and she gasped. The boys turned to see Madam Glass holding Charlotte hostage. When Frederick took a step toward them, Glass pushed the knife against Charlotte's flesh and a drop of the black ichor welled up on the blade.

"Now, now. You wouldn't want your lover to have her throat slit, hmm? And how about you, Papyrus? You call her your sister, so I suppose you don't want to see her dead. Then again, it wouldn't be much of a loss either way since she isn't really related to you."

Papyrus' eyes suddenly glowed a bright and angry orange.

Madam Glass tsked at him. "So hot headed." She frowned. "Back away from the machine." She jerked her head toward the wall. "Go stand over there."

Flamesman came in the room with four of the tawny skinned, werebats, dragging a large, black cable. He smiled brightly when he saw Charlotte.

"Oh! I was hoping you'd come back! What do you think? Isn't it brilliant?" He hooked the cable up to the port for it in the side of the machine. "The flaws in your drafts were spectacular! If I'd had the time, it would have been a lot of fun solving for them. It's rare that I'm presented with such an unimaginably, wonderful, learning opportunity. You are absolutely brilliant, Miss Featherstone. A credit to all of humankind!" Flipping a few switches, the machine filled with aether energy, lighting up. "In only a few moments, we shall see the sky. The true sky!"

An energy beam burst from the machine, hitting the rock above them. The ceiling crumbled, falling into the hole in the floor.

Flamesman frowned. "No. The beam isn't at full power. Why isn't the beam at full power?" He opened the side panel, staring as the violet glow of the aether doubled around the inhibitor crystal, dissipating into the air. He turned. "How? How did you do this?"

Glass growled, her grip on Charlotte loosening. "It doesn't matter how. Can you fix it?"

Flamesman shook his head. "Not with the pressure bomb in place. The device is still working, it will simply take longer."

Charlotte grabbed the arm with the knife and yanked it up to her mouth, biting into Glass' wrist. Glass screamed, dropping the knife. Charlotte drove her elbow back into Glass' sternum, knocking the wind out of the woman and silencing the scream. Spinning, Charlotte kicked Glass in the chest, sending the woman to the floor.

Flamesman ran toward them. "Victoria!"

Frederick clotheslined him. Flamesman hit the floor and the werebats attacked, jumping at the boys. Asriel punched the first werebat to reach them, sending it skidding backward. Papyrus grabbed the arm of the next one, throwing it backwards. It hit the machine, knocking the burrowing ray off kilter. The ceiling cracked and the ground above them fell, filling the chamber.
Charlotte turned to run for the boys only to be cut off by the cave in. She turned back to the machine and ran for it, grabbing the cable release. The power cable hit the floor and the machine shut down. But it done enough damage. The cave above them was falling in.

Madam Glass screeched as she scrambled to her feet, diving at Charlotte. Charlotte dodged to the side, landing against Gerson's shell. As the room continued to fill with dirt and rubble, she climbed Gerson's shell, looking to get past the edge of the ceiling and hopefully to safety.

Glass grabbed her ankle and Charlotte kicked the woman in the face, still climbing. The ceiling above opened and Charlotte pressed herself flat against the shell to keep from being struck by falling debris. She managed to find a spot the dirt rushed past and climbed on top of it.

Glass climbed up after her, face a mask of rage. "Come back here, you loathsome tramp!"

"How dare you!" Charlotte grasped the front of Glass' blouse and hauled her up. Grabbing the cameo, she ripped it from the lace at Glass' neck leaving wisps of thread behind. The woman screamed reaching for the cameo even as Charlotte drew back and punched her hard, breaking Glass' nose. The woman howled, clutching at her face and falling back as the ground beneath them lurched. Charlotte fell to her knees, watching as the woman rolled away from her toward the ledge, slowly turning back into the sightless slave girl.

Charlotte scrambled to keep the girl from falling, grabbing a hold of her with one hand and haulng her back up. The pale girl fell against her, the white hair marred with a single red streak. The pale girl shook her head, turning it in an attempt to hear something that wasn't the rushing of the ground around them.

Charlotte tried to find her feet and lift the girl, only to hear a voice in her head, long and slow. Everything around her seemed to slow down and her head felt light. The voice was unintelligible, but getting louder every second. She screamed, fighting against the growing cacophony in her head. She glimpsed the cameo in her hand threw it down, eyes squeezed shut.

The voice instantly went away, her mind quiet. She lay there, gasping for a moment, before she felt the ground lurch. The pale kind slipped from her arms, sliding from view as the earth above them began to pour down, caving in. She scrambled to her feet, desperately looking for an escape. Seeing none, she looked up and saw daylight. Hoping against hope, she jumped, crawling over the slowing mound for the opening.
Chapter 12

A hand grabbed Charlotte's wrist and quickly hauled her up, out of the hole. She practically flew up from the desperate pull and she tumbled onto a man with bleach blonde hair, in a pair of dark blue, skinny jeans and an ironic tee.

"Oh thank God! You're all right! When that sinkhole opened up, I didn't see you near it. I'm so glad I came over to look."

Charlotte blinked at him and choked back a sob when he helped her stand.

