The Heaven We Didn't Choose

by dragonashes

Summary

Eight years after the barrier was broken, monsters are integrating well into human society. It’s taken a while to overcome the “kill or be killed” culture, but thanks to hard work on the part of the royal family - including a dedicated ambassador - things are finally looking up for monsterkind.

Well, most of them.

Without life-threatening danger to motivate him, Sans is surviving on nothing but snark and grim humor. He’s losing himself a little more every day, and nothing can stop it. Nothing except, maybe, a little girl who needs him more than either of them could have guessed. Too bad her mom hates him so much.

Notes

Welcome to my story! This has been in production off and on for over a year and a half, and you would not believe how nerve-wracking this is to finally be posting it.

But you're not here for that; you're here for the story.

Enjoy!
In Which a Child Makes a Friend

Chapter Summary

...Who may not know he’s a friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hey there, kiddo.”

The kid, to Sans’s amazement, didn’t even flinch. It was...eerie.

Welp. No mistaking who her mother was. As if the shockingly green eyes didn’t give it away.

“Oh, kid, hey…” Abruptly, he realized that he didn’t know her name.

She stopped anyways. Just stood there, staring at him where he sat behind the hot dog stand in the park, silently.

And people called him a creep.

“Wow, you deaf or somethin’? I’ve been trying to get your attention for a while.”

“Mommy says not to talk to you.”

“Oh, she does, does she?”

“Yup.” The kid popped her ‘p’ like Frisk did when she was angry. Heh.

“Why not?”

“Cuz she says you’re a asshole.”

“...Huh.” Sans was honestly surprised that Frisk talked that way around her kid. She didn’t seem like the type. She was usually all prim and proper...well, on TV, at least. Kid had probably overheard it or something.

He grinned. She’d practically handed revenge for the peanut incident to him. “Well now, that can’t be right. I’m all bones, see?” He held out a skeletal hand, the tips of his claws gleaming in the afternoon sun. “Ain’t got no ass, let alone an ass hole. ‘Sides, aren’t you a big kid now?”

“I’m seven.” The kid, to her credit, didn’t take his hand. She shuffled a bit closer to the hot dog stand and examined the offered appendage with narrowed eyes, then glanced him up and down with the same expression. Sans could practically see the wheels in her little head turning.

“Okay,” she said, finally.

“Okay?”

“I’ll ask my mommy about you.”
And the little twerp skipped off. Sans decided after a moment’s hesitation that chasing a human kid through a populated area would probably get him dusted by overenthusiastic do-gooders, so he rocked back on his heels.

Frisk couldn’t ignore him now, at least.

Of course, he hadn’t counted on the kid’s persistence. It was less than a week before he saw her again.

“Hi, Mr. Skeleton.”

Sans growled, annoyed at being woken up from his afternoon nap. It was the middle of October, and the morning guard patrols had already stopped by; who else was out buying ‘dogs in freaking October? He slowly extended his claws and wrapped them around the edge of the hot dog stand’s counter, grinning maniacally as the wood creaked under the pressure. He pulled himself forward to peer over the edge and -

“Hi!”

It was Frisk’s kid again. Of course! Who ELSE would dare to wake him up? He dropped back into his seat.

“Hey, kid.”

“Are y’deaf or something? I was trying to get your ‘tention for a while now.”

Sans glared. The kid, true to form, just smiled back. She was Frisk’s through and through, that was for sure.

“Psh. So what’s a scrawny little runt doin’ all the way out here, bugging evil monsters at their hot dog stands?”

The kid giggled. Giggled! “Silly Mr. Skeleton! It’s only you out here.”

He looked around. Sure enough, his corner of the park was deserted. “Y’know what that means, kid?”

“Noooooo?”

“There’s no one to hear you scream when I...EAT YA!” He lunged, claws out. Not to hurt the kid - he wasn’t the kind of monster who’d dust a babybones - but to get some kind of reaction from her.

He got a reaction, all right: more laughter. In hindsight, the lunge would have been more effective without the hot dog stand in the way. He rubbed his sternum, feeling the ache from where he’d impacted the edge of the counter.

“Y’okay, Mr. Skeleton?”

“Heh, I’m fine.”  Ouch, that had taken his HP down! He grabbed a ‘dog and squirted a generous portion of mustard on it. No sense letting the merchandise go to waste. “So, what’re you doin’ out here by yourself again?”

“Oh!” The girl bounced in place. “I asked Mommy about you after last week, ‘cuz you said you didn’t have a asshole. She said that it really was you, and that I shouldn’t get too friendly with you. Oh! And she said that you’re a asshole ‘cuz you smell like you’ve been living in one, and you’re
full of shit.”

Sans choked on his ‘dog.

The kid grinned like she’d won one of those gold stars Tori handed out. “She also says that you’re a big fuzzy puppy deep down, and that’s why you wear the spiky collar.”

“Oh, that is IT.” He growled, feeling his eye burn.

“‘Kay, bye, Mr. Skeleton!” The kid waved and took off running. Sans, once again hindered by the hot dog stand, growled. He could have ‘ported after her, sure, but who had the energy for that nonsense? Besides, he had to finish his ‘dog.

Nah. He’d probably never see the kid again anyways. He’d deal with her when she came back.

If. If she came back.

Chapter End Notes

(Spoilers: she comes back.)

Alright. You still with me? Good.

Good.

So! This takes place in Underfell, but on the surface. This is not directly related to my one-shot "Anomaly," although it does share many of the same worldbuilding elements. Notably, this Frisk does not go through the same circumstances as Anomaly Frisk, and was in fact adopted by her Toriel and Asgore.

This story is not currently finished, though I am ~30 chapters in and nearly done with the story elements I have outlined. Most of the chapters are significantly longer; the first few are short to ease folks into it. I am comfortable with wrapping this story up at 35-40 chapters, but if inspiration strikes it may be longer.

Please take a moment to share your thoughts or leave kudos!

Finally, I hope you all have a great Christmas, especially if you celebrate it!
Sans was walking home from work about a week later, his mind drifting. He hadn’t seen the kid since that last incident at the hot dog stand - and good riddance! - but for some reason he couldn’t stop thinking about the twerp. Frisk, as much as Sans disliked her, had been a good ambassador for monsters after she somehow released them all from the Underground. She hadn’t been a bad kid - bit too nice for most monsters, actually - but she knew how to put her foot down and keep them in line.

It was thanks to her that monsters became citizens. Most hadn’t seen the point, at first. Why bother following human laws? Frisk insisted, though, and within a span of mere weeks after the barrier broke every single monster who wanted to move to the Surface had applied for citizenship.

Then she went after the human folks and made sure every single application was at least looked at, and in a timely fashion. He shuddered, remembering the...conversation between them when he’d initially refused to file his paperwork. He had no doubt that several levels of human government lived in mortal fear of the scrappy pest. It was a little awe-inspiring, even if it was Frisk.

It was unbelievably handy, as it turned out, to be citizens. They had to pay taxes, sure, but they could apply to jobs and earn money to offset that. They could rent their own apartments, drive their own cars, and go to any school they chose. They couldn’t be deported, which was helpful. They could sign contracts, including the one Frisk helped negotiate that gave ownership of Mt. Ebott to the Kingdom of Monsters under Asgore. The mountain that had been their prison and their tomb for centuries became a safe haven for monsters who were unwilling or unable to live among humans.

The humans had a problem with killing, which was pretty weird to the monsters at first, but they had settled that little speed bump fairly quick-

*What was that?*

Sans whipped around towards the sound that had snapped him out of his reverie. A little sob, nothing unusual. Except...this was a nice neighborhood. Not a swanky one like Tori lived in, sure, but the sidewalks were swept clear of leaves and the gardens were weeded. This was a neighborhood where people cared about themselves and each other.

Another sniffle, and Sans shuffled closer. He cursed himself with every inch. It was an ingrained response to check out anything that was probably a kid - monster children were far too valuable to let them wander alone, regardless of who they belonged to - but this was the surface. The brat was probably just upset that it didn’t get candy for dinner or something. Nothing a guy like him needed to worry about. Except...this house looked weirdly familiar…
He leaned over the hedge and groaned internally.

It was Frisk’s kid, because life clearly hated Sans. She was wedged in between two bushes in front of a house he thought might probably belong to Frisk, given the evidence. He vaguely remembered Boss dragging him to help with her move not long after the barrier broke, when Tori was closing up her old place in the Underground, but it was all a little fuzzy. He’d probably been concussed that day; Boss hadn’t handled the move well. Plus, despite his...disagreements with the ambassador - or perhaps because of them - he’d made a point of not remembering where she lived. Plausible deniability and all that.

Frisk’s kid didn’t notice him at first, despite being only half a bush away from the sidewalk he was walking on. He had the impulse to give the kid a good scare, teach her what happens when you let your guard down, but something held him back. Probably his repressed fear memories of Frisk.

Sans wasn’t stupid; that was it. No one poked a momma bear and expected to get away with limbs intact, and Frisk had more DETERMINATION than a hundred momma bears.

“Uh, k-kid…”

In hindsight, it probably wasn’t comforting for most human kids to have a skeleton walk up and stutter at them, but this kid wasn’t exactly normal. Instead of cowering or running away in terror, she looked up at him with tear-streaked cheeks and smiled.

Weird kid.

“Hey, Mr. Skeleton,” she said, still sniffling and wiping her nose on the sleeve of her striped sweater. Sans fought the sudden urge to hand the kid a tissue or something. Frisk seemed like the type of mom who would approve of such things. But, he reminded himself, this wasn’t his kid, wasn’t his responsibility AT ALL, and therefore had absolutely no obligation to-

“Mr. Skeleton?”

“Yeah, uh, kid?”

“Are you gonna be all scary again?” The question was posed with about the same level of concern that some kids gave a light thunderstorm: something that was maybe slightly unpleasant, but generally exciting.

“Maybe. Dunno, kid.”

She nodded as if she expected nothing less.

“So, uh, what’s a kid like you doin’ out here all alone?”

“Mommy’s not feeling good, so I came out here to get help. But then I got lost and I was scared but I found my way back and I f-forgot my key, and I think I’m all locked out now.”

“Oh. Huh.” Sans mulled this over in his head. What was going on with Frisk that her kid left the house to look for help? He thought there was a phone number folks could call if they had emergencies, but couldn’t remember what it was. (His phone was rarely charged, so it wasn’t really an issue. He was half-sure his number was blacklisted, anyway; he’d prank-called the emergency place once or quice…) “Hey, what’s goin’ on with your mom? She’s a tough ol’ b...lady? Don’t think she’d lock out her own kid, but I haven’t even seen her in a few months. Maybe she went a little loopy.”

The kid giggled like he’d been joking. “No, Mommy didn’t lock me out. I forgot the key, and the
door locks au’tmatic’ly. Au-to-ma-tic-ly.”

“Seriously, kid. Wha’s wrong with yer mom?”

“Why do you want to know, Mr. Skeleton? You don’t like her.”

“Maybe, but her mom’d kill me if somethin’ happened to her and I didn’t do anything. Seriously. She’d pull my legs off first, then my arms, one bone at a time, then—”

“Eeeeeeew.”

“Er, yeah, sure.”

She hunched back over, examining her knees. Her hands, wrapped around her ankles, fidgeted with the edge of her pink tights. “Mommy...she hasn’t been doing good for a couple days. Her tummy’s been hurting and she hasn’t been eating a lot. I don...I don’t know what’s wrong. I tried to l-look after her, but she...she…”

Sans hesitantly leaned over far enough to pat the girl’s head awkwardly a few times. It seemed to help, a little, maybe, so he didn’t think about it too hard. He grumbled under his breath, which she apparently took some kind of comfort from. She sat up after a moment.

“Can you maybe help me get back inside, Mr. Skeleton?”

“Eh...maybe? I think your mom’s pro’lly locked me out. But...let’s see, eh? Worst it can do is dust me, right?”

The kid giggled again, because she was Frisk’s demon-spawn and probably ate monster dust for breakfast.

A brief examination of the perimeter showed that the house was very well-protected. It was the residence of the monster ambassador, after all. Frisk had several cameras around the place (Sans was willing to bet gold they weren’t all connected to Alphys’s lab), and there was a magical barrier. A very strong, very familiar-feeling barrier. She was getting better at magic, he observed uneasily.

Frisk’s kid skipped through said barrier like it was nothing. Sans waved his hand uneasily near it and winced when a crackle of magic did exactly one point of damage with a curt snap. A warning shot. Definitely Frisk’s work.

Unwilling to risk his low HP any more, he edged back towards the sidewalk. He could get away while the kid was distracted…

“This way, Mr. Skeleton!”

...Or not. Sans drew in a quick breath when the kid’s hand clamped around his wrist and she began physically dragging him through the barrier towards the back door. It felt like he was trying to push through something thick and full of static. His wrist had passed through before he felt the twinge of magic, and he braced himself for an attack from the magical construct.

With a click like a disengaging lock, whatever was keeping Sans back seemed to...open? He could barely sense it, like something glittering on the outer edges of his peripheral vision, but it was no longer hindering or harming him. The sudden lack of pressure caused him to stumble through.

The barrier re-engaged behind him and he tensed. Clever, clever Frisk. Her kid was his only key
into or out of this place, apparently.

“You okay, Mr. Skeleton?”

“What, trapped inside another magical barrier I can’t get out of by myself? Sure, why wouldn’t I be? I mean, it’s only a very pointed reminder of the horror and helplessness that I faced every day for most of my life, but sure? Guess I’m fine?"

The kid looked a little guilty, which surprised Sans. He didn’t think she had the emotional range for it. She kept pulling him towards the house, though, so he figured she didn’t feel too bad. He considered picking the kid up and hauling the both of them back through the barrier - Boss was going to get cranky if he was too late - but something stopped him. The small hand wrapped around his metacarpals...it almost reminded him of another little brat.

One he’d raised alone, in a hostile world, when no one would help him.

He cursed the sudden rush of empathy he felt for Frisk. No one had really thought much of the fact that their ambassador showed up one day with a kid, least of all Sans himself. They all just kinda assumed that she knew what she was doing and went on with their business as usual. She’d moved out of Tori’s by the time she had the kid, if he remembered right, so...what had happened?

“Mr. Skeleton, you’re thinkin’ very hard today.” The kid was looking up at him with a very concerned expression. “I think you might burn out your brain if you keep thinkin’ too hard. That’s what Mommy says to me.”

“Heh. Ain’t got a brain, but you have a point. Guess today’s been a thinkin’ day.”

“Oooh.” She nodded like she knew what that meant. “Well...here’s the, um, back door.”

It was, indeed, a door. Sans sighed. Welp, now or never.

He knocked firmly three times, hoping that this was some horrible misunderstanding.

Nothing.

He wiggled the handle, but it was locked. A quick check of his pockets revealed that he’d left his lockpicks at home - again - and he didn’t think the barrier would let him pop home and grab them. He didn’t see another way inside...

Wait.

The windows on the back of the house were covered by colorful curtains: not lacy, like Tori’s, but thick enough to completely hide the view of the inside. “Hey, uh, kid...you got any windows you can actually see out of ‘round here?”

She led him around to the side of the house, where there was one window with parted pink curtains. He gave an uneasy salute to the camera mounted near it, then peered over the windowsill.

The window didn’t budge, but he could see inside. A bedroom decorated in a sickening collage of pinks and purples met his glance. There weren’t a lot of toys that he could see, but a few books in both English and Monster were stacked haphazardly on a bedside table. The floor, thankfully, was mostly clear.

He bent down and held a hand out to the kid. “Ready to go for a ride?”
“Yeah!”

“Hang on, then. 1, 2-” He took a side step through a shortcut, not letting her brace herself for it. The tension just made things worse for humans if he remembered correctly.

They reappeared inside the bedroom, stumbling a little on the landing. Once they were steady the kid patted his hand. Sans snatched it back; he hadn’t consciously tried to steady her. It was disconcerting.

“Kay, then. Where’s yer mom?”

“This way!”

Down the hallway was another door, which the kid immediately began smacking. Sans, expecting another locked door, turned the handle and gave it a good, solid shove just in case.

It opened easily... too easily.

“The door sticks,” she said, face-first on the floor next to him. “Ow. Sorry.”

“Tsokay,” he responded. This kid was quickly becoming more trouble than she was worth. He heaved himself back up and took a look around.

This bedroom was even more sparse than the kid’s. The walls were a neutral grey, a color he would never have associated with Frisk. The ‘bed’ was just a mattress on the floor, like his, though it looked like someone had actually bothered to put sheets on. Atop it, curled under a mismatched comforter, was a figure that could only be Frisk.

Long strands of brown hair stuck to her cheek and her skin looked clammy. She groaned, shifting as if trying to wake up, but her eyes never opened. She mumbled something under her breath that Sans didn’t catch.

“I’m here, Mommy,” the kid said, taking a running jump onto the mattress and barely missing her mother. “I brought the asshole skeleton to help. I know you said to stay away from him, but it’s too far to walk to Granny Ree’s house and I don’t know where your phone is.”

Sans stifled laughter behind his hand. Asshole skeleton? Granny Ree? The thought of the feared Queen of Monsters wearing an apron and baking pies nearly brought tears to his eye sockets. Granny Ree, heh.

Frisk began coughing loud, wet coughs, and Sans hurried forward. It sounded like the kiddo was trying to expel some internal organs. He was a little fuzzy on human anatomy, but he was pretty sure that was a bad thing for humans to do.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said, laying a hand on Frisk’s forehead. Frisk wrinkled her nose but didn’t respond.

“What?” Asked Frisk’s kid.

“Oh. Was talkin’ to yer mom. I knew her when she was just a little runt running through the Underground. Heh.”

“Is that why you don’t like her?”

Sans shrugged, not sure how to succinctly explain years of passive-aggressive dislike and lowkey
prank rivalry. He shifted closer to Frisk, trying to figure out where to start with this mess, and his kneecap hit a solid, familiar shape. “Hey, does your mom have a thermometer around?”

The kid ran off. Sans dug through the layers of blankets and was rewarded when the shape was just what he expected: Frisk’s phone. It was in a little wallet case with her ID and some other cards tucked inside. A bit of fiddling revealed that it still had half a charge. Good; that meant Frisk hadn’t been out longer than a day or two.

It was, however, locked. The kid - resourceful little thing - did something with her finger on a grid of dots and managed to get around that. Unfortunately, instead of calling anyone or telling Sans that she had things handled and he could go home, she merely handed the phone back.

Great. Responsibility: his one weakness.

The thermometer the kid found read from the ear, which meant that Sans had absolutely no clue how to operate it. A set of instructions printed on the side showed a diagram that could easily have been an exotic plant. He left the kid to figure it out and entertained himself with looking up healthy human body temperatures on Frisk’s phone.

A beep and a cheer from the kid indicated that she had, somehow, managed to get a reading. Sans compared the glowing numbers on the thermometer with the information on the phone.

40.1°C? That couldn’t be right…

A few minutes of fiddling later, and Sans found himself completely unable to get a better reading. (At least, if ‘better’ meant ‘Frisk is actually faking this whole thing and the lazy skeleton can go home now.’) Frisk’s fever was over 40°C, which was apparently on the wrong side of the line between ‘fever’ and ‘very high fever, go see a doctor immediately.’

“Uh, kid? Does your mom have a doctor she likes to go to? Or someone who patches her up when she’s hurt?”

“You mean Granny Ree?”

_Toriel had healing magic? When had that happened? “Uh, sure? Hey, can you call her? I think we’ll need some backup here.”_

The kid dialled, then set the phone down on the bed between her and Sans.

“Hello, my child!” Toriel’s voice came through the phone, tinny and distorted. “I have not heard from you in a few days, and the Embassy said you called in sick. You have worried me! How are you? ...Hello? My child? ...Frisk?”

Sans cleared his nonexistent throat. “Uh, hey, Tori.”

“Sans! I would recognize that voice anywhere. What are you doing with Frisk’s phone? You have not stolen it from her, have you? She needs it for work, you know.”

“Well, uh, y’see…” He explained the situation as best he could.

“Hmm. That is not good. Frisk is scheduled for a meeting this afternoon with the...well, with several world leaders. It is all highly classified. I will have to fill in for her; Asgore is out of the country until next Monday.”

“Wha-tha’s it? Yer kid is burning up here, and you’re worried about a meeting?”
A meeting that may open up a world of new opportunities for monsters, young skeleton. Yes, I am concerned, but this is what Frisk would want. Besides, you are there to care for her and Attie, are you not?"

"Attie?" The kid on the bed next to him gave a big grin. "...Oh. Well, see, I think Frisk needs a doctor. The k...uh, Attie...said that you're Frisk's doctor?"

"Well, only for the usual bumps and bruises. Why do you think she needs to see a doctor?"

"She has a fever of over 40 degrees celsius. Internet says that's a problem."

"Really, Sans. She is a tough girl; she will be fine."

Sans looked over at Frisk. She was shivering under the pile of blankets, her teeth clenched and eyes crinkled closed. He couldn’t explain why, but he had a bad feeling about all this. Despite the years of snark and fire between that lay between them, seeing her in pain brought back memories that haunted his nightmares. "Yeah, okay. And if things get worse? Is there somewhere around here I can take her?"

"Well, Ebott Medical Pavilion on West Amistad has an emergency room. I suppose that would be the fastest way of getting medical attention. She has gone there once or twice for human-specific problems. I’m sure she doesn’t want the fuss, though—"

Sans knew where that was. "'Kay. Bye, Tori." He hung up without waiting for a response. "Kid, grab a bag or somethin’. We’re goin’ on a trip."

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: The Amistad was a slaver schooner on which an uprising took place in 1839. It prompted an complex case in the US legal system, and wound up in the US Supreme Court with the slaves being defended by a legal team that included former president John Quincy Adams. The case was decided in their favor, though slavery was still legal at the time, and all 39 survivors were returned home through the generosity of abolitionists. It is considered by some to be the most important case involving slavery before the better-known Dred Scott decision in 1857.

Which is all interesting, but not related to the story. The street here is named in homage to “You Found Me” by The Fray, which begins: “I found God / At the corner of First and Amistad, / Where the West / Was all but won…” Hence: West Amistad, a symbol of difficult freedom.

Thanks for reading! I hope you all continue to enjoy this story. Believe me, we're just getting started. What's wrong with Frisk? Why does Sans not like her? And what kind of a name is "Attie?" Stay tuned for more!
In Which Humans are Captured

Chapter Summary

...And taken to the hospital, because Frisk really needs immediate medical attention.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Getting Frisk out of the house and past the barrier was a struggle. Sans could lift her with magic well enough, but making sure she didn’t bump her head on any walls on their way out the door was more of a challenge. Then there was the barrier. It had no problems letting the kid - Attie - in and out, and he could go with her, but his magic cut out when he crossed. Thankfully, an unconscious Frisk was apparently the same as a conscious Attie when it came to passing through the barrier, so he didn’t have to carry two humans through at the same time. After several attempts he eventually managed to wrangle Frisk into a half-carry so he could drag her through while Attie fidgeted and twitched in worry.

Once that was out of the way, getting all of them to Ebott Medical Pavilion was easy. Sans made his way inside, a shivering Frisk floating a little behind and Attie attached to his back like the world’s most awkward koala. The emergency room seemed pretty full but he had no competition as he made his way to the front and rang the bell at the nurse’s station. A world-weary young woman in green scrubs appeared, did the usual double-take at seeing a walking, talking skeleton, and stuttered something under her breath.

“Uh, hey. So, this lady here is running a fever of over 40 degrees Celsius. Her kid said that, what, her tummy hurt?”

“And she wasn’t eating,” Attie piped up.

“Yeah, that. We aren’t sure what’s wrong, so…” Sans wondered if the nurse would send them away or brush it off, like Tori had.

Thankfully, the nurse just gave a sigh and grumbled something at someone behind the counter. “Name?”

“...Sans the skeleton?”

"Her name."

“Oh. Uh, Frisk Dreemurr.”

“Huh. The monster girl?”

“The ambassador,” Sans growled. He pulled Frisk’s phone wallet out of his jacket, extracted her ID, and slid it across the counter to the nurse. The Delta Rune, the symbol of the monster kingdom, glowed a dull purple even in the uncanny light of the ER.

The nurse gave a little gulp and ducked away for a long moment. When she reappeared she looked a little disturbed. “W-well, we do have Ambassador Dreemurr’s information on file here. If...if
you can fill out a brief form so we can get some details on the current situation…”

He grabbed the clipboard and pen she was holding and glanced over the questions. He didn’t know even half the answers. A moment later, a pair of nearby doors opened to reveal a young man and woman - also in green scrubs - rolling some kind of mattress on wheels between them.

“Sir?” The young man said, gesturing to Sans.

“Uh…”

“We’ll take your friend now.”

They helped him deposit Frisk onto the mattress and began wheeling her away.

“Wait -“

“Are you family?” asked one.

Attie clung to his back harder. “He’s gonna be my daddy!” She said, wiggling a bit.

Sans’s mind went blank.

The nurses looked at each other and shrugged. “Well, you guys can come back to see her once we have her in a room. You just fill out the paperwork and hand it in to Susan at the front desk, and we’ll get her settled. Okay?”

“Okay!” Attie chirped.

Sans settled himself and the kid into chairs far away from the nervous gaze of Susan the nurse. The other folks seemed to edge away from their corner of the room, but he could feel their judgemental stares. Apparently neither the humans nor the monsters wanted to mess with him, which was perfectly fine. “Uh, kid?” He asked under his breath.

“Yep?”

“Why’d you say that I was...y’know…”

“Oh! Hospitals don’t let people who aren’t family in to see people. Mommy said that if someone ever had to take her to the hospital, I should tell the nurses and the doctors that whoever it was is going to be my new mommy or daddy! That way they can keep looking after me. Oh, unless it’s Granny Ree or Grampa Gory, ‘cuz they’re already family. Or someone from the Bad List. That’s the list of people I can never, ever, ever talk to.”

“And what, I’m not on the ‘bad list?’ I thought yer mom said not to talk to me.”

“Nope! You’re just on the Stay Away From List. You’re kinda okay.”

“...Your mom’s weird.”

Attie giggled. “Yep!”

Sans looked at the form again. So many little lines...it seemed to be blurring before his eye sockets. What sort of weird human sorcery was this? “Hey, uh, do you know any of this?”

“Mmmmmmmaybe?”
Attie knew her phone number and address, and Frisk’s ID had her birth date. She was just 24, he realized. Just a few years younger than he was. She’d been almost 16 when she broke the barrier and just 17 when Attie was born. A teenager. ‘Course, she’d been so short and so fond of striped clothes that she’d seemed younger, but still...

He filled out all the information he knew, then turned it in. Susan the nurse frowned at the blank spaces, but shrugged and went on her way. Sans reluctantly let Attie drag him back to their corner. Nothing to do but wait. The kid’s backpack was still sitting on her chair and he peeked inside, hoping for inspiration. He saw the edge of a coloring book and the bright wrapper of some kind of food, but it was hard to tell around all the stuffed animals.

“Hey, did you bring all your toys?”

“Nope, just Mr. Cuddlebug and Piggy and Dolly.”

“...Oh. Okay.” He wasn’t sure what else to say. He could barely remember the last time he’d actually been a ‘responsible adult.’ Gosh, was that ten years ago? He’d been a teenager himself when Boss had decided that he was in charge, and that had been that. Sans tugged absentmindedly at his collar. “So, uh, you’re Attie, huh?”

“Yup!”

“...Mean anythin’?”


“Huh. Good name.”

Attie beamed up at him. Then, to Sans’s surprise, her smile dropped. “Hey, Mr. Skeleton?”

“...Yeah?”

“Is...is my mommy gonna be okay?”

“...Gosh. I dunno, kid. T...uh, ‘Granny Ree’ thought we were overreacting, so she’s prolly fine. I guess we’ll have to wait and see what the doctors say, huh?”

To his absolute horror, Attie began to cry. It wasn’t the quiet little tears from earlier, either; this was full-on gross sobbing. He could feel everyone in the waiting room staring at him. He gulped and very, very gently put an arm around the kid. He hoped she wouldn’t flinch away; that would look bad-

She flung herself at him over the armrests of their chairs and wound up half in his lap, wailing into his jacket. Sans really wasn’t sure what to do, so he just kept holding onto the kid. She seemed to have the crying thing covered, so maybe he just had to...wait for her to stop? Pap... Boss hadn’t really cried much as a kid, so he didn’t have much experience to go on.

Frisk hadn’t cried at all. Not even after he-

“Dreemurr? Family for Dreemurr?”

Sans hefted the kid awkwardly with one arm and snagged her backpack with the other, then made his way to the nurse’s station. “Uh, we’re here for Frisk Dreemurr.”

A woman in green scrubs - not Susan - eyed him and the crying child in his arms warily. “Um, is
there someone who can watch the kid? We don’t like to have disruptions in the ER.”

“I’m it, sorry. If I can get someone here to pick her up I’ll pass her off, but we really don’t have many options at this rate. You’ll be good, right Attie?”

Attie nodded, still sniffling. The nurse sighed. “Fine. It’s a special case, anyhow. Right this way.”

The nurse led them into a large room, full of little cubicles with curtains for walls. Frisk was laying on her back on the rolling bed, which had been moved inside a curtained-off corner with “025” pinned to the outside.

“My name is Stacy,” the nurse said. “I’ll be helping Ambassador Dreemurr for the time being. We were unable to find any information on a primary care doctor for the ambassador, and you didn’t have that information on your intake form. Can you elaborate, Mr…”

“Uh, Sans. Sans the skeleton. And this is Attie.”

“Mr. Sans, then.”

“So…Frisk is usually treated by her mom. Uh, that’d be Queen Toriel. She has some healing magic.”

“What can you tell me about her medical history? What has…Queen Toriel…treated Frisk for?”

“Not much. ‘M not really a healer myself; I don’t know how all that works. Just bumps and bruises, as far as I’m aware.”

“How long has she been ill?”

“Not more than a few days, I think? When I found her, her phone still had half a charge, so she hasn’t been out long. Kid? Any ideas?”

“She felt bad yesterday and the day before yesterday,” Attie whispered into Sans’s jacket. “She wouldn’t get up this mornin’.”

He repeated this to the nurse, who jotted it down. She gave him a very steady look that would have made him squirm had he not been so used to Boss’s glares. “Look. I know you’re not the, what, fiancee. Right?”

“Uh…”

“I’m not judging or anything. I’ve seen teenagers come in with three and four ‘fiancées’ barely out of middle school. I’m just trying to get accurate information here.”

“Okay…?”

“Great. We’re on the same page. Now can you explain to me what happened?”

He described how he’d come across Attie and found Frisk (leaving out the teleportation; humans could be weird about that kind of magic) and the conversation he’d had with Toriel.

“It’s a darn good thing you brought her here,” Stacy said. “You’re also very lucky that Ambassador Dreemurr is a special case. If she didn’t have a rather unique note on file giving permission for, and I quote, “all monsters in general, all of them, you pretentious bureaucratic idiots” to be informed of her condition, I wouldn’t be able to say a word to you about her medical
situation. Based on the symptoms you reported - the stomach pains, nausea, fever - and what we’ve observed, it’s looking like appendicitis. Do you know what that is?”

Sans looked pointedly down at his bony arms. “I know it’s not a bone. Beyond that…” He shrugged.

She smirked. “Right. Well then. The appendix is a little organ off the colon, part of the large intestine. Basically, it’s a tiny little pouch in the lower abdomen full of bacteria. When it gets clogged, the bacteria puts pressure on the walls of the appendix. This can cause it to burst, releasing all that bacteria into the abdominal cavity.”

“That...sounds bad?”

“It can be life-threatening. Ideally, we like to treat appendicitis - inflammation of the appendix - long before it gets to the point where the appendix is in danger of rupturing. As things stand, we are currently working to get Ambassador Dreemurr in for emergency surgery. We’re trying to call a surgeon in from another site but traffic is backed up. We have her on antibiotics and fluids while we wait for her bloodwork to come back, but I’ll be honest: it’s looking a bit dicey. We’re not sure if the appendix has burst yet, but we want it out of the way as soon as possible.

“Her condition is being complicated by moderate dehydration and malnutrition. It also looks like she has a severe case of the flu, which isn’t helping things. Do you...well, you said you don’t know much about healing, but do you know if magic could help while we wait?”

“I really have no fu...uh...freakin’ clue. I’m more of a tear-things-apart kinda guy; puttin’ them back together isn’t my strong point.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I’m not a magic expert - I’ll have to consult one of our healers on staff - but do you think Queen Toriel would be willing to stop by and take a look? Since she was the primary healer and all. Familiar magic tends to work a lot better than foreign, at least on us humans, I hear.”

“I can leave her a message. Problem is, she’s filling in for Frisk in some kind of important meeting. I don’t know if she can get here.” Sans could teleport her in, but only if he could find Tori in the first place.

“Right, then. We’ll do this the human way for now. You and Attie can step out into the hallway to make that phone call. I’ll finish up what I need to do in here. We should be ready to take her back to prep within about 20 minutes or so. Sound good?”

“Sure, I guess.” Still feeling a little shell-shocked, he left Stacy to her work and stepped outside.

Juggling Attie and the phone, Sans managed to leave a voicemail for Tori. He was right; she wasn’t answering. He tried to emphasize the urgency of the situation - that Frisk could die because something inside her was exploding - but he didn’t know if Tori would believe him. It did sound a bit like something out of a sci-fi film.

He scrolled through the contact list, but most of the names he didn’t recognize. “Uh, kid? I don’t suppose you know how to get in touch with Boss?”

“Boss? Who’s Boss?”

“He’s, uh…” habit made him lower his voice, “He’s my little brother. Tall skeleton? Name’s P-Papyrus, goes by ‘The Great and Terrible Papyrus’? Part of the Royal Guard?”

“Hmm...I dunno. I’ve probably seen him, but I don’t think I’ve ever met him ‘fficially. He’s not
on my guard rotation. Is he nice like you?”

“Not really.”

“Oh. Okay. Is he mean?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“Oh. D’ya need to call him?”

“Probably. He’s gonna be mad at me. I was supposed to be home...gosh, two hours ago.”

“Don’t you have your phone?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.” Attie stuck a thumb in her mouth, nibbling at the nail. “Hey, Mr. Skeleton?”

“...Just call me Sans, kid.”

“But that’s weird. You’re a grown-up. But anyways, I’m sleepy.”

“Yeah. Me too, kid.”

“But I don’t want to sleep. I’m worried about Mommy.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you worried about her too?”

“Sure. Kinda. Yeah. I mean, I didn’t really want her to be hurt; it’s just that I don’t know her that well, y’know?”

“Oh. But then why did you help her?”

“She helped us monsters a lot. She broke the barrier that was keepin’ us in the mountain. We kinda owe her a lot, even if we don’t like to think ‘bout it.”

“Oh.”

“Yer sayin’ ‘oh’ a lot. You really are gettin’ sleepy, huh.”

Attie hummed.

“Tell ya what. We’ll head back inside and sit with Frisk - with yer mom - until the doctors come and do what they need to do. Then we’ll see about gettin’ you somewhere comfy. ‘Kay?”

“‘Kay.”

Sans readjusted his hold on her - he’d gotten more of a workout in the past few hours than he normally did in a week, just carrying this kid around - and trudged back towards Frisk’s cubicle.

“Mr. Sans? Mr. Sans!” Stacy the nurse was heading towards him at a brisk walk.

“Uh, yeah? Somethin’ wrong?”

“Please come with me.” She fell in step with him, throwing worried looks over her shoulder. “We
can’t talk out here; doctor-patient confidentiality.”

Bewildered, Sans followed.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: several months after writing the first draft of this chapter, one of my sisters was taken to the emergency room with severe abdominal pain. They thought it was appendicitis. It wasn't but I got some good emergency room data nonetheless. This isn't meant to be an entirely faithful reenactment of the emergency room experience, but that's not what you're here for, is it?

All the same, credit for the medical accuracy of Frisk’s symptoms and illness go to: WebMD, Healthline, and EveryDayHealth. Their websites were immensely helpful, and I take full credit for any discrepancies here. I also owe a world of gratitude to the users of the SurvivalistBoards forum who shared their experiences with appendicitis from September, 2007 through October, 2008 in the thread, “My daughter survived a ruptured appendix.” The first- and second-hand stories in that thread were immensely useful. A salute to all doctors, nurses, and first responders: you are real-world heroes.

Thanks to everyone who gave this story a chance! I know it’s not very popular, but I promise that things will pick up plot-wise. I'll be adding tags as we go along and things get more interesting.

Have a very happy new year!
In Which a Diagnosis Is Made

Chapter Summary

...And, thankfully, acted upon in a timely fashion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk’s little curtained cubicle was nearly empty. The bed and the drip stand were gone; a pair of plastic chairs and a little table were the only things left.

Stacy the nurse sat in one of the plastic chairs and motioned Sans into the other. He sat carefully, adjusting an increasingly-drowsy Attie, before eyeing Stacy with suspicion. “...What?”

“We’ve diagnosed appendicitis. Ambassador Dreemurr is heading to prep for an open appendectomy. She recovered consciousness long enough to sign consent forms and ask about her daughter, but she wasn’t terribly coherent. I’m sorry, but we couldn’t wait; the surgeon just arrived and is on his way up right now. We suspect, from her fever and the level of infection, that the appendix burst sometime this morning. That means we’re racing against time to control the infection before it spreads further. We’re just lucky we caught it in time; monster technology has made bloodwork much faster than it used to be, or we might still be waiting.”

“O-okay. And what does this...open appendectomy do?”

Stacy looked pointedly at Attie, who looked like she was going to cry again. Sans put a hand on the back of her head, pulling her face into his jacket. Little hands curled into the front, tangled around the hood strings.

“Well,” the nurse said with an air of one choosing her words carefully, “It means we will make a small...incision...in the lower abdomen. The doctor will remove the appendix - this should help limit the bacteria we have to deal with, and speed up recovery in the long run - and...clean things out, basically. We will need to remove as much of the harmful bacteria as possible.”

Sans winced. Removing things...sounded painful. Especially since humans couldn’t just put themselves back together after. “And then...what, she’ll be better? Back up on her feet?”

“...No, it’s not quite that simple. Ideally she’d be back up within a day or two, but with these complications it could be quite a bit longer. With antibiotic treatments to prevent infection we’re looking at a recovery timeline of three to eight weeks’ care, even if everything goes as expected.”

“She’s gonna be in the hospital for eight weeks?”

“Oh, hopefully not; it depends on her, though. This could be a bad case. I was hoping that magic could help, but the medical team consulted with our monster healer on call. She says that bacteria - as living organisms themselves - are affected by healing magic. While we could have either our healer or Queen Toriel come in and heal the surgical incision, we can’t risk keeping the bacteria healthy and resistant to our medicines. We’ll have to take care of it with antibiotics unless there are further complications.”
“Oh.” That sounded really, really bad, actually. What kind of horrible illness was this that magic couldn’t solve? “So... what do the kid ‘n I do now?”

“Unfortunately, all you can do is wait. It should take about an hour, maybe longer if there are complications in the - for lack of better term - cleaning process. Ambassador Dreemurr will be moved to postoperative care once she’s out of surgery; that’s up on the second floor. I can give you directions to the waiting room up there.”

“Sure, thanks. Uh... is there a place where I can put this little lump down so she can get a nap?”

“Not around here, sorry. The waiting room has some chairs for you. It’s more comfortable than the ER waiting room, at least; some of the chairs even have leg rests that you can pull out. Once the ambassador has a room, we can probably come up with a cot or a better chair.”

“Okay. Thanks anyways.”

It took Sans nearly half an hour to make it up to the second floor. Directions his non-existent ass. The place was more tangled than the CORE facility!

When he finally staggered into the correct waiting room, a bored-looking nurse took his information down and motioned him towards a few rows of plush chairs. Attie had been nodding off the entire walk, despite her best efforts, so Sans settled her first.

“C’n I have Mr. Cuddlebug?” She asked around a yawn.

“Sure, kiddo.” He opened the backpack, careful not to tear it with his sharpened claws. The jumbled pile of plush made no sense to him. “Uh... which one’s Mr. Cuddlebug?”

Attie reached over and grabbed a green foot, which turned out to be attached to a stuffed turtle with googly eyes. She sighed happily as she nuzzled into its inexplicably soft belly.

“... Huh. Not what I would’ve guessed.”

“You’re just... jealous.”

“Sure, kid. Go to sleep.”

She hummed in agreement. After a moment, though, she opened her eyes. “You’ll tell me if something happens, right?”

“Uh, sure. Sleep first, though. It’s been a long day for ya.”

“‘Kay. G’night.”

“G’night.”

He settled himself into the chair next to her. It was actually... pretty comfy, he realized...

“Mr. Sans?”

Sans snapped his eye sockets open. “Huh? Wha?”

An older man in scrubs was standing over him with a tablet. When had he...?

“You’re waiting for information on Ambassador Dreemurr?”
“Uh...yeah...sorry, just...”

“No, sorry to wake you. It must be a stressful time for you.” The words seemed a little insincere, like the nurse said them every day of his life and it was just habit. Which, Sans figured, was probably true. Humans were always in and out of the hospital, it seemed. “We’re sorry for the delay; the operation went a bit longer than we expected. Ambassador Dreemurr was just moved to a recovery room and the surgical team is debriefing. Most of them are needed on another procedure, but the doctor assigned to her ongoing care should be waiting for you there to discuss how it went and what treatment options we’re working on.”

“Uh, okay.” Sans stood up and took a step to follow the nurse. He had the nagging feeling that he was forgetting something…

‘Something’ grabbing the back of his jacket brought him up short, and he flinched. Oh, right. The kid.

“C’mon, Attie,” he said, scooping up the groggy kid and her backpack. “Let’s go see yer mom.”

Frisk’s room was down a hallway that looked exactly like every other hallway in the place. It was disorienting, to say the least. He had no idea how he was going to get out, if he was ever allowed to leave. The clean, impersonal atmosphere reminded him a bit too much of the Lab to be comfortable.

The room itself was...surprisingly nice, though. He didn’t really know what he’d expected, but it wasn’t the pleasant green walls and cheerful paintings. A monitor hung over Frisk’s bed with some basic information on it - in code, of course - and a dark TV was on the wall opposite. There was space and equipment for two beds in the room but the only one present was the one Frisk occupied.

“Mommy!” Attie squealed, trying to use Sans as some kind of launchpad.

“Woah there, kid. Your mom just came out of surgery, remember?”

“What’s surgery?”

A harsh chuckle came from behind him, and he turned stiffly. A young man stood in the doorway behind Sans, wearing a white lab coat over his scrubs. The doctor, probably.

“I guess you’re the ‘fiancée,’ then?” The doctor’s tone implied that he didn’t believe that story any more than Stacy had.

“Uh...yeah?”

He shrugged slightly. “Ookay. I’m Doctor Raymond Johnson. Just Dr. Ray is fine. I’ll be overseeing Frisk’s - that is, Ambassador Dreemurr’s - recovery for the next few days.”

“Okay...?”

“Sorry; I heard you fell asleep in the waiting room. Do you need a minute?”

“No, no; ‘m fine. So, uh, how did the…” Sans tried to remember the name of the procedure, but came up blank. “The open...uh, the surgery go?”

The doctor glanced down at the tablet in his hand. “The open appendectomy went better than expected, considering the circumstances. The appendix had ruptured, as we suspected, but our
team of surgeons was able to remove it and flush the abdominal cavity. The ambassador is reacting well to the antibiotics and the fluids we’ve been giving her, so that’s an encouraging sign.”

He glanced up. “You’re very lucky you brought her in when you did. Even a few hours, and we might be having a very different conversation. So many people ignore the signs of appendicitis and come in for treatment too late. This was cutting it very close.”

“It’s that serious, then? It sounded like she just had, uh, a stomachache and a real bad fever.”

“Yes, that’s how it starts. The patient will experience pain when the appendix is blocked, then relief when it bursts. Most think that it’s over at that point. Then the pain returns, with fever and nausea as the body tries to fight off the ensuing infection. Ambassador Dreemurr got lucky; her body formed almost a barrier of sorts - oh, pardon the term - around the infection. It kept things contained and bought her more time for us to do what we needed to do.”

“M not surprised. She always was a determined k...uh, lady.”

“...Yes. Well. The will to live is very important...to humans, at least. The ambassador certainly seems to be a fighter, so I have high hopes for her recovery. But anyways! Will you be spending the night here, or looking after the child? We can’t have a child here overnight - against policy, even in these special cases; you understand - but we can put you up on a cot if you want to be present when she wakes up.”

Sans very much did not want to be present when Frisk woke up, but saying so would be giving away more information than he was comfortable with. “I’d better get the kid somewhere where she can sleep. It’s, uh, been a long day. You understand.” Condescending asshole doctor.

“Very well.” He fished something out of his lab coat pocket and handed it to Sans. “I thought that might be the case. This is a recovery room; we’ll be moving her down the hall as soon as we’re sure she’s stable. This brochure has our visiting hours and a map with directions to the ward. Ambassador Dreemurr will be in -” He snatched the brochure back and drew a circle with a pen he’d produced from somewhere, “-Room 237, which is right there. Feel free to ask for directions from any of the nurses’ stations; the nurses know their way around. Visiting hours begin at 7, but please don’t bring the child by before 9. If she gets disruptive, she has to leave. No outside food or drink for now; we’ll be monitoring the patient’s diet very carefully over the next few days..”

“Okay.”

“You’re on the visitor’s list, of course, as are her parents. Anyone else must be approved by the ambassador or someone with medical power of attorney. That’s the person who makes her medical decisions when she’s unable to do so herself. I’m sure you know who that is,” he said, in a tone that indicated he believed Sans had no idea who that could be.

Oh, please. The only one Frisk would trust with something like that was Tori. “Sure, I’ll let her mom know.” The doctor’s smile twitched a little, and Sans figured he guessed right. “Anything else before I get this kid home?”

“Not really. No magic on the ward without a doctor’s approval, please. It can affect some of our patients in different ways, and we’d prefer to avoid...accidents.”

“You got it, Dr. Ray. Well, we’ll see you tomorrow, then. Attie, say goodbye to yer mom; she needs to sleep, and we’ll be back in the morning.”

“Bye, Mommy.” Attie leaned over Sans’s arm and kissed her mom on the forehead. It was almost disgustingly cute, and he could hear the doctor chuckling a little.
Sans left before he could punch the doctor square in the face. He’d save that for if he needed a good, solid reason not to come to the hospital again, ever. Halfway down the hallway he realized something.

“Attie?”

Attie hummed, sounding mostly asleep again.

“...Do you, uh, know how to get out of here?”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: All the boring medical stuff is at least fact-checked, even if the technical details are glossed over or fudged a bit for story reasons. This chapter is brought to you by the joys of appendicitis. Hooray!

This is the last of the short chapters, and the last one that has an absurd amount of medical stuff in it. Frisk is going to be in the hospital for a while yet, but we don't have to get the gory details. Sans will be happy to hear this; he didn't ask to have a bunch of random people giving him information on gooey human bodies. A good deed never goes unpunished, though.