"Hey, hey! It's okay! Or is there someone else down there?"

She looked down in the hole and found the bottom filled in. She shook her head. "No. It was just me."

The man smiled at her suddenly. "Woah! That's a cool accent! Where are you from? Is English your second language?"

Charlotte tried to smile and failed. "Uh. No. I've just been living outside the country for a while."

She turned and spied a familiar sight. She pointed. "Is that Mount Shasta?"

"Oh yeah." The man looked her up and down. "Do you want me to call someone or borrow my cell for minute? I mean. What were you doing here? And dressed like that?"

Charlotte looked down at herself and then looked around. She stood on the outskirts of a cemetery just under the shadow of the mountain. "Oh. I'm in town for a costume meet up and just needed a walk." She gave him a real smile this time. "Thank you for the help. I would have been buried if you hadn't found me!"

He smiled, eyes closed, and rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh yeah. Sure thing! Oh, hey!" He dug around in a pocket and pulled out a ball point pen. He clicked the head down and took her hand, writing down his phone number on her palm. "If you're gonna be around for the next for days, give me a call. There's these great waterfalls in the city park. Totally worth seeing." He gave her a wave and a smile before running off, a bit embarrassed.

Charlotte smiled and looked at the number on her hand. "He didn't tell me his name."

Sighing, she looked for the cemetery's nearest exit and the street. She brushed herself off as she walked, shaking the dirt from her hair and clothing. Satisfied that she was somewhat presentable, and happy that her dark blouse covered the majority of the dirt stains, she walked for the cemetery entrance, thankful that a coffin hadn't come down on her. She was pretty far in the quiet place and she read the names on the ornately carved headstones as she walked from the older part of the cemetery to the newer part by the front gates.

Charlotte read one name and froze stock still in place. Trembling, she squeezed her hands into fists in an attempt to stop shaking. She stared down at the shiny, black, slanted headstone with colorfully painted carvings of flowers around the name and a beautiful carving of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Jane Emily Smith
Beloved Daughter
Charlotte frowned deeply. "What a laugh."

A five year old in a posh, little, couture tunic and pants pointed at her. The child grabbed ahold of her mother's shirt and pulled on it. "Mommy! Mommy! Look at the pretty lady!"

A voice Charlotte still heard in dreams despite years trying to forget rang in her ears. "She is very beautiful."

Charlotte mouthed the word 'mom,' and turned to look.

The woman before was not the one she remembered. Rather than the eternally youthful, eternally professional, jet set doctor, with perfectly colored and cut hair, a woman with too much gray and too many fine lines greeted Charlotte. She pushed a stroller with a wreath of red roses, bright yellow, miniature sunflowers, pink carnations, and blue forget-me-nots balanced on the pink fabric shade that shielded a sleeping infant girl in a pink and purple onesie. Andrea Smith stopped in front of her daughter's grave, locking the wheels on the stroller. Lifting the wreath, she placed it very lovingly against the stone.

She looked up at Charlotte. "Did you know Jane?"

Charlotte nodded.

Her mother looked away for a moment, taking a deep breath so as not to cry. "She was the sweetest girl in the world. She was so very brilliant and so very kind. And her father and I did nothing but pretend she wasn't there. She'd still be here if we'd pulled our heads out of our asses."

Charlotte pressed her lips into a straight line and looked away. "I didn't remember her having siblings."

Andrea Smith reached down, petting the top of the five year old's head. "This is Isabella Jane." She knelt next to the stroller, reaching in to gently tug on one of the infant's feet. "And the littlest one here is Sarah Emily. Both named after their sister. Jane deserved siblings." The corners of her mouth quirked, like she wanted to smile and frown at the same time. "I've found that, in the last five years, I've been doing everything I could to give her the life she deserved even though she isn't here anymore."

She looked up at Charlotte. "Were you there that day? On Mt. Shasta?"

Charlotte swallowed. "Yes."

Andrea Smith nodded, mostly to herself. "What an awful way to find out that you're the world's worst parent." She stood and walked over to the grave. "You know? We never found her body." She touched the headstone. "I'd always hoped that she was still out there somewhere, alive and happy. That she was smart enough to just… never come back."

Charlotte stared at the grave. "I hope so too." She turned to continue to the street when Isabella grabbed her hand.

"Hey! You knew my sister, right? Was she cool?"

Charlotte smiled. "The coolest!"

Isabella smiled brightly, dancing a bit.

"You be good for your mom, all right?"
The five year old nodded before skipping over to her mother. Charlotte walked away, unsure of the flutter in her heart, but feeling much lighter. Finding the street, she made a left and began walking toward Mt. Shasta. It was strange how much of the town had changed and how much was still the same. Getting to the cavern under the mountain would be a long walk. She opened her leather equipment pouch and found that her tools were, miraculously, in place. Digging around in the bottom of the pouch, she found what she was looking for: a few gold coins.

Charlotte walked into the local pawn shop. Rather than the many rundown looking places that had bars on the windows, this shop was rather upscale, having a long row of glass cases against one wall. The items inside glittered, signs of pawns never repaid or items simply sold to the shop to be rid of them. She stepped up to the counter with a smile.