Thanks to everyone to left comments and kudos! You inspire me to keep posting this silly little story of mine.
Chapter Summary

...And Sans winds up with more responsibility than he expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Attie was asleep by the time Sans found his way back outside Ebott Medical Pavilion. He wasn’t entirely sure how he’d gotten there; the exit was one he didn’t recognize, and he was half-sure he’d just wandered in circles until the universe converged on itself and spat him out. Still, it was good to see the sky again.

The... night sky.

Well, shit. Boss was going to have his skull. He looked down at the sleeping kid. He couldn’t leave her alone, not after suffering through tears and awkward humans and enough medical jargon to make his head ache. He was starting to feel... responsible for her.

Taking her to his apartment would be the best bet, especially if Tori was still busy; he could start making calls in the morning. Hopefully Boss was still at that meeting thing, and Sans would have enough time to put Attie to bed and think up a good explanation before having to face the music.

Fortunately, teleporting with a sleeping kid was fairly easy, even if that kid was so heavy she felt like she was full of rocks.

Unfortunately, she didn’t stay asleep for as long as he’d hoped.

“SANS, YOU PIECE OF SHIT! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, AND WHY DO YOU HAVE A HUMAN CHILD WITH YOU??”

“Shut up Boss!” Attie whimpered in Sans’s arms, covering her ears. He lowered his voice; he was too tired to watch his words, regardless of whatever punishments Boss cooked up for him later, but he didn’t want Attie scared of him. “Look what you did! You woke ’er up!”

“YOU DARE CONTRADICT ME?? WHY WOULD I BE CONCERNED WITH...wait, is that...”

“Boss, meet Atlas Dreemurr. Attie, this is my b...uh, Boss. Attie’s gonna have to crash with us for the night.”

“What? SANS, WHY DO YOU HAVE THE AMBASSADOR’S DAUGHTER?? WHERE IS THE AMBASSADOR?? I DEMAND AN EXPLANATION THIS INSTANT!”

“Well, that’s rough, ‘cuz you’re not gonna get one until she’s back asleep. Guess you shouldn’t have screamed at me, huh.”

Boss narrowed his eye sockets and huffed. That was never a good sign. A yelling Boss was one Sans could deal with; a quiet Boss was plotting something.
Usually something painful.

“Very well, Sans,” he said after a moment, crossing his arms over his chest. “I will give you ten minutes to put the child to bed. In MY room; yours is filthy. The deadly death traps are currently disabled, and I’ve already changed my sheets for the night. Neither of you will touch anything in my room with your filthy claws. You will go in, deposit the child on my bed, ensure that she is asleep, and return here. Ten minutes, Sans.”

“Uh...sure, Boss.”

Well. That was unexpected. Sans didn’t know when Boss had developed a soft spot for kids; he sure hadn’t showed it back in the Underground. Heh, the last kid he’d acted this nice around was...

...Frisk, actually. Well. That made more sense.

Boss’s room was as neat and orderly as always. It gave Sans the creeps. He looked around; the decor was probably not what most humans found...comforting.

“You, uh, gonna be okay in here, kid?” He asked, giving a full-sized skeleton model (dressed in Boss’s spare suit of armor and a pair of sunglasses, of course) a light kick. “We can always punt and go to my room, but it is...uh, pretty messy.”

“Tsokay.”

“Allright, your choice. Onto the bed - hup! - and under the covers. Wow. This is pretty soft, huh.”

“You gonna be okay up here by yourself?”

“Uh-huh. Just...can you see if Mr. Boss can not yell again?”

“He is pretty loud, huh.”

“Yeah. It woke me up. He’s not nice, just like you said.”

“Kay, then. I’ll go talk to him. G’night, kid.”

“G’night, Mr. Skeleton.” To Sans’s surprise, she sat up before letting go of his jacket and did...something with her face near his cheekbone. It made a weird almost...smacking sound? He’d heard it before, but...

Oh, right. A human kiss. He could feel his cheekbones getting red.

“Welp, that’s enough from you. Go to sleep, ‘kay? And don’t wake me up b’fore morning.”

Attie muttered something he didn’t catch, her eyes already sliding shut. He watched her for a moment, half-expecting her to sit back up and start babbling, but she was still and quiet. Her breathing got a little slower and more even and she didn’t move.

Back in the living room Boss was sitting on the couch, posed with his arms still crossed in a manner that was supposed to look intimidating. Sans told himself (as he always did) that it was not intimidating, no matter how hard his knees shook when Boss scowled at him like that.
“So,” Boss said, “You have Ambassador Dreemurr’s daughter in my room. I trust there is a good explanation for that, and that you are not using this apartment to continue your little...feud with the ambassador.”

“Y-yeah, I have a good reason, Boss. See, I was walkin’ home from the hot dog stand - like I always do - since I didn’t have a sentry shift t’night, and, uh, I found the kid outside. Said she was locked out. I, uh, helped the kid inside, and she said her mom wasn’t feelin’ well. We took Frisk’s temperature, found out she was runnin’ one hell of a fever. We called up Tori, but Tori didn’t wanna...”

Wait. Tori. Tori had filled in for Frisk at that mysterious meeting...a meeting which the Royal Guard would have been running security for. And Papyrus had been - was still supposed to be - at a very secret meeting.

“...You already know some of this, don’t you.”

Boss snarled. “Just continue. I am losing my patience.”

“Kay...so, uh, Tori was busy. The internet said Frisk’s fever was high enough to be dangerous, so we took her to EMP’s emergency room. They said...it was good that we brought her in. Said the infection could’ve spread a lot further if we’d waited; that Frisk...could’ve died. So, uh, we waited until she was out of surgery, then I brought the kid here.”

“I...see. And why, Sans, were you walking past the ambassador’s home?”

“It’s just...on my route, Boss.” Kinda. An alternate route, really. Boss didn’t need to know about the monsters who’d been hassling him on his usual walk home; the punishment for allowing himself to be hassled would be worse than anything the bully-wannabes would dare do to him.

“And why would you - you of all people - help Frisk’s daughter? It is no secret that you and the ambassador have not gotten along for the entire time we have been on the surface. Your petty squabbles have caused more work for the Royal Guard than I care to outline for you at this moment. You expect me to believe that you would help her?”

Sans didn’t really have a good explanation for that himself. Just...he’d felt some kind of empathy for her. It was stupid - he’d always been too soft, even when he still lived Underground - but...that was the best reason he could come up with.

“I wasn’t gonna leave a babybones to watch her mom die, okay? I’m an asshole, but not that big of an asshole.”

Boss considered him for another moment, then relaxed slightly. Sans felt his shoulders droop in relief. “Well, at least that lines up with what we know.”

“What do you know? Sheesh, no need to get all growly. I’m just askin’ ‘cuz I wanna make sure Tori knows what’s goin’ on.”

“Hmph. Queen Toriel updated myself, Captain Undyne and a few other elite guards when it became apparent that the ambassador was going to be...indisposed. We thought it was much less serious than it apparently is.

“Then during a break in discussions, the queen received your voicemail regarding her daughter’s condition, and another from the hospital giving a much more...concise and detailed explanation of the situation. She neglected to inform us that you were watching the ambassador’s daughter, which is a...surprising oversight. Regardless, she tasked some of us with disseminating the news
among monsters and beginning the process of trying to control the media. You know this is going to cause a stir once reporters catch wind of this?”

“Uh…”

“You didn’t even think of that, did you. I wish I could be surprised. I’m still in shock that you actually performed an action of your own volition, and something that may very well have saved the life of a member of the royal family besides. It’s so out of character that I’m considering being concerned. As it stands, I’m just trying to figure out what you did wrong. There must be something; this is all too good to be true, otherwise.”

Sans stood very still, remembering one particular detail Boss would be furious about.

“Oh, by the stars; we may as well start damage control. What. Just spit it out. What did you do.”

Boss’s control was getting a little terrifying, actually. Usually he started screaming and throwing things at that point in the conversation.

“I, uh…well, y’see, it was the kid’s - Attie’s - idea, but…she kinda…said I was Frisk’s fiancee?”

Boss stared. “You... WHAT? Well...this is going to be a nightmare. If reporters get wind of this, I am dealing with it, do you hear?”

“‘Kay, Boss.”

“I mean it. NO talking to reporters. They will blow the whole thing out of proportion and cause a scandal that will take months, if not years to clean up. Just stay away from them altogether. You will not prank them. You will not make rude hand gestures at them. You will not swap their recording equipment for assorted root vegetables with crude faces carved into them.”

Sans hadn’t realized Boss knew about that…incident.

“You will not distract them and teleport away, ESPECIALLY if there are cameras nearby. You will avoid them as best you can. If you are asked a question, you will say “No comment” and keep on walking. Nothing else. If you are cornered, you will call me. No redirecting them to someone else; they know who the official liaisons are when the ambassador is indisposed, even if they elect to disregard that information. I will not have you risking human-monster relations by running your fat jawbone about something you don’t understand. Is. That. Clear?”

“Uh…crystal clear, Boss.”

Boss thought for a long moment, staring at something over Sans’s shoulder. “Oh, and - against my better judgement - I’m taking you off all sentry shifts and that hot dog stand of yours and assigning you as Atlas’s full-time caretaker until Frisk recovers.”

“What? But Boss…”

“No buts. She is, by all accounts, a resourceful and independent child. Captain Undyne has been her primary contact within the Guard, and she will likely want to stop by in the morning to...evaluate the situation. She’s very protective of Atlas; I suggest you be on your best behavior.”

“Then why can’t Undyne watch her?”

"Captain Undyne has patrols and administrative tasks, as well as active duty. Originally, we planned to have Queen Toriel and King Asgore take shifts with Atlas should the ambassador ever be out of commission, but both will be busy these next few weeks. There is much more going on
right now than you can possibly understand. Atlas needs to have a guardian or the humans will take her.”

“But...but why me?”

“The child seems comfortable enough with you, stars know why. Keeping Atlas here will provide additional security. Everyone else is up to their eye sockets with real work. You barely do anything but sleep, as it is; you may as well contribute for once. This will be a learning experience for you. Take your pick.”

Sans growled again.

“Oh, and if you intimidate the child into requesting another guardian I will make you sleep in the dog park for the rest of the year. Am I understood?”

“Y-yeah, Boss. I’ll keep a good eye socket on the kid, sheesh.”

“You had better.” Boss stood. “Now get out of here and go to bed. I must inform Queen Toriel of this development.”

Sans made a tactical retreat back to his room. For one fleeting moment, he really, really wished he’d just ignored the kid from the start.

Oh, well. He collapsed face-first onto his bare mattress and promptly passed out.

.oO0Oo.

BRRRRRRRING!

The sound of his phone alarm going off roused Sans from slumber. It took him a moment to register the numbers on his phone’s screen.

7:01 AM.

Ugh.

He grabbed it and silenced the alarm (titled, “WAKE UP, SANS”), then tried to slide it under his pillow. The movement caught on something...connected to his phone?

Oh. The charger.

He disconnected the phone (carefully; charging cords were so weirdly fragile) and reluctantly sat up. If his phone was charged and his alarm was set, that meant Boss had ventured into the depths of his room. That meant he was undoubtedly supposed to be doing something.

He blinked a few times, trying to remember. Nothing.

He glanced down at his phone. 131 text messages and 25 voicemails awaited him. Sssskip.

He was still wearing day clothes. That was probably...not good? Maybe? What had he been doing? He felt so tired. Couldn’t he go back to sleep...?

BRRRRRRRING!

His eye sockets opened again, slower this time. 7:05. Another alarm, this one called, “SANS, DON’T FORGET ATLAS.”
Huh. What did he need an atlas for?

BRRRRRRRING!

7:07. “UNDYNE WILL BE AT THE DOOR IN THREE MINUTES.”

Undyne? Why was Undyne…


He hauled himself off the mattress, stumbling a little. Sure enough, Boss’s door was clear of the ‘deadly death traps’ he favored when he was out doing Royal Guard things. A quick peek inside proved that Attie was - thankfully - still asleep. Boss’s alarm clock was dark; apparently, he’d unplugged it before heading out.

BRRRRRRRING!

Sans quickly silenced the alarm on his phone without reading it. Attie just rolled over, eyes still closed, apparently not too bothered by the noise.

The sound of a knock came from the front door of the apartment. He reluctantly shuffled over and unlocked it, positioning himself carefully -

“HEY, PUNK!!!” Undyne slammed the door open - narrowly missing his head - and strode into the apartment. As usual, she eyed the slightly shabby living room with barely-disguised disgust, then glared at Sans like it was his fault.

“Hey, Capt’n.”

“That’s Captain Undyne to you, sentry. Now, where’s the kid?”

“Sleepin’. We had a late night.”

“Ha! YOU had a late night? I’ve been awake for TWO DAYS STRAIGHT!”

That explained the manic gleam in her eye. “That sounds...awful.”

“Huh? Oh, this is nothin’.” She wavered a little as she brushed by him. “Is that coffee I smell?”

He breathed in deeply. “I think so. Want a mug?”

Undyne was already in the kitchen. “Nah. Mugs are for LOSERS!” She grabbed the carafe - still piping hot - and poured a generous portion into her mouth. “GAH! Stop staring at me and GO GET THE KID! We have a FULL DAY PLANNED!” She took another gulp.

A little resentful of Undyne for hogging the coffee, he shuffled back towards Boss’s room. Attie was still asleep as he’d left her, curled up on her side.

“Hey, kid?”

No response.

“Kiddo? Buddy, pal, chum?”

Nothing.
“Uh, Attie? Atlas? Wake up?”

The kid’s nose scrunched and her eyes opened just the tiniest amount. She hummed a little under her breath.

“Hey! There ya are. There’s someone here to see ya.”

“Mr. Skeleton…?”

“Uh, well, sure. I’m here, but you’ve already seen me, right?” He waved his hands like Mettaton did when executing a particularly flashy attack. “But there’s someone else here. I didn’t realize you knew the fish-lady.”

“Huh?”

“Y’know, Captain Undyne? Tall, blue, smells like-”

“Undie’s here?”


Attie smiled, then stretched sleepily. She moved about as fast as he did in the morning. By the time they made it back down the hallway, Undyne had finished the entire carafe of coffee. Luckily, she’d been over to their apartment before and knew how to operate the coffee machine; she was watching a small stream of brewed coffee trickle into the carafe like it held the secret to life and happiness.

For someone who’d been awake for 48 hours and counting, it probably did.

“Undie!” Attie said, running straight for the feared Captain of the Royal Guard. Sans tensed, ready to grab the kid and run, but-

“Hey, lil’ nerd!” Undyne swung Attie up over her head, high enough that ankles brushed the low ceiling, then settled the kid on her hip. It looked disturbingly domestic. Or it did, until she turned a formidable glare at Sans, who was snickering in the doorway. “Don’t. You. Dare.”

He snorted. “Why not? The kid-”

“…Is one of my besties. You aren’t. It’d suck to have to babysit without your jaw, now wouldn’t it?”

Point taken.

“Undieeee, you’re being silly! Mr. Skeleton has his jaw!”

“Mr. Skeleton? Sans, you little shit! You make her call you Mr. Skeleton?”

The skeleton in question grumbled under his breath. “Was her idea…”

Undyne cackled. “Kid, you ain’t gotta call him ‘Mr.’ nothin’! This asshole is just ‘Sans.’ Or ‘Shit.’ Either one’s fine.”

Attie giggled like Undyne had just told a joke.

“ANYWAYS! Papyrus took care ‘a ya, see? Oatmeal! Aww, don’t scrunch yer face up like that, punk. See? There’s a bowl here for that asshole, too. Misery loves company, right? And hey,
lookit that! Papyrus gave you the little dinosaurs from *both* packages of oatmeal! You get double dinosaurs today!"

Sans glowered. He didn’t care about dinosaurs in his oatmeal, not really, but it was the principle of the thing.

Attie tilted her head to the side. “Who’s Pa-py-rus?”

“Huh? You met him last night, remember? Loud, tall, wears black. Y’know, the skeleton guy who *isn’t* a lazy asshole.”

“Oh! You mean Mr. Boss?”

“Mr…” Undyne lost it.

“Oh MY GOSH, THAT’S THE BEST THING EVER! HAHAHAHA! Bone bag, I blame you for this! Oh…oh gosh…”

“What’s so funny, Undie?”

“N-nothin’, punk! Just…just let me breathe…whoo boy…” She took a few deep breaths, steadying the kid. “Oh! Coffee’s done!”

Attie was promptly dropped to the floor as Undyne turned complete focus towards the one true love of her life. The kid landed on her feet, thankfully, and contented herself with distributing the oatmeal and spoons.

It wasn’t Grillby’s, but it was food all the same. Frowning, Sans poked a funny lump that looked like it had been added after the rest of the oatmeal in the bowl. A tiny little orange dinosaur was inside.

“The orange ones are the best,” Attie whispered over the sounds of Undyne grossly demolishing the coffee. She gave him a grin that he could only describe as conspiratorial.

“Oh, thanks, kid,” he whispered back, eating the evidence of her little kindness.

Breakfast finished up quickly once Undyne ran out of coffee again. “Okay, punks,” she growled, “Here’s what we’re gonna do today. First, we’re gonna TRAIN!”

Attie cheered.

“Then, we’re gonna start on SCHOOLWORK!”

The cheering stopped.

“Aww, c’mom, don’t be like that. You know ya gotta do it. ‘Sides, we’re gonna start with HISTORY, not that nerdy science crap.”

“Hey,” Sans protested, personally offended by that remark.

“Pfh. *You’re* gonna do the nerdy crap with her, bone bag. I’ve gotta take off after lunch and do eff’n paperwork.”

Attie blew a raspberry. “Eff’n paperwork! Blech!”

“Shuddup!” Undyne put a hand over the kid’s mouth, like she expected Frisk (and all her accompanying maternal wrath) to tear through the apartment at any moment. “Ya can’t say the “eff’n” word until you’re grown up or your mom’ll kill me, ‘kay?”
‘Kay!"

Sans sighed. “And what about her mom?”

Undyne looked at him with a disturbing intensity. “None of your business, asshole. ‘Sides, you hate Frisk, right?”

He glanced at Attie, who appeared to be memorizing every word of the exchange for future blackmail. “I...uh...well...the kid’ll wanna see her, right? I’m supposed to watch her, ‘s all.”

“What? Why would Attie wanna go see someone in the hospital?”

Attie looked up at Undyne with one of the most pathetic, pleading expressions possible on a human face. “Pleeeeeease, Undie? Can we go see my mommy today? Please?”

“...Huh. Well, squirt, I dunno what good it’ll do ya, but sure. LATER, after schoolwork.”

Undyne’s phone buzzed, and her eyes scanned the screen for a long moment. It looked like she was having trouble focusing. “Oh! You’ve gotta get your ass to the hospital, like, now; bone boy. I’ll watch the kid. We’ll have an official liaison in place later to get us updates, but for now you’re one of the few folks on the visitation list. We’ve gotta make sure she’s still alive and stuff.”

“Okay.” Sans, grateful for the escape, shuffled as quickly as he could manage towards the door.

He was thwarted by a blur of blue. “NOPE! Change first!” she ordered, shoving him backwards so hard he fell over. “And take your phone so we can track you. If you DARE slack off or try to escape us, I’m gonna sic the dogs on you. Got it?”

“Fine.” He picked himself up, brushed off his pants, shuffled back towards his room and slammed the door. He could hear Attie whining that she wanted to go instead, and grimaced.

It took three changes of clothing before he found something Undyne deemed ‘acceptable’ to visit the hospital in. He wasn’t sure why she wanted him to wear long pants and his last clean turtleneck (red, naturally), but he wasn’t about to argue with the Captain of the Royal Guard.

Not when Attie was close enough to get caught up in the destruction, anyways.

After he passed inspection, Sans beat a hasty retreat. Attie was distracted by Undyne’s ‘training,’ so he was able to slip out without too much fuss. They appeared to be training Attie’s ability to pose dramatically and scream insults: a vital part of any monster’s childhood. He stopped to snap a photo - to blackmail Undyne in the future, of course; not because it was cute - and slipped out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Undyne’s a giggly drunk. That’s one reason why she never drinks. However she does, on occasion, stay up for WAY too long, which has about the same effect.

Also, Papyrus decorates his room in tacky Halloween decor.

Thanks for sticking with this story! We're getting into the meat of the first "arc," as it
were. We've gotten into the longer chapters, at least. A huge debt of gratitude to everyone who has left comments and kudos thus far; you are my inspiration to post and to finish up this story.
In Which Everybody Threatens Sans

Chapter Summary

...Which has, historically, been the best way to keep him in line thus far.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk’s room was empty. Why was it empty? Sans looked around. The only thing left in the room was the bed she’d been lying on when he saw her last. It was covered in dust.

Death was nothing new to him, or any monster for that matter. With as bad as things had gotten in the Underground, every monster had seen someone die...or the aftermath, at least. He’d probably seen more death than most, though. Heck, he’d probably killed more than most, Royal Guard aside.

He was not prepared for Frisk’s death.

His mind didn’t want to process it. How was she gone so quickly? She’d been doing better, right? The doctors had said she’d be alright, hadn’t they?

What was going to happen to Attie?

*Why do you care?*

“Sans.”

Frisk’s voice sounded horrible, like half her throat was missing. Sans turned and saw her standing by the doorway to the hospital room. She was dressed in that striped shirt she’d worn back in the Underground, but her face was the same as it was when he’d last seen her: pale skin, sunken eyes and exaggerated cheekbones, faint lines of sweat running from her dark, scraggly hair down her forehead.

“Sans.”

He wanted to turn away, wanted to run, but where would he go? Was Frisk a ghost now? Was she going to haunt him for the rest of his -

Something hit his arm hard, and he tumbled. The dream faded. The hospital room - the *real* hospital room - spun into focus round him. He dragged himself up using the chair he’d been sitting in and the edge of the hospital bed and peered at the room’s occupant.

Frisk was still alive...and awake. She quirked an eyebrow at him, a pale shadow of her usual sass. “Your phone,” she croaked, jerking her head towards the bedside table.

Hesitantly, and half expecting her to jump up and tackle him or something, Sans answered the phone. He cleared his nonexistent throat. “Uh...y’ello.”

“SANS!” It was Undyne. “I’VE CALLED YOU THREE TIMES! WHAT THE EFF IS GOING
“ON?? Attie, don’t repeat that.”

“Uh…”

“ARGH! You were supposed to report in AN HOUR AGO! You need to take over watching Attie! Get your bony ass over her NOW!”

“Yeah, yeah…” Frisk was still watching him.

“THAT’S ‘YES, CAPTAIN UNDYNE’ TO YOU, YOU LITTLE-”

He hung up and carefully dropped his phone into his jacket pocket, his eyes never leaving Frisk’s. His phalanges were shaking.

She broke the silence first, with a hoarse “Thank you.” She sounded as awkward saying it as he felt hearing it.

“Uh...no problem, kiddo.”

“I mean it. Thank you. I may not remember much, but I know you found Attie and I and took me to the hospital. I’m...reeeeaaaaally drugged up right now, but I think I kind of know what happened. Appendicitis is a serious thing. Thanks for taking me here. They’re saying I’d be dead if it weren’t for you.”

Sans, for lack of anything to say, just nodded uncomfortably.

She waved a hand in his general direction. “C’mere a minute.”

“Wow, kiddo, I’ve, uh, gotta go...Undyne…”

“She’ll understand. Come here.”

He leaned over the bed.