A large man in a dark polo to match his dark hair sat behind the counter. He didn't look up. "Pawn or sell?"

She bit her bottom lip, hopping a little from side to side before sighing, making it look good. "Sell."

"You sure about that?" He kept looking at his paperwork. "You don't seem interested in giving up what you've got."

She pressed her lips together. "I've been collecting these coins forever but I ran out of money so…"

"Let me see it."

Charlotte held out one of the coins and he snatched her wrist.

He looked up at her with a pair of the strangest blue eyes she'd ever seen. "You're from under the mountain."

"Where?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Do not try to say otherwise. Your accent, your clothing, and this coin." He let go of her wrist to tap the coin. "That's stamped with the Dreemurr coat of arms. Drop the act." He sat up straight. "I won't give you the actual value of the coin, just the current market rate for gold per ounce."

"I figured I would only get the market rate, but… What do you mean by actual value?"

He shrugged. "There are about twenty of these coins floating around the world and way more than twenty people who would pay a lot to have it."

Charlotte frowned. "Then I'll sell you something else instead. I have no intention of putting my home in danger just for a little cash."

"I have no intention of selling it." He reached under the counter and pulled out a small locked box. Pulling out a key on a chain under his polo, he opened it to reveal five other coins. "My father is from Telos. Something happened, he never explained what, and he got stuck up here. By the time he figured out how to go back, he'd already made a life for himself here in Mt. Shasta. He only went back after mom died."

The man coughed lightly, looking away as his cheeks turned a little red. "The coin in your hand is worth four hundred dollars. I'll give it to you in twenties. The bank across the street will change them out for smaller bills."

Charlotte let out a breath and nodded, handing him the coin. He handed her a stack of twenties.
"If you ever come through here again, please come by. Dad always talked about Telos. I'd like to hear more about it."

Charlotte nodded. "What's your father's name?"

"Oscar Titus Sawyer."

Charlotte nodded again and turned, heading out the door. She stopped in the bank to break the bills down before finding a taxi to take her to Lake Shasta Caverns.

Inside the visitor's center for the caverns, she bought a ticket for the next group tour, the last tour of the day. The group for this tour appeared to be large despite the late hour, a social club having a bit of fun together. While some of them commented on her strange attire, they simply found her charming and forgot her in their excitement to see the caves. A boat ride took the group across the McCloud arm of Shasta Lake and to the bus that took them up to the cave entrance.

As they descended deeper and deeper into the mountain, Charlotte kept falling back, letting others pass her until she was the last in the group. The path through the mountain hadn't deviated from her memory, being that it took eons for a cave to really change. When she came to the bridge she'd been pushed from, she stopped, letting the tour group snake away along the path. Charlotte stood at the railing, gripping it tightly. She could jump, hit the aqua vitae, and arrive in Agartha. Knowing that she could breath the mystical water once she hit it, all she would need to do was swim with the current until she reached Telos. She took a deep breath, ready to leap the railing.

A warm and familiar hand grabbed her arm.

Frisk smiled at her. "There are easier ways to get home."

"Frisk!" She threw herself in his arms, her mouth pressing to his with abandon.

Frederick's arms slid around her waist, holding her close before breaking the kiss to lean his forehead against hers, relieved.

"How did you find me?"

"You weren't in the rubble and we were so close to the surface, I hoped that you made it topside." He smiled. "You never asked me about the other entrances. So I figured you would go to the one you knew would get you back."

Charlotte blinked up at him. "But, how did you get here?"

He nodded over his shoulder and she saw Papyrus standing there with his hands in the pockets of his strange, orange suit coat, wearing his skin for once and looking almost too much like his mother with blonde hair and blue eyes.

"Hey, kiddo."

"It appears the skeleton can teleport."

Chara smiled widely. "Then let's go!"

Frisk's smile softened. "Are you all right? You obviously got here just fine, but are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm all right. Nothing but some scratches and bruises."

Papyrus placed a hand on her shoulder. "What happened to Glass? I saw her chasing after you, but
when we cleared out the rubble, all we found was one of the pale kind."

Charlotte frowned. "That was Glass. I pulled the cameo off of her. Is the girl okay?"

Frederick nodded. "She was wedged against Gerson's shell, but hadn't been smothered. What happened to the cameo?" His eyes went wide and he grabbed her shoulders. "You touched it! Are you all right?!" He paused, touching her hair. "Your hair… There's a red streak in it."

Charlotte nodded. "I figured there probably was. The pale kind had it and so did the woman who was Glass before that. I heard this voice that just kept getting louder and louder and when I realized I was still holding cameo, I dropped it, and it was buried. After that, I rushed to get over the dirt of the cave in. Are you both all right? What about Asriel?"

Frederick smiled. "We're fine. Asriel is seeing to Glass' slaves."

"And Flamesman?"

Frederick shrugged. "He's in custody in the Dalion's brig." His hands slid from her shoulders to her hands, holding them in his. "You said you missed fried chicken and french fries. Do you want get some before going home?"

Charlotte blinked up at him, before squeezing her eyes shut. "I…" She shook her head.

Frederick bent his neck to rub his nose against hers. "Home it is then."

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