Frisk grabbed the front of his turtleneck and pulled him down with a surprising amount of strength for someone who’d been cut apart the night before. This close to her, he could see that she was actually looking a lot better than she had even a few hours ago when he’d first arrived. Her skin wasn’t as pale, she wasn’t sweating as much, and she looked like she’d gotten some sleep. Her lips were pinched together so hard they were nearly white, and her eyes were narrowed in determination.

“I owe you. That’s a debt between you and me. We’ll settle that when I’m better.

“You WILL leave Attie out of this, do you hear me? You will NOT mess with her. You will not prank her. You will not get within fifteen feet of her. You will not look at her. Do you hear me?”

“Uh…”


“I’m kinda...babysitting her?”

Her eyes narrowed, and the fist on the front of Sans’s turtleneck pulled him even closer to her. “What?” she whispered. He felt the word more than heard it: a puff of hot, angry breath against his nasal ridge.
“Look. It wasn’t my idea. But Boss and Undyne worked something out, I guess; took me off all my regular jobs. I guess everyone else is busy? Yer mom’s filling in for you in meetings, the king’s out of the country. Undyne’s got guard stuff. I don’t know who else normally watches her, but apparently I drew the short stick, okay? ‘M not who you wanted to look after your kid, but I’m not...I’m not gonna hurt her, ‘kay? I’m not that much’ve an asshole.”

There was a tense moment when Sans was sure Frisk was going to attack him somehow. She looked murderous. Then, slowly, she eased up a little.

“Fine,” she said, finally. Her eyes looked tired.

“Fine?”

“I’m trusting you with Attie. Against my better judgement, against every maternal instinct I have, I’m trusting you. Stars know I’m in no condition to do anything about it anyways.

“You will report to me hourly with what she’s doing. You will send pictures when I ask. You will bring her to see me on a daily basis. If you choose not to, if you give me any reason to believe that you are harming her in any way - physical, emotional, it doesn’t matter - I will have your head if it’s the last thing I do. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Boss.”

Both paused for a moment, startled by the automatic reply. Sans glanced away. “I-I mean-”

“It’s fine. Just…”

The door opened and he flinched, but he couldn’t go very far with Frisk still attached to the front of his sweater. Even turning around was out of the question. He shifted slightly against the bed, bracing himself in case he needed to attack; having his back exposed like this made him nervous.

“Oh! Am I...interrupting something, Ambassador?” It was the asshole doctor.

Slowly, finger by finger, she released him. Sans sank back into the chair in relief, resisting the urge to run from the room.

Running only ever made things worse.

“Hello, Dr. Ray,” Frisk said in a sickeningly sweet tone she usually reserved for stubborn politicians and obnoxious monsters. It was a tone Sans knew all too well. “Can you give us just a moment? We’re almost done here.”

“Well, you see, Ambassador-”

“Please.” It was a demand, not a request.

Dr. Ray left.

Sans winced as Frisk turned her attention back towards him. “Look. I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to snap. I just...” She gestured vaguely with the hand she’d grabbed him with. It appeared to be shaking a little. “I usually know where Attie is and what she’s doing, okay? When I have to go abroad, either Mom or Dad or Undyne has her and I know she’s safe. I know you’re gonna demand the moon from me once I’m out of here and can settle my debts, but...just take care of her, please? Whatever you want from me - whatever reason you have for doing this - I’ll do it as long as she’s safe. Okay?”
Her voice was quavering a little by the end of this speech, and Sans guessed it wasn’t just from the medication. He felt another uncomfortable twinge. “Yeah, yeah, fine. Look. You got your phone, right?”

With shaking fingers - and they definitely were shaking, now - she patted around her legs and managed to pull the phone out from where it had been tucked beside her under the covers. It slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. Her face was a little flushed when he handed it back to her, but he couldn’t tell if it was from embarrassment or from the appende-sickness or if she was somehow afraid he would hurt her.

*It isn’t an unreasonable fear,* his mind offered. He shook the thought away.

“How. What’s your number?”

She recited it to him, voice starting to sound a little weak and breathy. Her exhaustion was plain in the lines of pain that were tracing across her face, but she was holding herself together admirably.

He stored the number, then tapped a few more times. Her phone buzzed and she entered the unlock pattern it in a gesture that looked automatic, pulling up the message she’d just received.

A smile transformed her face into something that Sans couldn’t look away from. He wasn’t sure why; wasn’t sure what it was about this (admittedly, very sick) human woman that seemed so...entrancing in that moment. It wasn’t beauty, not the way he usually defined it, but it sure wasn’t ugliness.

He coughed to cover up his discomfort. “I...uh, when I left this mornin’ Attie was doing ‘training’ with Undyne. Reminded me of...well.” He ignored the nostalgic twinge with ease. “Consider it a first report, okay? Kid wanted t’see ya. We’ll be by later if yer up for it?”

Frisk nodded absently, her eyes still glued to her phone.

He escaped as quietly as he could. The doctor was waiting outside, jiggling his leg impatiently, and gave Sans a nasty look. He resisted the urge to respond with a rude hand gesture and instead focused on finding the exit.

It took...less time than it had the night before, by his estimation. That was good. He had a lot to think about, but a lot more that he definitely didn’t want to think about.

Like that dream. What was *that* about? In hindsight, it was almost funny; humans didn’t dust, and didn’t turn into murderous ghosts to terrorize the living. (He was pretty sure, at least. He’d never seen it happen, but some of the movies humans made were pretty convincing.) So...why had he dreamed about it? Did he really hate Frisk so much he wanted her to die? He didn’t think he did - most of the time, he was too lazy to even hold a proper grudge - but...well. He’d be the first to admit that he wasn’t exactly a *nice* person.

It was barely 11:00 by the time he got back to the apartment. Undyne was enthusiastically jumping around, summoning spears and gesturing wildly. It looked like she was attempting to reenact an entire battle by herself, and she seemed to be doing a fairly good job if Sans was any judge.

“Mr. Sans!” Attie said, swerving narrowly around a set of dangerously sharp spears to launch herself at him. “You’ve been gone forever!”

“Nah. Just since breakfast.”

Undyne loomed over them. “And WHAT have you been up to, bone bag? You were supposed to
“You didn’t say anything ‘bout that, just told me to go visit Frisk in the hospital. I did.”

“I TEXTED YOU, YOU ASSHOLE! I’M GOING TO BE LATE FOR MY SHIFT!”

“...You said you were here until after lunch.”

“DON'T USE MY WORDS AGAINST ME!”

“Right-o, Cap’n.”

“THAT'S CAPTAIN UNDYNE TO YOU, YOU...YOU...” She glanced at Attie, who was watching her with awe, then turned back to him. “YOU FISH STICK!”

“Ooooh!” The little girl gasped with the tone of a child who had just learned her first proper swear word.

“'Kay, Captain Undyne. Did you need something before you make like a ball and bounce?”

“Bounce!” Attie said, hopping in circles around them. “Bounce, bounce, bounce!”

Undyne growled. “If she picks up bad habits, I’m blaming you. Also: you need to fill out a full report with the details of your visit this morning.”

In that moment, Sans knew the meaning of dread. “...You mean a text, right? I can just text you or Boss or Tori what happened?”

Her grin was full of sharp, sharp teeth. “The forms are on the table. But since you’re so eager, sure you can fill them out in triplicate! We normally scan and email them, but I wouldn’t want to deprive you of any extra work, since you’re volunteering!”

“Gee, I’m not...”

“Papyrus will be by around noon to pick them up.” She grabbed a duffel bag from her inventory and threw it at him hard enough to bruise a little. “Clothes and stuff for the kid. She can dress herself, but she needs to be presentable.”

“Awww, man,” Attie interjected.

Undyne crouched down to the kid’s eye level. “I’m holding this sad sack of bones responsible for you, okay? If he does anything you don’t like, what do you do?”

“Call you?”

“Right. Call me. You have your own phone in the bag -” She waited for the cheering to stop - “But keep it charged, okay? I put all our numbers in. Text this asshole so he has your number too, alright? Just in case.”

“Okay! Can I text my mommy?”

But Undyne was already out the door. Attie looked more dejected than Sans expected. He shuffled over and patted her on the head gently, being careful of his claws. “H-hey, what’s wrong?”

She sniffled. “Can...can I text my mommy?”
“Sure, don’t see why not.”

“YAY!” She dug out the phone and got to work, navigating around menus at a pace Sans found dizzying. She recited a phone number out loud as she punched it in.

Sans brought out his own phone, snapping a picture.

_You 11:27 AM_
”Undie” gave the kid a phone
Off the hook?

A response came immediately.

_Frisky Dreamer 11:27 AM_
No. Report?

Sans did a double-take at seeing the time. It was almost 11:30. Boss was due in _half an hour_ and he had...lots of paperwork to fill out, by the looks of it.

_You 11:29 AM_
Undyne just left
Said to dress the kid
Also lots of paperwork
I hate paperwork

_Frisky Dreamer 11:30 AM_
You’re complaining to the wrong lady, bonehead. Make sure my daughter gets dressed in something my mom would pick out and text a picture.
She can dress herself. She doesn’t need your help, you scumbag. I don’t trust you.
Also, fill out your damn paperwork.

_You 11:33 AM_
Wow u text ur kid with those fingers

There was no response. A moment later, a ding sounded from Attie’s phone. The kid squealed like she’d been pinched and ran in a circle, staring at her phone and not where she was -

“Kid!” He flung a hand out, barely catching the kid’s soul before she smacked face-first into the wall. “Yer gonna be the death of me. Watch where you’re going before your mom pops my head off and mounts it, yeah?”

Attie just giggled as she was slowly settled back upright. “Oooh, I’m blue now! Blue’s my third fav’rite color! Orange and pink are better, but blue is great. It’s better than green, which is what Undie can do to me. Can I wear blue today, Mr. Sans?”

“Uh, sure. If Undyne packed a blue shirt for you-”

The kid was already throwing clothes wildly out of the bag. It looked like they’d been folded at one point - Undyne was a neat freak like that - and Sans groaned at the thought of refolding all those little shirts. Finally, the kid found whatever she was looking for and waddled back off towards Boss’s room to change.

Sans ignored the mess in favor of the looming pile of paperwork on his desk. He checked the clock on his phone: 11:40. He had time. He could do this. Right?
...Where were the pencils again??

He searched through all the kitchen drawers and under the couch before finding a broken pencil stub that Boss had probably discarded at one point. It was just the writing end, no eraser in sight, but it would have to do.

He settled in and started filling in the required blanks. He felt...so tired. He’d barely gotten four and a half hours of sleep the night before, if that, and his nap in the hospital had lasted an hour at most. His hand trailed off in the middle of the form to rub at his eye sockets...

_BANG!_

He jerked to his feet, hand outstretched to attack...

...Boss.

“Uh…”

“OH, PLEASE DO EXPLAIN,” the taller skeleton sneered, approaching the table in three long strides. “Please explain why you were so out of it that you failed to answer the door, despite sitting right there at the table.”

“S-sorry, Boss. ‘M just...tired?” It was no excuse, and they both knew it.

Boss’s hand came up under Sans’s chin, sharp claws pressing into his vertebrae even through the thick, standard-issue Royal Guard gloves. “And where,” he asked, “is the paperwork I am here to pick up? Surely you have that complete and ready to go, yes?”

“N-no. It’s almost done, but-”

He was cut off when two of Boss’s fingers were hooked through his collar, lifting him and slamming him spine-first into the dining room wall. His vision blurred from the sharp impact to the back of his skull, but it wasn’t _nearly_ as hard as it usually was. Boss was holding back.

“WELL?”

“I...I’m almost…” Sans resisted the urge to claw at the hand holding him up. It _hurt._

“Mr. Boss?”

The voice made him feel sick.

“Attie...go...” He could see the kid out of the corner of his eye socket, staring at Boss. It was no surprise that she didn’t listen to him; it _was_ a surprise when she crossed her arms, stomped over to Boss, and kicked him in the shin hard enough to dent his formidable HP.

Boss dropped him with a small yelp both brothers would deny until their dying day, for very different reasons.

“Mr. Sans is MY babysitter!” She said, eyebrows furrowed. She stomped a foot. “You don’t get to beat him up, you big meanie!”

The guard stared at her. Sans braced himself, sure that he’d have to move quickly to get the kid out of Boss’s attack range...

Boss tossed his skull back and _roared_ with laughter. “YOU ARE VICIOUS! NYEHEHE!
UNDYNE HAS TAUGHT YOU WELL! YOU AREN’T ANYTHING LIKE YOUR STRANGELY EFFECTIVE PATHETIC WIMP OF A MOTHER! THIS IS A FINE DAY INDEED FOR THE MONSTER MONARCHY!"

Sans was pretty sure Boss didn’t notice how Attie’s face went pale and her little lips trembled.

“OH, THIS IS GLORIOUS! YOU WANT TO FIGHT ME YOURSELF THEN, CHILD?” A wave of one hand summoned an array of bones, all glowing an angry red with attack magic. “PREPARE YOURSELF!”

“Oh...Boss? I don’t think the kid’s mom would like it if we beat her up on her first day here-umph!” He barely caught himself on his chair when he was shoved out of the way.

“THEN YOU HAD BEST FINISH YOUR PAPERWORK QUICKLY, YES?”

He picked the pencil back up with shaking fingers and wrote faster than he ever had in his life. Thankfully, Boss was still in his monologuing phase; he hadn’t actually done anything worse than taunt the kid. Attie had screwed up her little face into a determined expression, but Sans could read the fear in her eyes. It made him feel...uneasy.

Undyne hadn’t actually left triple copies of the forms, thankfully, and most of the extra pages were just blank sheets meant for appending additional comments. His conversation with Frisk had lasted less than ten minutes, so he didn’t have all that much to report. Scribbled down everything that came to mind took about a minute. After checking it over to make sure he hadn’t missed anything - that would’ve been a disaster - he shoved it in Boss’s face.

It worked. Boss had a lot to say about Sans’s handwriting (“ATROCIOUS!”) and his lack of detail (“WHAT DOES ‘LOOKED LESS DEAD’ EVEN MEAN? THAT’S NOT A MEDICAL TERM!”) but his attention had been diverted away from the human child. Thankfully, she had more self-preservation than her mother had ever shown and retreated somewhere down the hallway while Boss was distracted.

“I EXPECT BETTER RESULTS NEXT TIME, YOU SCUM!” was Boss’s parting comment as he stomped out the door.

Sans breathed a sigh of relief and sunk to his knees. He was alive, and Attie was alive, and Frisk didn’t have a reason to-

*Ding!*

He pulled out his phone.

*Frisky Dreamer 12:15 PM*

*I DON’T SEE A PICTURE OF MY DAUGHTER, SANS.*

*You 12:16 PM*

Tell that to boss he was distracting us

“Uh, Attie?”

There was no response. He heaved himself back onto his feet and dashed down the hallway.

Attie wasn’t in Boss’s room, but there was a small pile of her clothing that Sans scooped up. He grimaced; it smelly, probably from all that exercise with Undyne earlier. Human body fluids...yuck.
“Attie!”

She wasn’t in the bathroom, though there was a pink toothbrush propped up against the sink faucet. He plunked it into the toothbrush caddy next to Boss’s (originally bright candy red, with black bones drawn on it with permanent marker), dumped the clothes in the hamper, and moved on.

“Attie!”

Where else could the kid even be? There wasn’t any other-

Wait.

He pushed open the door to his own room. He immediately knew that someone was in the room; there was a strange sense of something being displaced, of a space invaded by something terribly foreign. The door was usually locked, but then again, he wasn’t usually ordered to change his clothing repeatedly by an irritable fish-lady.

He sighed. “Attie, I know you’re in here.”

There was a muffled sniffle. “M sorry, I’m sorry…”

“Hey, it’s not you. Boss is just...like that, yeah? Don’t take it personal.”

“He...he was gonna...h-hurt me! He was gonna stab me with a bone!”

“Nah, kid. I wouldn’t have let him do that.”

“You didn’t stop him.”

“...Well, I was doin’ what Boss asked. I knew that as soon as I got the damn paperwork done he’d go away and leave us both alone.”

The closet door slid open, revealing two green eyes and a pinched little face. “You didn’t fight him for me.”

“Kid...I don’t even fight for myself. What do you want from me?”

Attie glanced away, apparently not sure what to say. It was hard to remember that, for all her apparent maturity (she was so like her mother in that way), she was only seven. Less than half the age Frisk had been when she broke the barrier.

“Dunno,” she finally said. “I guess I just wanted someone to save me.”

“We all do, kid. I would’ve stopped him before he hurt you, but standin’ up to Boss...it’s just not smart, y’know? I was trying to get him out of both our hairs.”

She giggled, eyes tracing over his bare skull. “I guess so. He was just scarier than I ‘xpected.”

“Yeah.” There was something tugging at his long-neglected conscience, and it...wasn’t going away. He struggled for a long moment, then gave in to the impulse. “I...uh, I’m sorry, kid.”

Attie responded by shuffling out of his closet and over to him, then slowly wrapping her arms around his ribcage as far as she could reach. “I forgive you,” she said, her voice muffled by his jacket.

Sans, unsure of what to say back, just wrapped his arms around her as well.
“Are you okay? It looked like Mr. Boss was hurting you when I walked in.”

“I’m fine, kid. Sheesh. I’m a tough guy; I can take a hit. Boss ain’t gonna dust me anytime soon.”

They were both quiet for a long moment.

Ding!

“SHIT!”

Attie giggled. “You said a baaaad word!” she said, wiggling a little. “You’re gonna get in troooooouble!”

“Oh, ‘bad word’ my ass! Like Undyne didn’t say the same damn word a dozen times right in front of you. Here - come out into the hallway; I gotta send your mom a picture of you before she has my head.”

Frisky Dreamer 12:28 PM
SANS THIS IS STRIKE ONE

You 12:28 PM
Sheesh cool ur pants
Here
*1 picture message sent

Frisky Dreamer 12:29 PM
Sans. What is my daughter wearing?

You 12:30 PM
Looks like a blue shirt with orang stripes and green pants
Kid sure hase some fashion sense yeah?

His phone began to ring. Wincing at Attie, he answered it. “Y’ello?”

“Sans.”

“F-Frisk.”

There was a deep breath. “This is what you are going to do. Where are the clothes Undyne packed?”

“In the living room, mostly.”

“Go there and tell me what you see.”

He did. He described the articles of clothing as best he could, despite Frisk’s annoyance at his lack of color knowledge. How was he supposed to know the difference between chartreuse and magenta? Those sounded like madjik spells, not colors.

Attie just sat back and laughed, the little demon.

She stopped laughing when presented with a new outfit (white shirt with blue stripes, black pants) and stomped off down the hallway to change.

“She’s gone. I’ll send you a picture once she’s back, okay?” He hovered his finger over the button that would end the call, hoping against hope that Frisk was satisfied.
“Great. Then I can chat with you in the meantime.”

He swore internally. “‘Bout what? Are we friends now?”

“Shut up.”

“Okay then.”

“Sans, if you hang up I will text my mother the picture of Attie you texted me. The one with the awful outfit she will not approve of.”

“Oh…”

“Great! Then let’s talk. We can’t do this every morning; it’s not reasonable. You’re about to get a crash course in fashion. I suggest you write down what I’m about to say.”

He scrambled for the leftover pages from his report and retrieved the pencil stub from under the table. “Uh, okay, go ahead.”

And Frisk began to rattle off the weird rules of human fashion. There were a lot, apparently. Certain colors couldn’t be worn with certain other colors, shoe color was important, socks HAD to be worn with some outfits and COULDN’T be worn with others. Human fashion apparently changed every few months too, which sounded daunting, but she brushed off his concerns. Attie mostly dressed in the traditional style of monster children (striped shirts and pants or skirts depending on her mood), but her wardrobe had a whole rainbow of colors that would never have been worn Underground and they had to match up in some kind of complementary fashion. It was...dizzying, but he didn’t dare to interrupt.

“Got all that?” Frisk finally asked, her voice sounding hoarse again.

“I think so. Uh, just to clarify...anything goes with jeans, right?”

A sigh. “Pretty much, sure.”

“Cool.” Several pairs of jeans had been tossed recklessly from Attie’s bag. Perfect! “Oh, kid’s back. Bye!”

“Wait-”

Sans ended the call and snapped a quick picture of Attie. It was blurry. “Ugh...stop spinnin’, kid.”

“But spinning pictures are the best pictures!” she protested.

“How’s about you strike a pose, huh? Do...uh, do that thing Undyne does with the muscles. That’ll look cool, right?”

The girl growled and flexed. She had no identifiable muscle bulges in her arms, but he snapped a picture anyways.

You 12:44 PM
*1 picture message sent
Ur kids terrifying
Gotta keep her under control

Frisky Dreamer 12:46 PM
That’s your job for now, bonehead.
Good luck.

He felt his soul stutter and glanced back at Attie. She was still growling and flexing, seemingly content, but she noticed him looking after a moment and flashed an absolutely wicked grin at him.

*You 12:47 PM*
I think shes gonna kill me

*Frisky Dreamer 12:48 PM*
As long as she cleans up after.

*Well, I deserved that after...everything.*

It was hard to remember, sometimes, that Frisk hated him. He’d given up on returning the favor a long time ago, except for passive-aggressive stunts like covering her workplace in sticky notes with rude words on them or trying to get her kid to ask awkward questions. He didn’t *like* her, far from it, but staying angry just took up too much effort.

*Frisky Dreamer 12:49 PM*
Don’t forget her schedule. I expect hourly updates.

Oh, right. They had things to do.

“Allie, we’ve gotta...huh.”

The kid was gone.

Sans realized, with a dawning feeling of horror, that he was doomed.

**Chapter End Notes**

Fun fact of the chapter: Frisk trusts Sans to look after his own interests. As long as there's something in it for him, she's pretty sure he'll keep her kid safe. She's just not sure what "something" is.

Is she right or wrong? I guess we'll find out!

Thank you so, so much to everyone who left kudos and comments! I treasure each and every one.

I also updated the tags to better reflect where we are in the story, and lowered the rating. There isn't anything particularly racy about babysitting that would merit a "mature" rating. I may raise it again once we get further along, but right now...it really wasn't merited.

Again, thank you to everyone who gives this story a chance!
In Which Skeletons are Explained

Chapter Summary

...From a scientific and magical point of view, of course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Sans tracked down Attie (who had somehow crawled into the dryer and was rocking herself back and forth) it was after 1:00.

This was a problem, he realized as he consulted the schedule Undyne had pinned to a cupboard with a paring knife. Lunch was supposed to end at 1:00, and he had no idea what to even start cooking.

“Can I have a hot dog?” Attie asked. “You make hot dogs, right?”

“Uh...sure, but…”

“Okay! Where are they?”

“I don’t think I…” He checked the fridge, just in case. The shelves, to his surprise, had actual groceries on them. Huh. Someone must’ve stocked up. Half of this stuff he didn’t even recognize. Weird.

To his everlasting shock, one drawer held a six-pack of ‘dogs. On the package was a pink sticky note covered with Boss’s handwriting:

YOU CAN HAVE HOT
DOGS FOR NO MORE
THAN ONE MEAL PER
DAY, SANS. BUNS ARE
IN THE CUPBOARD.
~THE G&T PAPYRUS

Ooooookay.

Sure enough, a quick survey of the cupboards (also stocked with more food than Sans was used to seeing) turned up a package of buns - the good kind, not the cheap tasteless things he threw on the ‘dogs at his stand.

Cooking them properly was...more work than he really wanted. He didn’t have a rolling warmer in the apartment, and he didn’t want to wait for the ‘dogs to slow cook anyways. He slipped both ‘dogs into their buns and stuck them in the microwave for half a minute.

Amazingly, the ‘dogs didn’t explode (unlike most things he microwaved). He sent out a tentative thread of magic to feel for temperature, not trusting his bones to give him an accurate read. It felt...less than boiling hot, but beyond that he wasn’t sure.
“Uh, here, kid. Bone appetite, heh. Careful; not sure if it’s hot.”

“Okay!” Attie grabbed the ‘dog with both hands, took a big bite, and winced. “Iff a liffle hoff,” she said, mouth full. She swallowed anyways, so he wasn’t too worried.

“Hey, kid; if that’s too hot for ya, wanna see somethin’ cool?”

“Sure,” she said, before taking another huge bite.

Sans opened his mouth, tilted his head back, and shoved the entire hot dog, bun and all, into his mouth. He felt his magic protesting - he wasn’t really made to do this - but he ignored the discomfort and resisted the urge to cough.

Attie was staring at him with huge eyes, a half-chewed bite of hot dog visible in her mouth. He waited a moment for his magic to dissolve the ‘dog enough to talk, then laughed at her. “What, you can’t do that?”

“No,” she said around her masticated food. She closed her mouth, realizing her error, then chewed and swallowed with a thoughtful look on her face.

Sans knew that look.

The girl held the remaining half of her ‘dog out to him. “Teach me,” she demanded.

“Yeah, no, kid.”

“Why not?”

“Humans aren’t built like us. You’ll choke yourself, then Undyne’ll kill me, then Boss’ll kill me, then your mom and her mom’ll kill me. I’ll be super dead.”

“You’re silly, Mr. Sans.”

“Yep. That’s me, regular comedian.”

“Teach me!”

"No, kid!"

“Please?”

“No!"

“Pretty please with a cherry on top?” She blinked rapidly, her lower lip extended.

“What, is that supposed to make me more willing to teach you how to suffocate on ‘dogs? Hell no, kid! And stop making that face; the lip shit is super creepy!”

“Awww,” Attie muttered, dejected, to her ‘dog.

“Tell ya what. You finish your ‘dog, and when it’s science time I’ll tell you all about how a skeleton can eat a whole ‘dog at once. Okay?”

“Okaaaaay.” She finished her meal in the largest bites possible, sending herself into more than one coughing fit.
Science wasn’t next on the list, though. Next was something called Grammar, which Attie tried her best to wiggle out of. She wouldn’t capitulate until Sans reminded her that she couldn’t see her mom until her schoolwork was done.

Schoolwork went by very quickly after that.

He wasn’t sure how much of it was actually correct - according to the note Undyne had left, the worksheets would be delivered to Tori for grading - but he was impressed by her speed.

True to his word, he spent the entire 45-minute “Science” time slot sitting at the dining room table explaining what he knew about a skeleton’s magical digestive system. He even let Attie drop things into his mouth - jelly beans, mostly, after they found some in the cupboard and he accidentally revealed that he’d never eaten them before - so she could see that they vanished instead of dropping out the bottom of his skull.

“You don’t look like a real skeleton,” Attie said, peering intently at the juncture where his skull met his spine. “You’re shaped really different.”

“I promise you, I am 100% a real skeleton. I just don’t look like a human skeleton.” And if he had a buck for every time he’d had to explain that to a human he’d have a whole herd.

“That’s what I meant, sorry.” She narrowed her eyes, then leaned over and slapped both hands to Sans’s cheeks.

He flinched, hard, but the impact - despite its force - did no actual damage. He stifled the urge to slap her hands away. “What’chu up to, huh?”

“You face feels funny.” She tapped her fingertips against his cheekbones. “You feel kinda soft.”

He growled. He wasn’t used to being touched, and having someone - even someone so small - put her hands on his face was really uncomfortable. “You can stop that now, kid. Don’t make me remove you.”

She paused, then looked him in the eye sockets. She must have been able to read some part of his expression because she snatched her hands away and sat back into her chair. “Sorry, Mr. Sans.”

“‘Tsokay. Just...don’t do that again, yeah? You wouldn’t want me to put my hands all over your face, would’ja? No? Then don’t do it to other people.”

“But you’re so cool!”

He coughed. “That’s no excuse, kid. You gotta ask before you do that to someone.”

“Why?”

“It’s...polite?”

She tilted her head to the side. “But you don’t care about being polite. You’re a asshole.”

“Just...it’s...yer mom’d kill me if I taught you bad habits, okay? And it makes people uncomfortable, and I know you’re too young to really understand yourself in relation to others but you don’t do things like that, okay? You’ll learn as you get older.”

“Okay.”

“And it’s kinda rude to call people assholes. Just...while we’re on the topic.”
She giggled. “Okay. But you still are one.”

“You got that right.”

Silence.

He rubbed the back of his vertebrae. “Ooookay, then. Uh, what’s left on the list?”

Attie ran into the kitchen and consulted the note. “Art!” she called back.

“Huh? Art? What kind of pansy school bullshit is that?”

The girl stomped back into the dining room. “My favorite.”

“...Oh.” He pondered this. “So...what do you do for ‘art’? I don’t know a damn thing, but isn’t art pictures and stuff?” Hadn’t Boss called his spaghetti ‘art’ at some point? Did that count?

“I mean...I guess I can color,” she said. “I have my coloring pencils in my bag!”

“Okay, but...aaaand she’s gone.” Sans pondered chasing after the kid, but decided it would be too much effort. He was tired. Between keeping up with Attie and texting Frisk periodically throughout the day, he really just wanted a nap.

She returned a few minutes later with a box of pencils and a pad of paper. She didn’t say anything or ask questions - a miracle, given how the rest of her schoolwork had gone - but instead hummed to herself as she emptied the box of pencils across the table and began to draw.

The scratching of the paper and the off-key humming was...strangely calming, actually...

“Mr. Sans!”

“Hrk-wha?” He sat up quickly and looked around. When had he put his head on the table?

Attie was leaning towards him. Her pencils were packed up and sitting neatly atop a small pile of loose papers. “You were asleep,” she said.

“Oh. Uh, sorry, kid.”

“Tsokay. Mommy takes naps sometimes too. I don’t usually take naps anymore ‘cause I’m a big girl now, but Mommy says that sometimes grown-ups work too hard and have to take naps.”

“Yeah, sometimes.” He was feeling pretty groggy.

“Also, your phone was ringing.”

“Shit!” He dug around in his pocket until he found the offending hunk of metal.

“Bad word!” Attie howled.

**Frisky Dreamer 3:25 PM**

Sans, you’re late for your check-in. Just because I’m drugged into unconsciousness does not excuse you not sending an update and stuff. I am so high right now

Ignore that last one

**Frisky Dreamer 4:03 PM**
Sans, I haven’t heard from you in two horse.
Hours.

*Frisky Dreamer 4:22 PM*
SNAS, ANSER UR DAM PHONE!

“Uh, kid? Don’t you have a phone too?”

“No...oh! Wait!” She pushed herself back from the table and tottered off down the hallway. Sans sighed and tapped out a message.

*You 4:26 PM*
Were doing art
Kid really drew me into it

The response was immediate.

*Frisky Dreamer 4:26 PM*
You fell asleep again, didn’t you.

*You 4:27 PM*
Hey do u wanna have us come visit u or not

*Frisky Dreamer 4:27 PM*
Whatever.

He grinned. Apparently, that worked on both mother and daughter. Speaking of which… “Kid? You find that phone? We need to head out if we’re gonna go see your mom.”

“I found it!” She returned with the phone in all its pink and blue glory. “I have a message from Mommy, see?”

There was, indeed, a message from Frisk asking (in a much nicer tone) how her day was going.

“Hey, what’s that less-than-three thing mean?”

“Oh. It’s a soul! See?” She held the phone on its side.

“That’s...weird. And isn’t that upside down?” Sans flipped the phone on its other side.

“But I’m a human! Our souls go the other way.”

“Oh. Right. Anyways, are you ready to go see yer mom? I’d better let her see for herself that you’re in one piece. I don’t think she believes that I haven’t eaten you yet.”

Attie giggled, but awkwardly bundled into her coat and shoes anyways. She seemed to be struggling with her shoelaces. It was funny to watch.

“You, uh, got that, kid?”

“Maybe. These aren’t my favorite shoes. My favorite shoes are pink and they have flowers on them and they light up when I walk, which is why they’re my favorite. Those ones have velcro on them so I don’t have to tie them, but these ones just have shoelaces.”

Sans nodded noncommittally. He briefly considered helping her but…
...Nah.

She eventually knotted them into submission and tucked the ends of the laces inside the top of her shoes. Shrugging, she grabbed the stack of papers and tucked them under her arm. “Okay! I’m ready!”

“Uh...what’s with that stuff, kid? I thought that was your art.”

“It is! I drew pictures for Mommy. I’m gonna show her and see if she can hang them up in her hospital room. She usually hangs them up on the ‘frigerator, but there isn’t a ‘frigerator in her room I don’t think.”

“Fair enough. Okay, you ready?”

“Yes!”

He put both hands on her shoulders. “One, two,” and... teleport.

Attie grabbed onto his arms for support when they reappeared in a protected nook across the street from Ebott Medical Pavilion. “Oh! That time it wasn’t so bad!”

“Yeah. You should get used to it soon enough.”

“That’s pretty cool! Can you teach me how to do that...that…”

“‘Ts called ‘teleporting,’ kid. Disappearing and reappearing in a different place, kinda like the world’s best shortcut. It’s a bit more complicated than that, but...it can get pretty sciencey. And no, I’m pretty sure I can’t teach you how to do that, either.”

She pouted all the way up to her mom’s room.

He opened the door first, not wanting to interrupt anything, but Frisk was awake. And waiting, of course. “Sans,” she said in a tone that brooked no argument, “Why don’t you come on in.”

He came right the heck on in, one hand guiding Attie in front of him. “Say ‘hi’ to yer mom, kid.”

The girl paused for a moment, staring at her mother. Frisk did look pretty bad still. Sans hoped Attie wasn’t going to scream or cry or cause a fit; he knew he’d be blamed if she did.

“Hi,” she said in a very quiet voice.

Frisk smiled. It was the same smile she’d worn earlier when he sent her the picture of Attie and Undyne, and he fought the urge to look away. “Hey, baby girl. Won’t you come up and give me a hug?”

“I-I don’t wanna hurt you when you’re sick.”

“I’ll be okay. Just make it a gentle hug. No jumping.”

The little girl tiptoed up to the bed, leaned up, and gently put her arms around her mother. They both sighed at the same time.

“Now what did you bring me? Oh-Sans, chair.” She gestured towards the aforementioned furniture, which had been moved against a wall.

Sans sat.
“I brought you pictures!” Attie said. She laid out each page individually on the bed, covering the blanket almost entirely. “This is the room where I slept last night. See? It’s full of skeleton stuff! It belongs to a guy called Mr. Boss, but Undie said that wasn’t his real name.”

“It isn’t,” Frisk said. “His real name is Papyrus. But go ahead.”

“Oh, right. This is Mr. Pa-py-rus’s room. He let me sleep on his bed, ‘cause he said Mr. Sans’s room was pretty messy. It is, y’know.”

“Oh? When were you in Sans’s room?”

“I hid in there before lunch. Mr. Boss - I mean, Mr. Pa-py-rus - came in and was beating up Mr. Sans because of paperwork. Then Mr. Pa-py-rus tried to fight me until Mr. Sans finished the paperwork.” She held up another picture. From his vantage point, Sans could barely see three blobby figures: two black and red, one blue and pink and black. “See? Mr. Pa-py-rus is trying to fight me ‘cause I told him not to beat up Mr. Sans. Mr. Sans finished the paperwork before he stopped talking. He talked a whole lot, more than Granny Ree does sometimes.”

“Papyrus...tried to fight you.”

“Yeah. I was kinda mad that Mr. Sans did paperwork instead of saving me, but it’s all better now.”

“What?”

“He said ‘I’m sorry, kid’ and I said ‘I forgive you.’ And he said that he would’ve stopped Mr. Papyrus if he’d really started fighting, so it’s okay.”

Frisk pulled her daughter in for another hug. Over the child’s head, she gave Sans a long, intense look. He squirmed in his chair a little.

“Fine. I guess...it’s okay, if you aren’t hurt. I’ll have to have a long talk with Undyne about this, though; I don’t want you in a house where someone’s going to attack you at random.”

“It wasn’t an ‘at random!’ He tried to fight me because I told him not to beat up Mr. Sans. Remember? I told you.”

“That’s right. Hey, Attie, could you do something for me?”

“Yyyep!”

“Can you get me a drink of water? There’s a water fountain at the end of the hallway, out and to your left. Here’s my cup. Go out, fill the cup with water, and come right back so you can show me the rest of the pictures. Don’t spill.”

“Okay, Mommy!” She wiggled off the bed, careful not to wrinkle any of her drawings, and left the two adults alone.

Sans glanced at the side table. “You already have a cup of water,” he muttered.

“That’s not the point. You know that.”

He did. “Look. You know that the best way to get Boss to stand down is to give him what he wants. He wanted paperwork; I finished the damn paperwork. It’s not my fault Undyne changed her schedule without telling me.”

“If you hadn’t fallen asleep in here earlier, you wouldn’t have had to rush.”
“Yeah, well, I wasn’t exactly running on a whole lotta sleep. You know, after carting you and Attie all over town last night.”

Frisk’s hand clenched the blanket over her knee, then relaxed. “I…that isn’t what I wanted to talk with you about. Sans…does that happen on a regular basis?”

“The naps? Well sure. I’m-”

“Not the naps. Don’t play dumb. You know what I’m asking about.”

The look on her face said that she was not in the mood to be messed with; she wanted answers, and she knew he could give them. Strange, that this human was the only one to realize that his stupidity was an act. “…Yeah, I know. And…”

What could he say?

“Sans?”

“Yeah. Just…I don’t know how to answer that. Boss…he gets aggressive when he’s angry, you know? And I’m one of the things that makes him angry the most. It’s my fault, really. You get it, right?” He winked.

Frisk’s expression didn’t change.

“A-anyways, I’ll watch the kid closer. She can…I dunno, hide out in my room when he’s around. I’ll clean up and everything. That way she won’t have to see it.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. I didn’t ask why it happened, or whose fault it was, or how you plan to cover it up. I asked how often it happens.”

“…Not as much as you’re thinking, but more than you’d like.”

“How typically vague. Are we talking once a day? A week? A month?”

“Couple times a week? I dunno. I’ve never charted it out.”

“Alright. Alright.” Frisk took a deep breath. “That stops now. Whatever you and your brother do when there aren’t kids in the house, that’s your…ah…business-”

“Hey!”

“-but I won’t have the pair of you scarring my daughter. Both of you will be on your best behavior, alright?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Mommy!” Attie shuffled in with a glass full of water, her tongue peeking out from between her lips and a look of concentration on her face. “I…almost…have…the…water...OOPS!”

She tripped over her own feet and the water spilled.

“Attie!” Frisk was halfway out of bed before she was stopped short by the plastic tubes the doctors had stabbed into her arms.

It didn’t matter much; Attie was floating gently in mid-air, faintly glowing. “Blue!” she cooed.
“Sans,” her mother said, “Put her down. Gently.”

He did.

No one spoke for a long moment.

“I’ll excuse it just this once, because it looked like you were keeping Attie from getting hurt. But if you ever - ever - use blue magic on my daughter again, I will hunt you down. Is that clear?”

“Yeah, Boss.”

Frisk slammed her hand onto the bedside table, causing both Attie and Sans to jump. “I am NOT your BOSS, Sans!”

“Yeah, uh, sure.”

A nurse popped her head into the doorway. “Everything alright in here, sweetie?”

“Yes,” Frisk said. “We’re fine. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. Anytime a loved one is sick tempers run high, y’know? Y’all just take a deep breath; no worries. Oh, and visiting time is almost up, unless your honey there wants to stay the night.” The nurse wiggled her eyebrows.

It took Sans a beat to realize that the nurse meant him, not Attie, and he wanted to crawl into his own hood in embarrassment. “Nah, gotta get this kid into bed. Early mornin’ and all that.”

“Alright, then, sweet thang. Y’all take it easy and let me know if you need anything.” She closed the door gently behind her.

Sans carefully avoided looking at the humans.

“Alright, Attie; time for you to go now. Come give Mommy a kiss and head home with Sans, alright?”

There was a shuffle as Attie did as requested. “Can I come see you tomorrow? I didn’t get to show you the rest of the pictures.”

“Maybe. Mommy’s pretty tired. If everything goes well, then yeah.”

“Okay. G’night! Don’t let the bedbugs bite!”

“You too, Attie.”

“I won’t. I bet the bedbugs are scared of Mr. Papyrus.”

“I’m sure they are.”

A small hand in his interrupted Sans’s studied ignorance of the proceedings. He glanced down to find Attie grinning up at him. “Ready to go, kid?”

“Yup!”

“Kay, then.” He gently started to tug her out of the room.

She resisted. “Wait! You didn’t say goodbye to Mommy!”
“Uh...bye, kiddo.”

“Her name isn’t kiddo, Mr. Sans.”

“Bye...Frisk?”

The woman on the bed breathed deeply, but didn’t look at him. “Text me when you get home. You owe me a few check-ins.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

They left.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans just enjoys being disturbing. This may come back to bite him. (Ha, ha.)

I have started getting a bit more into Tumblr, if that interests anyone. You may find me here. I am slowly getting caught up on posting my stories over there - all the one-shots are there, at least - but soon everything will be backed up. The ask box is open and I check it regularly, if you'd prefer that to commenting here. The reason I bring it up is because my current active stories - THWDC and Bullet Hell - have some supplemental information I'll be posting over on Tumblr exclusively. I'll link to it from AO3 once it's up.

That said, THANK YOU to everyone who has read and left kudos and comments! You are my inspiration. <3
Chapter Summary

...And Sans nearly loses his edgelord club membership card.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day went about as well as Sans expected. He was once again woken up by the flurry of alarms reminding him of Undyne’s impending invasion of the apartment, but he made sure to have Attie up and dressed in ‘training clothes’ before she arrived.

It was worth the extra effort. Undyne had calmed considerably, having apparently slept at some point, but she kept eyeing him with a very...intense expression. Attie demanded enough of her attention that she didn’t say anything, but he felt an overwhelming sense of foreboding.

Either Frisk had made good on her threat to talk to Undyne about Boss or Sans had messed up on his paperwork again. Possibly both. He was betting on the former, though, especially since Boss hadn’t come back to the apartment the previous evening.

This meant that Undyne wound up giving them a crash course in breakfast...literally. The kitchen looked like a war zone by the time they were finished, with globs of oatmeal across the ceiling, floor, and stove top. The oatmeal itself was full of dark brown flakes that made Attie wince every time she took a bite. He made a mental note to look up an oatmeal-making tutorial on Youtube; there had to be a more efficient way to do this.

“No paperwork today,” Undyne said once she’d scarfed down her own portion of oatmeal. “The queen’s doing the morning visit before she meets with the...well, with...important people. We’re also moving her room and posting a guard outside.”

Sans blinked at her, slowly. “...What are you talking about?”

She growled. “Frisk. The ambassador. Queen Toriel is going to see her this morning to assess her status. You,” she gestured to both of them with a strange figure eight motion, “stay here. You can see her this afternoon if you get the all-clear, but text me first. We’re relocating her to a more defensible room and posting a guard. Make sure you bring your ID, ass-clown, or you’ll be locked out.”

“No! Don’t lock me out!” Attie said, grabbing Undyne’s arm. “I wanna see my mommy!”

“Don’t lock me out!” Attie said, grabbing Undyne’s arm. “I wanna see my mommy!”

“Oh, you can go on in just fine, punk; the guards won’t bother you. They’re just gonna make sure no one gets to see your mommy without permission. If a bad guy tries something funny they’ll beat ‘im up! It’s for security, right?”

“Cool!” The girl bounced in her seat. “Can I be security for Mommy too? I wanna beat up bad guys!”

“Haha! You’ve gotta train a little harder than THAT if you wanna be in the Guard! Ready?”
“Ready!”

“I’ll be here,” Sans said, staring intently at the last globs of oatmeal in his bowl. “You guys have fun.”

Being lifted by his skull was a new and special kind of painful, he discovered. Also, Undyne’s grin was even more terrifying close up.

“You’re not getting out of training THAT easy, nerd! A little exercise never hurt anyone!”

Attie made a mad dash for the living room, screaming about training and friendship and how wonderful everything in her little life was.

The next hour and a half could only be described as torture. Sans didn’t know a whole lot about humans and fish-monsters (or whatever Undyne was), but he was very certain that skeletons were not designed to bend in some of the ways she was trying to make him bend. He could feel the strain on his joints; he was sure he was going to dislocate something. It didn’t help that the stretches were interspersed with periods of intense movement, pushing his still-sore bones well past their limit. He hoped Boss never found out about this; the big guy had enough punishment ideas to last him a lifetime.

He collapsed onto the couch when Undyne finally stopped.

“That was a GREAT warm-up,” she said. “Now for the REAL training!”

Sans debated crawling under the couch. There wasn’t a lot of space under there; his skull and ribcage would be a problem...

She laughed at him. “I’m just kidding, NERD! Don’t you know how to take a joke? Hey, hey Attie, look at this loser! He can’t even do a little exercise!”

“Mr. Sans isn’t a loser,” Attie solemnly reminded her. “He’s a asshole.”

“You BET he is! Anyways, make sure he doesn’t fall asleep, huh?”

“Okay!”

His phone went off. Oh, right; he hadn’t texted Frisk all morning. He’d get on that. Just as soon as he could feel his arms again.

“Mr. Sans?”

His vision started going...a little fuzzy...

“-ey? Hey? Can you hear me?”

Sans looked up at Undyne. She was looking a little worried or angry, one of the two. He wasn’t sure why; he hadn’t actually passed out, had he? “‘Mfine,” he mumbled into the couch cushion.

“Yeah, no, punk. Attie, go grab me the bottle of green juice in your fridge and a cup. Sans, talk to me.”

“‘M fine.”

She huffed. “You’re an idiot. No, listen to me: you’re an idiot. Anyone knows to speak up when they’re being pushed too far. Except you, I guess. Do you know what’s happening? Your magic
levels are so low you’re losing HP. Slowly, but still. You’re literally killing yourself.”

“Thought a little exercise never hurt anyone.”

“Yeah, a little exercise. We didn’t even do much, really. Heck, Attie’s had more exercise over the past few days than we normally do in a week, and she’s just fine. You? You collapsed under your own lack of magic. We’re not even practicing magic, beyond whatever’s holding you together and making you move! You’d have to do...well, pretty much no exercise at all on a regular basis AND be super low on magic to get to this point.”

“Sounds ’bout right.”

“And that’s why you’re an idiot. Oh - thanks, Attie.” She took the bottle of juice, poured some into the cup, and pushed it towards Sans.

He managed to get himself upright and tipped... most of the juice into his mouth. It tasted like something that was brewed in a froggit’s armpit, but he did feel better after. “...What is that stuff?”

“Magic-infused sports drink. Good for the body AND the SOUL! The Royal Scientist came out with it a few years back. You never heard of it?”

“It’s disgusting.”

“I’ve seen what you leave behind at your sentry post; you have no right to criticize anyone else’s eating or drinking habits.”

Fair enough.

“Also, next time we do this, frickin’ tell me when you’re about to collapse, would ya?”

“Gee, didn’t know you cared.” Also: next time??

“Oh, I don’t. Someone needs to watch this little punk, though, and she seems kinda fond of you. Stars know why.” She ruffled Attie’s hair.

The kid grinned widely. “It’s ’cause he feeds me hot dogs and lets me do fun science and lets me color and takes me to see my mommy. And he didn’t let Mommy die and he helped me beat Mr. Papyrus and stuff.”

Sans eyed her. “...Right.”

“I told Undie all about the fight with Mr. Papyrus! I have her phone number in my phone and I was texting her last night when I was supposed to be sleeping.”

“M I gonna have to take your phone away at bedtime?”

“Noooo!” She flopped over onto the couch next to him dramatically.

Undyne laughed. “Well, since you’re not about to dust, I’ll be off. Drink another glass of that stuff, asshole. Attie, make sure he does.”

“Okay!”

“And Vice Captain Papyrus will be back sometime this evening. If he scares you at all, even just a little bit, you tell this worthless lump here to get you out and you text me. Okay?”
“Okay!”

“Oh, and a word of advice, Sans?”

He raised his head a fraction.

“Walk around a little. You’ll be even worse off if you don’t.”

The very atmosphere seemed to deflate when Undyne left. Sans felt like melting into the couch cushions and just...not moving until Boss came back and kicked his lazy butt into gear.

“Come ooooon!” Attie whined, grabbing the back of his jacket and trying to drag him off the couch. She was succeeding. “Undie said you have to keep moving! If she says so then we have to do it!”

“Nooo.” Sans dug his claws into the couch, trying to anchor himself without leaving obvious rips that Boss would scream at him for.

His phone went off again.

He reluctantly disentangled himself from the kid enough to sit up (though she wound up clinging to his back) and pulled it out.

Frisky Dreamer 9:22 AM
Sans, I’m waiting for a check-in.

Frisky Dreamer 9:42 AM
I’m calling Undyne if I don’t hear from you in five minutes.

You 9:44 AM
Undie just left
We were doing morning torture

Frisky Dreamer 9:44 AM
Explain. Now.

You 9:46 AM
U know the stretching and the posing and the running in place that kindve thing
The usual stuff undie likes

Frisky Dreamer 9:46 AM
Training?

You 9:47 AM
Yeah that

Frisky Dreamer 9:47 AM
Don’t call Captain Undyne’s training ‘torture,’ or I’ll tell her you called her “Undie.”

You 9:48 AM
U got it

“Ohoo, ask her if we can come see her this afternoon!” Attie said, leaning over his shoulder.

You 9:49 AM
Kid wants to know when we can come see you this afternoon
If ur up for it

Attie dragged him off the couch when no answer came immediately. He reluctantly shuffled his tired bones around the living room a few times, but gave up when his phone remained silent. “Uh, you’d better change your clothes, kid. Maybe your mom’ll text us back later. She’s probably busy, remember?”

“Oh, yeah! Granny Ree’s visiting her this morning, right?”

“Right. So let’s see if we can find something your mom’ll approve of, okay?”

“Okay!”

Attie wound up in a yellow and white striped shirt and jeans. He mentally reviewed the fashion lessons from the morning before. It looked...pretty good? Jeans went with everything, right? He couldn’t tell if the yellow was supposed to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for Attie’s skin color (all of that had gone clear over his skull) but Frisk wouldn’t have bought her kid a shirt that looked bad on her, right?

...Hopefully?

He snapped a picture and sent it to the overbearing mother, hoping for the best.

Schoolwork went better than the day before. Sans was still mostly lost, but a few subjects (mostly Math and Science) weren’t too different from what he’d been taught in the Underground. At seven years old, Attie wasn’t doing anything too complicated; he was able to follow along and help out fairly well.

It reminded him of teaching Boss, really. The sad structure that passed for a school in Snowdin had burned to the ground around the time Sans graduated (in a completely unrelated incident, not that he hadn’t been tempted), so Boss had been deprived of a few years’ formal education. It had been challenging to get an excitable babybones to sit still long enough to do a page of multiplication, but he’d done his best.

His best, he knew, wasn’t great. It was probably the reason Boss turned out the way he had.

Attie, at least, was used to the routine. She knew to check her list of schoolwork (Undyne had left it on the counter this time, and had removed the one she’d pinned up with the knife) and found her assignments based on the numbers associated with each subject. It boggled Sans’s mind. Teaching kids at home was, apparently, something humans had simplified greatly. There was a whole system of what to do each day and everything. It made remembering to text Frisk a little easier, too; he just shot off a text as they finished each subject. Attie did the same, happy for an excuse to use her new phone.

Lunch was hot dogs, again. Attie, predictably, demanded that Sans eat his all in one bite. He initially refused, but...well, the thing she did with her eyes was growing on him. He caved and swallowed his hot dog whole.

He didn’t sit still long enough for Attie to take a picture of him doing it. She did her best, but it wasn’t quite enough.

Ding!

Frisky Dreamer 12:58 PM

Sans, what exactly are you teaching my daughter?
You 12:59 PM
Nothing were just having lunch

Frisky Dreamer 12:59 PM
So bragging to a young girl about how you can swallow weiners is normal for you?

Sans squinted at his phone, trying to make sense of the message. He knew ‘weiner’ was another word for ‘hot dog,’ but...he felt there was something he was missing.

You 1:00 PM
Kinda i mean i run a ‘dog stand
Dont really talk to the customers but sometimes onell wonder y a skeleton needs food
Where r u going with this?

Frisky Dreamer 1:02 PM
I can’t decide if you’re naive, stupid, or far more creepy than I ever gave you credit for. Where is Attie now?

He looked around. The kid was at the table doing more Grammar. He snapped a picture.

You 1:04 PM
*1 picture message sent

Frisky Dreamer 1:05 PM
Okay.

You 1:06 PM
Kiddo what the hell is going on

Frisky Dreamer 1:07 PM
You can’t do that anymore. And stars, keep Attie from talking about your ‘hot dog trick.’

You 1:08 PM
Uh y

Frisky Dreamer 1:09 PM
BECAUSE I WON’T HAVE YOU INVOLVING MY DAUGHTER IN YOUR DIRTY PRANKS!!

Yep, he was definitely missing something.

You 1:10 PM
U high again? I have no idea what ur talking about

Frisky Dreamer 1:10 PM
Stupid it is, then. Look it up.
NOT around Attie.

Sans double-checked that Attie was studying and not peeking over his shoulder, then opened the web browser on his phone. He typed in ‘eat a weiner.’

Oh. OH.

...Humans were disgusting.
You 1:12 PM
So uh what the hell
U humans r crazy
Like what even
Y would u do that with ur mouths
With all ur gross fluids
Thats unsanitary
Like wow

Frisky Dreamer 1:15 PM
That’s about the reaction I was expecting. So NO MORE, OKAY?

You 1:15 PM
I may never eat a hot dog again
What the hell
Y didnt anyone say anything
Like do people think im some kind of weirdo for working at a dog stand
Like theyre just in the store with other food
Is that normall
Is tht what huans do

Frisky Dreamer 1:17 PM
Oh, you sweet, innocent child. You have no idea.

You 1:17 PM
Y do humans destroy everything good
This is a travesty against Science
Like y

Frisky Dreamer 1:19 PM
Sans, calm down.

You 1:19 PM
O ok
Uh
So
No more dogs for the kid

Frisky Dreamer 1:20 PM
They are just normal food. Deal with it however you want.
It’s just that said food happens to vaguely resemble part of the human anatomy that a little girl
DOES NOT need to know or think about.
Just watch your words, okay?

You 1:23 PM
O so im off the hook

Frisky Dreamer 1:23 PM
Not hardly.

“Mr. Sans?”

Sans quickly pocketed his phone and looked over at Attie, holding her Grammar workbook to her chest. “What’s up, kid?”
“Are you okay?”

“Uh...fine? Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been texting for a long time now. And you look kinda sick.”

“Heh, yeah?” He gripped his phone, wishing he had some of that...what did humans call it? The stuff that makes you forget stuff? Brain bleach? “Your mom was just telling me that ‘dogs aren’t good for ya. So I guess that’s out. For now, at least.”

“Awwwww.”

“Yeah, me too, kid.” He was never going to live this down, he realized.

“Say, uh, you done with your school?”

“I’m done with Grammar. It was easy today.”

“Yeah, uh, great. What’s next?”

Sans fought for focus the rest of the afternoon. It wasn’t so much that humans apparently had some weird kinky ideas about what to do with their gross squishy body parts and fluids (though that was part of it); it was the fact that he’d lived on the surface for seven years and had never come across such an idea. Did humans think it was weird that a monster had a hot dog stand? Why had no one said anything to him?

Oh, right. He was a rude, violent asshole who hated people.

That...probably explained a lot.

Still.

“How can you help me with art today?” Attie asked.

“Uh, I’m not really an artsy guy, kid.”

“It’s okay. Everyone can do art. Making art is a way of showing other people how you see the world; that’s what Mommy says.”

“That sounds…” kinda whimpy, actually, “…cool?”

“Yep! And today I’m feeling spikey!”

“Wait, what?”

“Do you have toothpicks and glue, Mr. Sans?”

As it happened, Sans found an unopened jumbo box of toothpicks in the back of a drawer. Attie found glue...somewhere. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know where. “What now?”

“Now, we build stuff! Here, can you hold this?”

Over the next hour or so, Attie glued toothpicks (and half of Sans’s fingers) into a spiked wooden death trap. It was actually a little impressive. The design was basic - a pit trap with spikes in the bottom - but the pit cover had working hinges that allowed it to drop open in the middle...once he disentangled himself from it. They’d found a pair of old bottle caps, and gluing one on each side of
the pit cover gave the two halves enough of a counter-weight to reset themselves each time. She found a bag of grapes in the fridge and amused herself with rolling them over the top of the pit and watching them fall to their squishy deaths on the toothpicks below.

There wasn’t enough force to actually impale the grapes properly, but it was the thought that counted. For a seven-year-old, she was well on her way towards carrying on the proud monster tradition of death traps. Not for the first time, Sans wondered if he should be worried.

Then the kiddo surprised him. She’d been rolling grapes onto the death trap, watching the cover open and close, and out of the blue she asked why it worked the way it did. Sans hadn’t expected that, not from a kid her age, but gave her an overview of the physics. She was trying to understand, he knew, but her eyes glazed over halfway through his explanation.

“...Well, that’s enough for today. We’d better head out if you wanna go see your mom.”

“Okay! Can I bring my deadly death trap of grape death?”

“I...think that’d be a bad idea. You don’t wanna scare the humans, do ya?”

“Yes! I wanna scare ALL the humans! Well, except for the people at the Embassy. They’re nice.”

“Ookay. You don’t think the doctors are nice?”

“Nnnope! They give you shots and take your temper’ture and do things that make your soul feel funny. They try to bribe you with stickers but Mommy said that she got candy as a kid and that’s way better than stickers.”

“Eh, fair enough. Put your shoes and jacket on and we’ll go terrorize some doctors. Uh...without your death trap.”

“Aawww! Why?”

“Think of it as...a challenge?”

Attie whooped a wild war cry and charged off to find her outerwear. She really was like a little boss in some ways.

He was sure he was forgetting something. What had Undyne said?

Oh. Right.

You 4:42 PM
Hey undyne im gonna take the kid to see her mom

Capn Undie 4:44 PM
HANG ON ASSHOLE

There was a long pause, and Sans took the time to retrieve his ID from where he’d left it in the pocket of his other pants. He hated disturbing the sanctity of his laundry pile but showing up without identification to one of Undyne’s checkpoints was always unpleasant.

His phone gave a loud ping.

Capn Undie 4:53 PM
You’re cleared with security. Room 249, down the hall and around the corner from the old room.
BRING YOUR ID and we’ll have no problems, got it??

You 4:56 PM
Got it

Capn Undie 4:59 PM
And don’t even THINK about causing trouble or I’ll have you KICKED OUT. You can sit outside while Attie does whatever she does visiting her mom. I’m sure there’s a kiddie chair we can grab for you.

Sans narrowed his eye sockets. “Hey, Attie? You ready to go yet?”

“Not yet!” Attie appeared with her shoes on, holding her jacket. “My laces were being doo-doo-buts,” she said conversationally.

“...Right. Okay. Hey, why don’t you grab that death trap after all? And some grapes; we can show yer mom how it works.”

“Physics!” Attie screamed as she stumbled off to find her creation.

Sans grinned.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans thinks human body fluids in general are gross. I mean, he's a skeleton. Why wouldn't he?

Also, Frisk may be juuuuuust a little bit paranoid. To be fair, Sans is looking to cause just a little bit of trouble, so she's not entirely unjustified.

But yes! Thanks for stopping by! You can find me here or on Tumblr, whichever your preference. Still getting caught up over there, slowly but surely.

On an unrelated note, I'll be updating my other ongoing story, Bullet Hell, probably sometime this weekend. If you want to see a badass Frisk who fights horrible nightmarish mutated creatures instead of horrible nightmarish mutated germs, you may want to stop by and see if it's your cup of tea.

EDIT: This chapter now has FANART!! Many thanks to the talented Venelona who illustrated Sans's embarrassing text exchange with Frisk!
In Which Dog Marriage Saves the Day

Chapter Summary

...And Sans actually proves useful for once, the lazy lump.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The humans at the hospital responded with typical lack of self-preservation in the face of certain (grape) death. A few of the doctors eyed the construct in Attie’s hand curiously, but no one thought to stop or check that it was something safe to have. In fact, they ignored the pair altogether.

The monster guards were a different story.

“Sans, it’s been a while.”

(“Far too long.”)

Sans gulped. “H-hey, Dogamy, Dogaressa.” He hoped they couldn’t smell the sweat beading down his skull. He hadn’t been expecting this pair to be on guard, especially with Dogaressa so far into her first pregnancy. Either Undyne expected no trouble in a hospital or she was willing to let the viciously protective couple tear any intruders to shreds.

Possibly both.

Dogamy stepped forward, brandishing his wickedly sharp battleaxe. “The Captain told us not to let anyone through…”

(“...But she did call and say you could pass with the baby puppy,”) Dogaressa said, somewhat reluctantly.

“Heeeeey, thanks guys, we’ll just be-”

He’d almost reached the door when he felt the back of his hoodie snag on something.

(“I know you weren’t about to slip past without showing your ID, Sans.”)

“Eh, what’d be the point? You can’t, uh…” The sound of Dogamy’s growling made him rethink his wording. “You...already know it’s me, yeah? ‘Cause your nose is so...great.”

“Our noses are the best in the Royal Guard! We can sniff out an enemy from miles away!”

(“...But we still need to see your ID card.”)

He sighed and extracted the rectangle of laminated paper from his pocket. Dogamy snatched it from him, sniffing it over and holding it up so close to his eye it was nearly touching, before giving an amused little growl and passing it to his wife. Dogaressa repeated the procedure.

“You may pass...”
(...But don’t cause trouble, little bones.)

The skeleton ducked away from the paw trying to pat his skull and brushed past. ‘Don’t cause trouble,’ huh. That was rich, coming from a couple of dogs whose favorite hobby was breaking into Boss’s room and stealing his attacks to give as presents to each other.

“...Mommy?”

Startled, Sans took a good look at the bed. Frisk appeared to be...sleeping? Weird. He checked his phone. He hadn’t actually received anything from her since the...incident...over lunch.

“Hey, kid, I think we should probably go.”

“What? But I didn’t even get to show my mommy my deadly death trap of grape death!”

“Sure. But she’s sleeping, yeah? How’re you gonna show her your trap if she’s sleeping?”

Attie marched up to her mother’s bed and shimmied up onto the edge. “Then I’ll wait!”

“Kid, we really-”

“You don’t have to wait, Mr. Sans. It’s okay. I’ll stay right here and wait for my mommy to wake up.”

He sighed. “There’s no way I’m going past the Dogi again without someone to throw at ‘em if things get bad. Fine, fine, we’ll...wait, I guess. But just for a little while, okay? And stop cheering; you’ll wake yer mom up.”

Attie quieted down. She curled up on the edge of the bed, carefully avoiding her mother’s legs. “Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Why do you call me ‘kid?’”

“I...uh, I guess it’s a nickname. Y’know, ‘kid,’ ‘kiddo,’ ‘bud,’ that kind’ve thing.”

“But why don’t you call me by my name instead?”

“Dunno? Does it bug ya, k...uh, Attie?”

She thought for a moment, then hummed. “It’s okay. You can call me whatever you want.”

“So if I wanted to call you ‘little pink cuddlebug...’”

Attie giggled and curled up tighter. “Nooo!”

“Shh!”

“Oh yeah.” She was silent and still for a moment. Then, “Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah?”

“Why does Undie not want me to come to the hospital?”

“Did she say that?”
“Kind of. When we were training yesterday she asked why I wanted to visit. She said it was pointless.”

“I, uh, guess it’s not really something monsters do.”

“Really? But Mommy sometimes takes me to visit Embassy people who are sick when they’re in the hospital, or when their kids are in the hospital. She said it’s polite. Do monsters just like being mean?”

“Well...that’s a whole ‘nother story. It’s just...we didn’t have hospitals in the Underground, y’know? So we’re not used to the whole...hospital thing.” They closest thing they’d had was the Lab, and no one visited the Lab.

“Oh.” She hummed a little. “But then what did you do when you got sick?”

“Heh. I never got sick.” He ignored Attie’s disbelieving giggles. “But if someone might have gotten sick or hurt or somethin’, well, you had to either wait it out find someone with healing magic. And you had to convince the person with healing magic to heal ya, usually by givin’ them some food or a weapon or something else they might want. Heh, when Boss was a babybones he fell out’ve a tree. I had to walk all the way to Waterfall to find Old Man Gerson.”

“Really? Mr. Papyrus got sick from falling off a tree?”

“What? No! He broke his arm nearly clean off! Old Man Gerson made me redo his whole roof for putting the brat’s arm back together! The old fart kept complaining at me the whole time, saying there were holes; I did patch jobs for years! He still whines to me that his roof leaks, and he lives in a ground floor apartment now.”

Attie giggled again. She was playing with her deadly death trap of grape death, messing with the hinged cover. “You’re pretty funny, Mr. Sans.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t funny at the time. Boss’s just lucky he’s my little brother, or he’d be Undyne’s left-hand man.”

“...I don’t get it.”

“Eh, it’s wordplay. Don’t worry ‘bout it.”

They sat in silence, absorbed in their own thoughts. The shadows grew longer as the sun slowly sank into the toothy maw of the city’s skyline. It was strangely peaceful. Almost too peaceful.

“...Attie?”

The little girl on the bed shifted, but didn’t respond. Asleep, he realized. He felt his own eye sockets slipping closed in sympathetic exhaustion. It didn’t help that he was always...so, so tired...

“Sir?”

“What?” He jerked upright, nearly knocking his skull into the nose of the nurse who had leaned over him, way too close for comfort. “What do you want?”

“Visiting hours are over. I’m sorry to disturb you, but you and the little one will need to come back tomorrow.”

He growled a little and stretched. The magic that held his bones together popped much like human
cartilage, but without the barrier of muscle and skin to dampen the noise. He grinned at the nurse’s flinches.

Mischief managed, he shuffled over to the hospital bed. Both humans were still sleeping, so he carefully started gathering Attie into his arms.

She hummed a little in protest as she was removed from the warm nest she’d made for herself.

“Sorry, kid; gotta head home. You can sleep more there, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

The nurse gave him a dirty look as he left, which sat funny with him. He was used to getting strange looks sometimes - as far as he could tell everyone got strange looks sometimes, human or monster - but that was a particularly strange look. It was frustrated, but almost impatient, like Sans could have interrupted something.

...Maybe the nurse really cared about punctuality? Or maybe she really just needed to take care of something? She’d been holding one of those bags of fluid Frisk was usually hooked up to, after all.

“Mr. Sans?”

He looked down into anxious green eyes. “Yeah, kid?”

“I accident’ly left my deadly death trap of grape death in Mommy’s room. Can we grab it?”

“Oh...can it wait until tomorrow?” He glanced at the Dogi, who eyed him back with raw suspicion. Well, he assumed they were eyeing him, given the direction they were facing.

“No. I kinda need it to show Undie so she knows I did my art for today.”

“No label,” his mind finally registered. The solution bag has no label. ALL of Frisk’s medications have labels.

What an odd thing to notice, he thought faintly.

“Okay, then.”

The Dogi sniffed them openly as they passed, but didn’t stop them or demand an ID. Sans pushed the door open gently, hoping silence would keep the nurse from yelling at him…

...and froze.

“Mommy,” Attie whimpered.

The nurse had both of Frisk’s hands in a tight grip, trying to fend off her patient. There was an empty clear plastic bag on the bed, a labeled one, and the one the nurse had been carrying was in its place on the hook on the wall.

Sans lifted the nurse into the air, eye crackling with magic.

“No,” Frisk croaked, her breathing picking up. “No.”

“What? No, what?”
But she didn't answer him. Attie was wailing and struggling against his hold, but - somehow - didn’t break free. He didn’t want her to see what was happening to her mother. Frisk’s breaths came in rough pants; her mouth worked, and her hands shifted, but nothing was making any sense.

The nurse lashed out, and Sans drew on his magic to reinforce the gravity magic...only to come up empty. He was still drained, still exhausted and shaky and weak. The only reason he’d been able to use that much magic at all was because he’d napped for an hour or two. It took only a few seconds for the nurse to break free of his flickering magic, drop, and lunge for him. Battle training - which had fallen by the wayside over the past few years - kicked in, and he dodged.

And stumbled.

He ached from the morning workout Undyne had put him through, and the pain nearly made him drop the kid he was carrying. His physical and magical reserves were low. Too low.

I can’t take this bitch, he realized.

...Wait.

“INTRUDER!” He yelled, dragging Attie away from the nurse’s wild swings. “FETCH!”

The door smashed open. Dogamy and Dogaressa burst in, followed by Lesser Dog and Doggo. They must have just shown up for the change of shift. This attack had been timed.

He extended his power once more, forcing the nurse down. It didn’t matter that his control was waverin, that he nearly gagged on the feeling of emptiness in his soul, that the nurse would break his hold within a few seconds.

A few seconds was all he needed.

One well-aimed bone attack severed the plastic tube leading from the unmarked bag into Frisk’s arm, and Sans moved himself and Attie clear of the incoming chaos.

The dogs barked and howled as they swarmed in on their quarry just as Sans’s magic failed. He half-expected them to tear the intruder to shreds where she was, but they merely held her down. Well, Dogaressa bit the woman’s shoulder, but he wasn’t going to shed any tears over that.

“Let me hold her down, puppy dear,” Dogamy said. “Doggo, call Undyne. Tell her there’s an intruder in the ambassador’s room.”

Dogamya allowed her husband to pin the struggling woman down, then looked over at Sans. Her manic grin was punctuated by the sharp red of blood on her teeth and maw. (“You! Get help!”) she snarled.

Help…? He looked over at Frisk, who was starting to convulse on the bed. Lesser Dog was standing between the ambassador and her attacker, neck curled protectively around her, but was whining helplessly.

Right.

He adjusted his hold on Attie, who was now crying openly and clinging to his jacket, and dashed into the hallway. The nurse’s station was just around the corner.

“Hey!” He called as he approached. “HEY! Someone, help!”
A tired older woman leaning on the station counter squinted her eyes at him, looking supremely bored. “What is it? Another dog biscuit run?”

“No. A-a patient. We need help.”

“Hun, no alarms have gone off. Everything’s fine.”

He growled and leaned in. “There was just an assassination attempt on the Monster Ambassador. She’s been poisoned or something; one of your nurses attacked her just now. She’s convulsing and not making any sense. We need help.” He slammed his ID card down on the counter. “NOW.”

The nurse gawked at the card for a long moment, reading the text printed on it, then picked up her desk phone with a shaking hand. “Yes? Hello? This is Amber in Short-Term Observation. I need a team in Ambassador Dreemurr’s suite ASAP. Possible poisoning.” She put the phone down, then immediately picked it back up again and punched another button. “Security? I need a team to Suite 249 immediately. There’s been a reported assassination attempt on Ambassador Dreemurr.”

She tossed the phone down, then ducked around the nurse’s station and into the lobby. “Sir, I would recommend that you stay here.” Then she was gone, down the hallway towards Frisk’s room.

“Mommy...Mommy...” Attie sobbed into his jacket.

He wrapped his bony arms around her and staggered over to the nearest chair. The kid was fidgeting and crying, wailing for her mommy, but she wasn’t trying to escape him anymore. That was great, because Sans was very certain his legs wouldn’t hold him up at the moment.

He didn’t know what to tell her. He couldn’t say that Frisk would be alright; he didn’t know what was in that bag of fluid, or how much had gotten into her body before he’d severed the lead. He didn’t know what it was that Frisk didn’t want him to do. Had she been afraid of him? Had his use of magic made things worse?

Was Attie going to have to watch her mother die after all?

He shifted to relieve the pressure of something digging into his leg. Oh, right; his phone. He pulled it out and stared at the screen. He could call someone, but who? Doggo was supposed to be calling Undyne...

He scrolled to a familiar name in his contact list and held the phone up.

A woman’s voice answered after a single ring. “Sans? Whatever is the matter?”

“Tori, it’s Frisk. An assassination attempt at the hospital. The dogs have the gal, and I have Attie, but last I saw Frisk she was in rough shape.”

“What did you say?”

He repeated himself.

“Sans...what? Is...is this one of your pranks? Ha...ha...I know how much of a morbid sense of humor you have, but this r-really is not funny...”

“I’m not jokin’ with ya Tori. Not this time. Doggo’s supposed to be calling Undyne-” he paused as a group of men and women in white coats rushed by in the direction of Frisk’s room, followed
by a straggling line of security guards. “Just wanted to let ya know.”

There was some heavy breathing on the other end of the line. It became more and more ragged until it devolved into a muffled, hiccupping sob.

“...Hey, now, Tori. ‘M sorry. Look; I didn’t mean to upset you. Just didn’t want ya to find out through the grapevine.”

Toriel breathed, shaky and deep, before responding. “I appreciate the consideration, Sans. I know Frisk is not...someone you particularly get along with, b-but…”

He waited a few moments, but she didn’t continue. “I...uh...no problem. I’d offer to give you a shortcut here, but my magic’s all bone dry.”

Neither of them laughed at the pun.

“I...appreciate the offer,” she said finally. “I will see if someone can give me a ride over to the hospital. I was merely working on additional paperwork; it can be put aside until morning.”

“O-okay.”

“I shall see you soon.”

“Okay. See ya, Tori.”

A proper cop - not hospital security - walked by not long after he hung up, and Sans’s (figurative) heart sank.

Cops meant that word was getting out. Wherever cops went, reporters would usually follow. Reporters meant awkward questions he wasn’t allowed to answer, which meant the reporters got frustrated, which meant they got aggressive.

Sans was not in the mood to deal with any more aggressive humans.

Attie didn’t protest when he picked her back up and headed for the main lobby. He would’ve preferred to hide, but he’d seen the security cameras around the hallways. There was no way he wouldn’t be found if someone was looking for him. Better to head for where Tori would probably be arriving and hope he could meet up with her there; most humans were terrified of a 7-foot-tall goat monster with fangs and claws and horns.

It only took Tori about twenty minutes to arrive. That was the good news. She walked in around the time a larger contingent of cops showed up and began sweeping the hospital.

The bad news was just who she’d gotten a ride from.

Boss...didn’t look happy. At all. Usually his expression could pass for some level of enjoyment, or at least sadistic amusement at someone else’s expense. He was a skeleton, after all; the grin was pretty much permanent.

Sans ducked his head in an attempt to avoid Boss’s glare, but it didn’t spare him from getting a look. It was a look that clearly said that he was in for a world of pain as soon as they got home. He gripped Attie a little tighter.

“Are you okay, Mr. Sans?” she asked, drying her remaining tears with the sleeve of his jacket.

“Eh, ‘m fine. Wanna go see your Granny Rec?”
She hummed. “Not really.”

“What? Why not?”

“I think she’ll be mad at me.”

“Why would she be mad at you?”

Attie was sniffling again. “She...she always tells me to look after Mommy and I didn’t, and now Mommy’s hurt or more sick, and it’s all my f-fault.”

“Shhh, shhh.” He tucked her into his jacket as far as he could, maneuvering both of them away from the curious eyes of a few reporters who were starting to congregate outside the doors. “It’s okay, kid. Attie. Yer gramma won’t yell at you. She might yell at the dogs, or Undyne, or me, but it wasn’t your fault.”

“Is Mommy going to be okay?”

“I, uh, I dunno. Let’s go find out.” He went to shift her into a more comfortable carrying position, but met resistance.

“Mr. Sans? If my mommy doesn’t wake up again, can I live with you?”

He froze. “Kid, you have no sense of self-preservation. You’ve known me, what, three days at best? Remember what happened yesterday with Boss? You don’t want to live around that, believe me. You’d be better off with your gramma and grandpa or Undyne. They can teach you how to grow up into a proper monster.”

“So...I can’t?”

He sighed. “We’ll see, okay? I’m pretty sure it won’t come to that.”

It had, though, he realized. When push came to shove everyone was worried about Frisk, but not a whole lot of people had been concerned about Frisk’s daughter. Yeah, the kid was kept out of the public eye, but that didn’t mean people like Tori and Undyne and Boss didn’t know about her.

And yet...no one had thought to make arrangements for her that first night he brought her home. No one but him. Boss had stuck him with the kid after the fact, but it was becoming more and more apparent that it was a rushed patch job.

No wonder the kid had latched onto a bum like him.

“Sans! Atlas!” Tori was waving one giant claw in the air in his general direction. He followed her gesture. “I thought you two would be waiting upstairs.”

“Didn’t want to be in anyone’s way.”

“Very well. Walk with us. You can give us a full briefing in a more secure location.” The queen and her guards fell into formation and began moving in the direction of the elevator.

This put Sans right next to an absolutely peeved-looking Boss. Oh, he was far too professional to be yelling and screaming, but the implicit threat was there all the same. Sans just hoped he’d survive whatever Boss had in store.

Tori, apparently oblivious to the tension between her friend and one of the Royal Guards, stalked through the hallways of the hospital like she owned the place. It was impressive. Even the guards
were looking nervous, and they were trained for all kinds of uncomfortable situations.

No wonder Tori was queen. Despite their differences (and that little revolt a few centuries back that saw her banished to the Ruins) Asgore would’ve been a fool to let her go, especially with the ever-changing situation on the surface.

A cop stopped their entourage once they got to the second floor, but let them pass once she’d confirmed Tori’s identity. A doctor in a long white lab coat with a harried expression did the same.

“I can’t let you in the room right now, ma’am,” he said, running one dark hand through his short black curls. “We’ve got our hands full keeping your daughter alive. Here. Why don’t you all come and sit in this room right here - it’s empty - and we’ll keep you posted as we know more.”

He was out of the room in two long strides, heading back towards Frisk’s room.

Everyone was quiet for a long moment. Then-

“Achoo!”

Sans wiped Attie’s nose on his sleeve. She was looking better than she had earlier, at least.

“How are you, little Attie?” Tori asked holding out a hand to pat the kid’s head.

Attie flinched away. Tori jerked back like she’d been burnt, looking hurt and confused. The kid buried her face in Sans’s jacket and started shaking again.

“She’s afraid you’ll be mad at her,” Sans said, rubbing a bony hand over the kid’s back. “I told her it wasn’t her fault.”

“Of course it is not your fault, Atlas! What a silly thing to think! It was the fault of the horrible woman who attacked your mother. You had nothing to do with it. Now, will you not come here and tell Granny Ree what happened?”

Attie slid off Sans’s lap and made her way over to her grandmother. Tori picked the little human up with one massive arm and settled her effortlessly.

The kid told her story in stutters and whispers, punctuated by the occasional hiccup. She was holding herself together admirably, really. She didn’t let a single tear fall the entire time.

“It seems that, contrary to your concerns, you actually helped your mother,” Tori said. “Why, imagine if you had not thought to go back into the room! Who knows what would have happened to your mother!”

That was probably the wrong thing to say, Sans thought, but he didn’t comment.

Attie snuggled with her grandmother for a few moments longer before Tori put the kid back down.

“Now. Sans. You saw what happened, did you not?”

“Oh, a bit? I saw Frisk fightin’ off the lady, but not much else.”

“And she said nothing?”

“I, uh, lifted the lady off ‘er using my magic. Frisk said...uh, she said ‘no.’ I’m not sure why, but...” He shrugged and busied himself with settling Attie back onto his lap. He could feel Boss’s eye sockets burning into his skull again.
“Hmm. That is strange. As far as I am aware, Frisk has no aversion to magic; certainly, she would not be opposed to magic being used on an aggressor. She said nothing else?”

“...No? Not that I heard. Oh, I did cut the line - y’know, the one that went into her arm - but I’m not sure if it helped at all.”

“Well! I am sure it did. Whatever substance was in that could not be beneficial for her, if it has taken this long for the doctors to stabilize her.” She was holding herself together admirably, but Sans could read the worry in her eyes.

There was a knock at the door. After a moment, one of the guards who had remained outside to watch the door walked in with the doctor they’d met in the hallway.

“Queen Toriel,” the doctor said, “Please come with me. Ah, alone, please. Or at least without the kid. It’s your daughter. We need to go over what we know.”

“Is she alright?”

“She’s stable, and that’s about as best as we can hope for. She’s unconscious, though, and I need to explain our plans going forward.”

There was silence after Toriel left with a pair of guards, leaving the other two behind. Not even Boss dared to break the silence.

What was happening to Frisk?

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Monsters genuinely don’t understand why humans would want to put all their sick and injured people in one place, and then visit them. After all, vulnerable family members can heal much better at home, where they can be protected and cared for by other family members, right?

Thanks for reading! Goodness, Frisk isn't having a great week. Did you know that IV medications can take full effect in 5-10 seconds? Don't do drugs, kids.

I can't believe how far we've come already! The next chapter is one I'm very excited to post, so hang onto your socks for that in a few days. A huge thanks to everyone who has left comments and kudos for me; I treasure each one.
She awoke suddenly. One moment, she was unconscious; the next, she was awake. It was a little like loading a SAVE, actually.

The thought made her panic a little. She mentally reviewed everything she knew, everything she’d done. The past...however long...was a blur. Not good. She slowly lifted her left wrist, but found only a thin plastic tube that ended in a needle taped to her arm and disappearing into her skin. The watch she usually wore was missing.

Her right wrist held a plastic bracelet with her name (Frisk Dreemurr; at least she hadn’t gone back too far) and some information she couldn’t make sense of. Her head ached when she tried to think. She looked around the strange green room and found a glass of water on a bedside table next to her. Sitting up was a slow and painful process (her side felt like it had been stabbed) and her arms shook when she tried to lift the water glass, but she managed to take a few sips.

She hadn’t realized how dry her throat was until that moment. Her head still felt like someone had taken a hammer to it, but at least her throat felt better.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to center herself. She had dealt with worse pain - far worse - and had come out intact. She just needed to discover what had happened, where she was, and if she had, indeed, messed with time again.

Once she forced the pain to the back of her mind, she looked around again. The light streaming through her window didn’t help, but she couldn’t do much about that from the bed so she ignored it. Another look at the bedside table revealed a black rectangle that almost made her weep with joy.

Her cellphone! That would certainly help!

She reached out for it, slowly, and made sure her grip was as firm as she could make it before lifting the small device back into bed with her. She didn’t want to drop it; she’d never make it out of bed to retrieve it.

That thought sparked a small memory: Sans - Sans?? - picking up her cell phone and handing it back to her. The thought of the skeleton produced more confusion than hostility, which was surprising...


She unlocked her cell phone (the passcode was the same as she remembered, thankfully, though she didn’t change it often) and looked at her text messages. 156 messages from...Sans? And almost twice that many from a “Baby Boo?” What had happened to her??
Sans was an awkward topic at the best of times, so she opened up the messages from “Baby Boo.” She immediately felt something warm and fuzzy in her chest. It was...Attie’s phone. She couldn’t remember how or when or why Atlas had gotten a phone, but she’d been bugging everyone she knew about one for ages. Personally, Frisk thought seven was a bit young to have a cell phone, but...well. She’d just skimmed them, but the messages were adorable. She closed her eyes against the sting of tears. She wished with all her heart that she could see her daughter, give her a big hug and make sure she was okay…

Frisk pushed her longing to the side and dried her eyes. There was a full week of texts she apparently hadn’t read. She...she hadn’t LOADed, then. Relief made her feel giddy and a little nauseous. It was strange that her phone was still charged after all that time, though; someone must have plugged it in occasionally.

Considering monsters’ aversion to hospitals, Frisk had a short list of people who would do such a thing. She made a mental note to send a message of thanks to her coworkers at the Embassy once she was feeling a little more coherent.

Speaking of whom, there didn’t seem to be any messages from them. Then again, her cell phone was only for emergencies, so that was a good thing. Frisk pulled up her email app and checked her work messages…

...then immediately closed it again. She breathed out, slowly. How had she accumulated two thousand messages in the course of a week?? Or had she been out longer than that??

With shaking hands, she switched back to her messaging app. The long chain of texts from Sans stood out, waiting for her to deal with it. Her first urge - to delete the whole thing - was both petty and foolish. Sans was rarely intentionally cruel; he was a prankster, and frequently crossed the line between “funny” and “destructive,” but the damage and injuries he caused were usually a side effect and not the goal.

...Usually.

If nothing else, he probably had information she could use. For all his faults, he was more insightful than most people she knew, human or monster. It was one of the reasons she hadn’t cut him out of her life altogether; that, and when push came to shove he was usually reliable. If he could stay awake and actually remember that he’d been asked to do something. Oh, the price would be steep, but he would do what was required of him.

Regretting it already, she opened the messages from Sans.

It...wasn’t at all what she expected. She remembered as soon as she read his first few texts that he had somehow been put in charge of Attie. That’s right; she’d been sick, and he’d found her and brought her to the hospital, then been saddled with her daughter. She almost - almost - felt sorry for the guy. Then again, being in charge of the little bundle of energy that was Attie would keep him on his toes. Sans was the kind of person who needed to be kept on his toes, in her opinion, at least to keep him out of trouble. He had caused so much trouble over the years...

There were pictures, she noticed. For some reason, without prompting, Sans had taken to documenting Attie’s daily life. It started off simply: the first two days she’d missed, it was just pictures of Attie posing (to show her outfit for the day, she remembered) and hourly updates telling her that Grammar was done or that Attie wouldn’t eat anything but hot dogs for lunch, much to his embarrassment. There was a message on the morning of the second day that said something about “Boss,” but that was downright incoherent.
She made a mental note to ask him about it, recalling Attie’s innocent drawing. The idea of someone - even Sans - living in an abusive home made her chest feel hot and tight. She had never pegged Papyrus as an abusive type, but...she remembered her conversation with Sans on the topic. How he had thought it was normal. How he’d said things like “you know how he is” and “it’s really my fault” like he expected everyone to know. And worse, to agree.

...How many monsters still lived like that, after so long on the surface? Sure, the murder rate among monsters had gone down enormously after the barrier fell, both among monsters who moved to the surface and those still in the Underground, but violence still occurred with far greater frequency than it did among humans. How many lived like Sans, their situations unnoticed in the face of bigger problems?

She put the thought aside. There wasn’t anything she could do from a hospital bed. She needed more information. In the meantime, Sans was a grown monster; he could deal with the situation himself. She vowed to check on him, though. If nothing else, she owed him.

She owed him a lot, she realized as she scrolled into the third day of texts. These started out like the first two days - a picture of Attie, hourly status updates - but around lunchtime there was a flurry of pictures. Attie was...trying to cook? The texts indicated that he and Attie had gotten sick of Undyne’s and Papyrus’s cooking and that they had decided to try their own hands at it.

From the look of things, it had turned out rather well, actually. The chaos documented in the pictures was far less than she expected from Attie’s first foray into the culinary arts. She admitted, reluctantly, that maybe Sans wasn’t half bad at teaching.

The end result - mac and cheese with hot dogs cut up into it - didn’t look unusual at all. There were a few pictures of Attie eating and smiling, giving thumbs-up gestures to the camera, so it was probably more or less edible.

Her little girl was growing up.

Not for the first time, Frisk felt worry tug at her chest at the thought. Due to the nature of her upbringing Attie had been isolated from almost everyone, human and monster. Sure, she knew her grandparents (well...her monster grandparents, who were leagues better than her human ones had been) and some people at the Monster Embassy, and Undyne and a few of the guards, but not many others. She had been raised in a world of adults with limited opportunities to interact with children. None of the embassy kids were her age; all were older by at least two or three years or significantly younger. It was a mark in her favor that she was able to get along with them as well as she did. She had her friends, and as of yet she hadn’t gone looking for more.

It couldn’t last. Attie was becoming more and more curious. Ever since she’d come home and asked her mother for more information about “the creepy hot dog skeleton” she’d met at the park, Frisk knew that it was just a matter of time. She could ground Attie for speaking to strangers, she could yell and scream and try to enforce the idea that the outside world wasn’t safe, but that wouldn’t help anyone. The outside world was safe - safer than Frisk’s maternal instincts and personal experience wanted to admit - and Attie would never learn to be independent if she was smothered by an overprotective mother.

That had been the reasoning behind letting her go to the park on her own in the first place. The park was just down the street, within easy walking distance. It was populated by neighbors, usually, and the Royal Guard patrolled there regularly. The guards had agreed to watch out for Attie from a distance. Plus, she’d warded her daughter quite well: there was enough magical protection around the little girl to stop bullets, both magical and mundane. If anything happened she would have known, but that didn’t stop the worry.
Another thought came to mind. Of all the people Attie could have met at that park that first day, she’d met Sans. Attie had approached him and had somehow drawn him into conversation, despite the fact that he could be awfully aggressive towards strangers when he wanted to be. And barely one week later, Sans had - against all Frisk thought she knew about his nature - taken the time and effort to drag her to the hospital. She thought she remembered a foggy conversation with her mother, as well, in which Toriel had apologized for asking him not to take her to the hospital. If that had actually happened - and wasn’t some strange fever dream - it meant he had found some reason to cross one of his oldest friends. And for someone he hated, no less.

Would Sans have helped if Attie hadn’t met him that day? Frisk didn’t really want to think about it. He might have, she realized, feeling a little guilty. The amount of detail she saw in his pictures and texts betrayed a thoughtfulness she wouldn’t have attributed to him. She didn’t know much about him, really, beyond what Papyrus told her, and she was beginning to think that neither brother was really a reliable source on the topic.

In between complaints (Papyrus was such a drama queen, not that Frisk would ever tell him to his face), she’d learned that Sans was the older brother by several years. Papyrus made no mention of parents or guardian figures in their lives that she could remember, not that she’d really thought about it. Had Sans...raised Papyrus? If so, why? Family was crucially important to monsters, with most family units sticking together their entire lives like small clans, but “emancipating” inconvenient relatives - legally cutting them off from the family - wasn’t unheard of. The brothers’ current situation implied that Sans hadn’t raised his brother for personal gain; or if he had, he had lost control of the situation long ago.

If Sans had raised Papyrus, then...maybe that explained why he didn’t just leave. There was a bond that was created between a caretaker and a child, usually. She’d experienced that from both ends. Attie was her whole world...or as much of it as she could spare from the increasing demands of politics, which was far less than her bright little girl deserved. Frisk herself been a teenager when she met her parents, but that didn’t change how much she loved them. Sometimes she wondered if she loved them more than they loved her, but that was okay. They’d been through much, much worse than she had; emotional issues were the least of their worries, really.

It broke her heart, though, that they had never seemed to bond very closely with Attie. Toriel tried, certainly, but the spark just...wasn’t there. Oh, they tolerated her, and both Asgore and Toriel watched her without complaint when Frisk was busy, but they never went out of their way to spend time with her. Maybe as Attie grew they would become closer. Frisk hoped so; she didn’t want to ever have to choose between her parents and her daughter.

Maybe if she had a husband, or at least a boyfriend, they would be more accepting? Despite their issues with violence, monsters could be strangely old-fashioned at times. Attie’s conception had been...not intended, and under horrible circumstances, and she would never have wished such a thing on her worst enemy, but Frisk had stepped up to the challenge and raised her daughter all the same. Did monsters think less of her for it? No one had ever said anything to her face - human or monster - but she’d seen the slight double-take from some monsters when she introduced herself and her daughter without a man in the picture.

There were rumors, of course, that Attie wasn’t entirely human. There was no physical evidence - Attie didn’t have any strange features or coloration - but that didn’t stop people who wanted to make trouble. Especially the press. At least once a year, some reporter thought he or she would make a big name by spreading rumors about Attie.

Frisk had started to ignore those slanderous articles. It was something she never thought she’d do, back when she was sixteen and trying to figure out how to help lead an entire civilization to a new
and better life, but she wasn’t sixteen anymore. She had supporters all over the world, now; when those articles appeared, people would swarm social media to decry attacks on an innocent child. It certainly gave her hope for humanity as a whole.

...And she’d gotten well and truly off track.

Pushing aside her musings, she continued scrolling through Sans’s messages. His entries seemed to grow more and more detailed as the week progressed. In addition to his status updates, he had started sending pictures of Attie doing ridiculous things. The little girl apparently found the skeletons’ dryer fascinating, which clearly worried Sans though he didn’t admit it outright. She also did a number of ‘art projects’ that Frisk would never have approved of at home, but which Sans dutifully documented (and cleaned up after, if his complaints were to be believed). There were even a few spontaneous texts about cute things Attie said:

SANS 12:12 PM
So Attie just asked me what happened to my ears. Told her a spider got em. Didnt help that we had takeout from Muffets for breakfast this morning

SANS 2:54 PM
Kid thinks humans turn into skeletons? Whatre u teaching this kid?”

SANS 9:30 AM
Atties worried about u. Hope u wake up soon

That last one was...unexpected. Did he mean Attie hoped she woke up soon, or that he himself did? Was he saying it to get Attie out of his (proverbial) hair, or because he was genuinely concerned?

...Did Sans actually care about Frisk as a person, or because she was Attie’s mother? He was clearly getting attached to the little girl, if the tone of his texts was anything to go by, and it had been barely a week. He’d known Frisk for eight years and hadn’t shown anywhere near that level of concern.

She did a quick search on her phone for ‘appendicitis recovery time.’ According to the internet, getting fully back to normal could take anywhere from two to eight weeks. Many people were more or less fine within hours. But…

...She’d been sick for a while before she started feeling stomach pains, she remembered. She was pretty sure it had started off as a common cold, only to be compounded by her insides exploding on her. She hadn’t been able to eat; after a while, she couldn’t even keep fluids down. Then there was the…actually, what had happened? Her memories were hazy. According to what she found about appendicitis, there was no reason she should have been unconscious for a week. Heck, she should have been up and walking around within a day of having surgery!

Thinking back, there had been...something, she was fairly certain. She remembered Attie, and Sans, and that horrible blue magic...he’d used blue magic on Attie, but that was a different day, right? He’d saved Attie from falling, and she’d scolded him for it. She...she really should apologize for that. (Maybe. She had enough nightmares about blue magic to keep have second thoughts, at least.)

No, wait. He’d used blue magic on someone else, right? She remembered panic, and the sounds of fighting, and the burning feeling of fire inching its way up her arm. And then that blue magic that made her want to scream and dodge and get away, even as she faintly realized it wasn’t aimed at her.
Someone...had attacked her? Frisk wasn’t sure how reliable her memories were. They were mostly hazy feelings, and feelings were all too subjective. She needed objectivity; she needed facts.

She hit the call button for the nurse. After a few minutes, she heard a voice punctuated by growls outside her door. It opened soon after to admit a very tired-looking man who looked vaguely familiar.

“...Dr. Ray, wasn’t it?”

Dr. Ray smiled and adjusted his glasses. “That’s right. I can’t tell you how pleased we all are that you’re awake, finally. You had us all worried!”

She smiled. Something about this man grated on her nerves, but she was not going to let it show. It was probably unintentional, anyways; he looked like he needed a good eight hours of sleep. Even Undyne - her "bestie" - was unpleasant after a day or two without sleep.

“Well! How much do you remember?”

“Well, not a lot, really. I...shouldn’t be in bed still, I’m pretty sure. I was out for, what, a week? I don’t think that’s normal for appendicitis, but I’m not the doctor here. Were there complications?”

His smile slipped a little when he saw her cell phone, but it was back in place by the time he met her eyes. That wasn’t suspicious at all. “Not...as such. Someone accidentally gave you a double-dose of one of your medications. It was completely unintentional, I assure you. We’ve dealt with it, and we’re very sorry it happened.”

“I see.” He was lying, Frisk was sure. She wished Sans was there, strangely enough; he’d been dragged into a few of the early meetings with the humans and (reluctantly) lent his strange gift for sussing out lies and half-truths to the negotiations.

But Sans wasn’t with her right then, and she didn’t want to owe him more than she already did.

“All the same, I’m glad you’re feeling better! I’d recommend you stay off your phone there for a bit yet; wouldn’t want to stress yourself out.” He gave a little laugh that put Frisk’s teeth on edge.

“I’m about done for the day anyways.”

The doctor smiled and held out his hand. Frisk looked at it, then back at him, keeping her face twisted into an expression of polite confusion.

There was nothing on the surface or in the Underground that could make her hand over her only lifeline to the outside world.

After a long moment he backed off, that strange smile still in place. “Well, as long as you take care of yourself, that’s what matters. I’m surprised you can get reception in here, actually; I can’t get a signal on mine half the time.”

“I think being near a window helps.” And monster technology, though she wasn’t going to tell him that. Alphys was involved in a ton of really shady experimentation but she was a godsend when it came to making sure phones had good reception, regardless of environmental interference. After all, she’d had lots of practice.

“Well, I’ll let you rest. Are you hungry? It’s about lunchtime. I can send a tray up.”

Frisk felt like her stomach was eating itself it was so empty, but she kept her expression neutral.
“I’m not sure I could eat anything.”

“You really need to eat something, Ms. Dreemurr. You’ve been unconscious for a while. Can I bring you up some soup? Jello? Maybe a fresh glass of water?”

This was getting strange. “No, thank you. I don’t think I can keep anything down right now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Well, I’ll have a tray sent up just in case you change your mind.”

Dr. Ray let himself out after tapping something out on the tablet in his hand, and Frisk breathed a sigh of relief.

A buzzing next to her leg brought her attention to her phone.

*SANS 12:13 PM*

Atties asking for hot dogs again. Trying to wean her off em and onto plain macncheese but she still wants hot dogs in it. We’re gettin good at macncheese at least.

She smiled, almost despite herself, and texted a response.

*You 12:15 PM*

It’s three words. Mac and cheese. Or mac & cheese, if you can find the ampersand on your keyboard.

Three heartbeats later, her phone rang. ‘SANS,’ her caller ID announced. She blinked, surprised, but picked it up.

There was a shuffle on the other end of the line instead of any kind of greeting, and Frisk felt a flash of annoyance. If this was one of Sans’s pranks…

“MOMMY!” a familiar voice yelled, far too loud for the speaker. There was a low rumble in the background; she couldn’t make out much, but it sounded like the skeleton himself. “Mommy,” the voice said at a much more normal volume. “I missed you so, so, sooooo much!”

“I missed you too, baby boo. Is...is everything okay? Are you okay?” She sounded like a frog, but she didn't care.

“Yup! I’ve been pretty okay. Mr. Sans and I are making macncheese!” Attie said it like Sans typed it, as if it was all one long word.

“I’m glad you like mac and cheese, Attie. I’m a little surprised, though; you didn’t like it the last time I tried to make it for you.”

There was the sound of air being blown across a microphone. “That’s because I was six, Mommy. I’m seven now. Besides, it was in a box. We made this all by ourselves! And put hot dogs in it!”

“Wow, really?”

“Yyyyyup! We boiled the noodles, then drained them and mixed together milk and cheese until it was hot. Well, we’re still waiting on that part today. It hasn’t gotten all bubbly yet. When it gets all bubbly, then we add the noodles and the hot dogs and eat it all until it’s gone!”
“That sounds like a big lunch.”

“You! I can eat a bowl of it and sometimes two bowls, but sometimes Mr. Sans doesn’t eat all of
his. I think that’s silly. Oh! Did you know that skeletons turn food into magic?”

“Oh, really?”

“You! Mr. Sans told me all about it when I asked him, and he let me feed him jelly beans. It’s true!
None of the jelly beans escaped! And when he eats his macncheese, it doesn’t go down his throat
into his tummy! Because he doesn’t have a throat! Or a tummy, I guess. Mr. Sans, do you have a
tummy?”

There was more rumbling in the background.

“He says not really. I think I might have to check.”

This kid was going to be the death of her. “You should probably believe him. It’s rude to go poking
at people without their permission.”

“Oh. That’s what Mr. Sans said, too.”

Frisk really didn’t want to imagine what kind of scenario led to Sans having that conversation with
her precocious little girl. “...Well, he’s right.”

“Okay. Oh! Are you feeling better now?”

“A little. I’m still kinda tired. I just woke up...maybe an hour ago.”

“Oh! That’s great! I haven’t been to see you since Wednesday. That was two whole days ago. You
woke up a little bit then, but you didn’t say anything and Mr. Sans said you might not remember.
He’s been reading a lot about what happened so I could know if you were okay.”

“I see. And...what did he say?”

“He said you’d be fine, and that you were just sleeping it off. He said that’s an expression. It
means your body is healing, but it takes too much energy for you to be awake while that happens.”

An induced coma, maybe?? Or was that the wrong phrase? She was an ambassador, not a doctor.
“Interesting. Well, I don’t want to keep you from your lunch. Do you think you’ll stop by later?”

“Maybe. I’ll ask. Mr. Sans? Can we stop by and see Mommy later?”

There was a pause. Frisk couldn’t hear anything at all.

“I think I need to go check on Mr. Sans. He’s doing something in the kitchen with the noodles and
he’s not answering me. Can I call you back after lunch?”

“As long as you promise to be good for Mr. Sans.”

Attie huffed again. “I’m always good for Mr. Sans, Mommy. It’s my job to keep him out of trouble,
and it’s his job to keep me out of trouble. He says we look after each other, but Undie says I’m
really in charge. I think she’s joking, though. I think Mr. Sans is really in charge. He’s better at it,
and he gets me up in the morning and makes me wear nice clothes and he can reach the cupboards
to get stuff out so we can make macncheese.”

She tried to keep from laughing; her side still hurt. “Well, as long as you have everything under
control, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay! Bye, Mommy! Love you!”

“Bye, Attie. I love you too.”

There was a beep as the line went dead, and Frisk put her phone down. It was good to hear her daughter so happy. She was a little jealous that Attie and Sans had managed so well by themselves, even though she knew that feeling was irrational. Attie...was growing up. Soon she wouldn’t need her mother at all.

That thought chased Frisk into a restless sleep, filled with skeletons and shadowy figures and children who danced away into the darkness, never to be found again.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Talking to your daughter fills you with DETERMINATION. [*SAVE] [CONTINUE]

Frisk is okay! And alive! Missing a week, yes, but doing pretty well. But what happened during that week? And how will Sans's dedication to his task of watching Attie affect his relationship with Attie's mother? He did send an average of 22 texts per day. That's an impressive one-way conversation for a guy who isn't exactly a social butterfly.

Since my internet being was stupid, I'm posting this much later than I expected to. That means the extras for this story won't be up on Tumblr until tomorrow, because I require sleep in order to be ready for work in the morning. Crazy, I know. Still, I apologize for the delay.

Thank you so much to everyone who has left comments and kudos; you are my inspiration.
In Which Dinner is Delivered

Chapter Summary

...To a very hungry and very confused ambassador.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans scrubbed at his bowl, giving a little grin when the cheese sauce came off without too much fuss. That had been his mistake the first time they made mac ‘n cheese: he’d left the dishes for later, and had wound up getting in trouble with Boss when the sauce took too long to scrub off.

As long as he didn’t think about how much work he was doing it wasn’t too bad, really. Attie usually followed him around everywhere and insisted on helping, so he didn’t have to do everything himself, either.

“Dry,” he said, handing the bowl off to his helper. She took it from him, tongue between her teeth, and carefully rubbed a dry dish towel over it.

“Done!” she declared, placing it with over-exaggerated care on top of a small stack of other dishes. “Can I wash the silverware?”

“Sure,” he said. He peeled off his rubber gloves (he’d found out the hard way that food, water, and bones don’t mix well) and handed them over. Attie swapped her towel for the gloves and carefully put them on, stretching her tiny fingers as far as she could into them.

The gloves went up to her elbows and were far too big for her hands, but there wasn’t much she could do to hurt the silverware. She awkwardly fished a pair of spoons out of the dishwater, rubbed a dishcloth over them until the cheese sauce was gone, and tried to hand them to Sans.

“Rinse ‘em off,” he reminded her.

“Oh! Right!” She turned on the water and rinsed them off before handing them back to him for drying.

The little girl bounced impatiently on her toes, splattering tiny droplets of soap water across the kitchen, as Sans put the dry dishes away. He looked at her for a long moment, tilting his head from one side to the other and tapping his jawbone.

“Ooookay. I guess we’re done.”

“YAY!!!” The gloves flew off and landed on the floor halfway across the kitchen. He retrieved them and tossed them back into the sink, listening for the telltale pitter-patter of feet that announced Attie’s presence.

She slid precariously into the dining room and scrambled onto the chair she’d claimed as hers, phone clutched in both hands. “I can call Mommy now, right?”

“Sure. But only for a few minutes; you’ve got more homework to do.”
“But it’s Friiiiday!”

“Yeah, ‘n that means it’s the last day of school for the week. But remember what Undie said: if you don’t finish on Friiiiday, you have to do schoolwork on Saaaaaturday.”

Attie groaned in a way Sans knew wasn’t truly serious and dialled. Her little feet kicked back and forth as she waited.

Her entire body crumpled after a moment, and Sans felt his own mood sink as well. “She’s not picking up,” Attie said.

“She’s probably asleep again. She needs lots of rest, remember?”

“Yeah. But she was awake and talking to me earlier!”

“She sure was, but she might be tired again. Remember when you woke up in the middle of the night a few days ago? You went back to sleep after, right?”

“Yes, but that was the middle of the night. It’s the middle of the day right now. Why is Mommy sleeping so much in the middle of the day?”

“You tell me.”

She sighed. “Because she’s still sick after what the assassin lady did and she needs to sleep so she can heal up all nice and healthy. That’s what you told me. I still think she would heal faster if she was awake, though.”

“Do ya, now.”

“Yes. Also, then I could go see her.”

“Well, let’s finish up the last bit o’ this schoolwork. I’ll text her like always so she doesn’t worry; I’m sure she’ll text or call or somethin’ when she wakes up. Okay?”

“Okaaaaay.”

The rest of the school day dragged by for Sans. It wasn’t so much that the schoolwork was boring (at least, not any more than usual), but that Attie seemed to be entirely unable to focus. Sans could empathize. It seemed like a small eternity before she dragged out her paper and pencils and began to half-heartedly scribble some kind of picture for her art project.

Then Sans’s phone vibrated.

“Is it Mommy?” Attie asked, nearly tripping over her chair in her mad dash for Sans’s seat at the table.

“Woah - hang on there, kid! Gimme a sec.” They both stared intently at the phone as the messaging app loaded. Sure enough, the screen read:

Frisky Dreamer 4:45 PM
Sorry I fell asleep. Didn’t realize I was so tired.

The noise Attie made had his skull ringing. “Okay, okay, settle down, alright?”

“MY MOMMY’S AWAKE!!!!”
“Yeah. Now do you wanna text her back or should I?”

“We both can!”

Sans sighed.

You 4:49 PM
No problem I know the feeling

Frisky Dreamer 4:51 PM
Is Attie there? Is she okay?
Oh. Never mind. She just texted me.

“Mommy wants to know if we’re both okay!” Attie said. “Can I take a picture of you?”

Sans hesitated. He was absolutely certain that Frisk didn’t want anything to do with him. “Uh, why don’t I just take a picture of you and send it to her?”

The kid rolled her eyes. “Because she asked about both of us. That means we have to send a picture of both of us.”

“Well, you’re outta luck; my phone doesn’t have one of those little cameras on the front.”

“That’s okay! Mine does!” She began scrambling up onto Sans’s chair, hampered by the fact that she couldn’t do much to move the skeleton currently sitting in it.

With a low grumble, Sans scooted away from the table far enough to lift Attie into his lap. “There ya go. Oh, wait a sec.” The kid’s pigtails were looking a little lopsided. He took the hair ties out and carefully re-gathered her hair, making sure not to pull too hard or get the fine strands caught in his phalanges. “There. Now you’re extra cute. Happy?”

“Not yet; I still need to take the picture. Smile and say ‘cheese!’”

“’M always smiling, kid.”

She laughed. “I mean a real smile.”

“You think you can tell the difference?”

“I know I can. So smile really big like you’re happy, okay?”

He let his mouth fall into his default wide grin as the flash went off. Attie hummed and examined the picture, frowning.

“That’s not a real smile, Mr. Sans. We have to try again.”

She did try again. Several times, in fact. Finally, she came up with a picture that she declared “okay, but not great” and scooted off his lap to send it to her mother.

Sans caught a glimpse of it and felt his face growing a little red. He really wasn’t photogenic, being a literal skeleton and all. He wasn’t even sure what was going on with his mouth in that picture; it looked like he was scowling as much as smiling.

Frisky Dreamer 5:00 PM
Not a fan of the camera?
You 5:00 PM
SO
Can we come visit today or r u 2 tired?

Frisky Dreamer 5:02 PM
You can come. Might want to check with the guards, though.
Oh, and why do you use textspeak only half the time? I know you can text in full sentences.

You 5:07
2 much werk
Work

Frisky Dreamer 5:09 PM
...Right.
By the way, can I ask a favor?

You 5:11 PM
Whats it worth 2 u?

Frisky Dreamer 5:12 PM
Add it to my tab.
Can you bring some food in?
Probably need to sneak it in; the docs don’t like outside food.

You 5:15 PM
Uh sure
Whaddaya want?

Frisky Dreamer 5:17 PM
Something not too rich or smelly. I’d go for plain bread at this rate.

You 5:19 PM
I’ll see what i can do

He looked through the cupboards. Undyne and Boss had gone on a competitive shopping trip a few days ago so there were groceries, but once again it was an eclectic mix of gourmet noodles and random ingredients he was pretty sure they had selected for the packaging more than the contents. With a grin on his face, he grabbed a few things from the cupboard and a leftover container from the fridge, then stuck them in his inventory.

“Hey, kid, wanna head out?”

There was a pause, then Attie looked up from her phone. “What?”

“Wanna go see your mom?”

“Yes!” She dashed off to get ready.

A few minutes later they appeared outside Ebott Medical Pavilion, hand in hand. Attie had adapted well to teleporting over the past week; she barely seemed to notice it anymore.

“You remember the way to your mom’s room?”

She thought for a moment. “I think so?”
“Go ahead and take us there.”

“But what if I get lost?”

“I’ll be right here; I can ‘port us back outside if we get really stuck. Okay?”

“...Okay.”

She did pretty well, all things considered. She went down the wrong hallway after leaving the elevator (it was confusing; the hallways really did all look the same) but she was resourceful enough to correct herself after realizing that the room numbers were wrong. Finally, they arrived at the new and improved security checkpoint outside Frisk’s room.

“I did it!” she said, bouncing on her toes.

“Yeah. Great job.”

“Can I give your ID to Mr. Lesser Dog?”

Sans eyed the aforementioned canine, who was wagging his tail hard enough to knock them both over. “Uh, sure. Just watch for the-”

Thump.

“...You okay there?”

Attie picked herself back up and dusted off the knees of her jeans. “I’m fine!”

Lesser Dog whined and leaned over, realizing that he’d hurt one of the few humans he liked. Attie smiled and reached up on her tiptoes to give him a brief and gentle scratch behind the ears.

Beside him, Doggo shifted in what looked like a nicotine deprivation dance, but Sans knew better.

“Can I pet you too, Mr. Doggo?” the kid asked.

He thought it over for a moment, then leaned over with a long sigh. Attie giggled. Sans knew that Doggo wanted to be pet just as much as Lesser Dog did, he just would rather give up dog treats for life than admit it.

Literally. The question had, actually, come up once or twice.

*Bone friend and little pup good boys,* Lesser Dog woofed, handing Sans back his ID. *Can go in to see sick momma puppy.*

“Thanks, LD,” Sans said, giving the dog a scratch under his chin. He snorted when the dog’s neck extended a little. “You keep a good watch, yeah?”

*Lesser Dog and packmate Doggo will watch very good! Dogs are good boys! Won’t let anyone smelly past! More pets?*

“Maybe on the way out, pal,” he said, steering a giggling Attie into the hospital room. He didn’t want a repeat of what happened the last time they’d seen Lesser Dog on duty; it had taken hours to get his neck back to a reasonable length, and he’d been growling and snapping at everyone in sight the whole time.

Frisk, thankfully, was still awake. “Made it past the attack dogs?” she asked with a smirk.
“Yyyup!” Attie said, bouncing on her toes.

“C’mere, you.”

Attie ran at her mother, skidding to a stop just short of the hospital bed before gingerly crawling onto it to give her a hug. “I missed you,” she mumbled into Frisk's shoulder.

“I missed you too, baby boo.”

They sat like that for a moment, and Sans shifted awkwardly. He felt like he was intruding.

There was a funny rumbling noise, and Frisk’s face started to turn pink. Sans grinned; after living with a little human shadow for a week and a half, he knew that sound.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Maybe. A little.”

Sans dug into his inventory and, with an elaborate flourish, pulled out a plastic fork and…

“...Tuna?” Frisk’s voice was almost a full octave higher than normal. She looked a little sick. “I ask for something bland and low-profile, and you bring me...a can of tuna.”

“I cod not pass up the opportunaty.”

Attie wiggled off the bed and stomped over to her babysitter. “Mr. Sans, stop being silly with my mommy!”

“Heh. Sorry, kid.” He patted her right between her pigtails, then put the can back in his inventory. After a moment of poking around, he withdrew the leftover container. “Wanna show your mom what you made?”

“Yes!” She grabbed the container and the fork he offered her and presented them both to her mother. “We made macncheese, like I told you. I think this is our best one yet! We had to go to the store last night for extra cheese because Mr. Boss doesn’t like to buy cheese, so it’s suuuper fresh!”

“The only bread we had in the house was hot dog buns,” he explained, shrugging.

Frisk gave him a long look, carefully opened the container, and grinned. “It looks great, Attie. Thank you so much!”

“You’re so welcome! Mr. Sans helped, too. You should say ‘thank you so much’ to him, too.”

Sans opened his mouth to say that it really wasn’t necessary, but-

“Thank you so much, Sans.”

“Heh. It’s nothin’.”

“I mean it. Thank you, Sans. Thank you for everything. Including, of course, the mac and cheese.”

His eye sockets met hers, and he felt a jolt of...something. Surprise, definitely. Frisk...she hated him, right? Heck, he deserved it! But...she looked really, genuinely grateful. When was the last time someone (besides Attie) had thanked him? “I...uh, you’re welcome.”
They both looked away at the same time.

“Mommy?” Attie piped up. “Why is your face all pink like you’re embarrassed?”

“Um…”

“Oh! Do you wanna kiss Mr. Sans?”

“ATLAS HOPE DREAMURR!”

Sans pulled the hood of his jacket up, knowing full well it wasn’t nearly as effective as he hoped. This kid…

“Is that a ‘no?’ Undie says the blushing thing means you’re embarrassed or you want to kiss someone.”

Frisk gave a noise that sounded like a growl and took a few quick bites of the mac ‘n cheese. “This is really great,” she said, a touch too loudly. “You’ve gotten really good at this, Attie.”

The kid gave a devious little smile. “Thanks,” she said, patting her mother’s hand. “It’s okay. You don’t have to talk about it until you’re ready.”

Sans coughed. “Attie, listen to yer mom.”

“But she didn’t tell me to do anything!”

“Didn’t you ask me not to tease ‘er? She’s still sick. Stop bein’ so…” he waved a hand in the general direction of the woman he was not looking at. “…silly.”

Attie sighed. “Okay. Sorry, Mommy, for embarrassing you. Sorry to you also, Mr. Sans.”

“Tsokay.”

“You’re forgiven.” Frisk dug into the mac ‘n cheese with the air of someone desperately hungry, but wanting to make her food last.

“We can make more,” Attie said, watching her mother closely. “I didn’t know your tummy was so empty or we could have made some more before we left. Right, Mr. Sans?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“But we didn’t know. Mr. Sans said they would probably give you some sugar ‘n stuff through the bag thingies, and that you would get enough water that way, but I don’t think that counts as eating for real.”

Frisk hummed. “I agree. This is much more pleasant.”

Sans coughed into his hand. “So why’d you want us to bring ya food? Don’t they feed you here?”

“Well…yes. It’s just…hmm.” She took a few more bites, eyes narrowed in thought. “Do you know my doctor? Dr. Ray?”

“Yeah…I’ve met ‘im.”

“What’s your opinion?”
He looked at her, not sure where this was going. Why was she being so...friendly? Was this a trap? Frisk could switch from friendly to aggressive very quickly when she wanted to. “I. Uh. He’s a doctor?”

“Your honest opinion. I think...well, I want to hear what you think of him.”

He sighed. “I think the guy’s an asshole. He doesn’t think much of other folks; doesn’t seem like it’s aimed at monsters particularly, though. He just doesn’t like people he thinks are...hmm. Lesser than him? ‘M not sure how he decides that - education level, maybe? - but if you don’t fit his criteria, he thinks you’re basically worthless.

“He might not be aware of it. He certainly thinks he’s right all - or at least most - of the time, and being aware of such a huge character flaw would puncture his ego. He probably just thinks that he knows better than other people, and they should listen to him because he’s a doctor. He seems alright at his job for all that; it’s probably a point of pride to do well.”

Frisk nodded. “Do you think he’s a liar? What reason would someone like him have to lie?”

“Depends on the lie.” He studied her face. She looked...wary. What did all this have to do with food? Had someone threatened her? At least she could defend herself, probably better than he could...now that she was conscious, anyways. “He might lie to protect himself or his job. If he made a mistake, he might want to cover it up. Doesn’t strike me as the type to lie for someone else, though, unless it suited his purposes or helped him somehow.”

“So you don’t think he’s malicious.”

“Not unless you’re a threat to him. What he’d do if he thought you were tryin’ to hurt his reputation or upstage him...’m not sure. But in general? Like I said, guy’s an asshole. ‘Course, I haven’t had any huge soul-searching conversations with the guy. Could be completely wrong ‘bout him.”

“I don’t think so.” She laid her fork into the empty container firmly. “Sans, I haven’t given you enough credit. You really are a lot more observant than you think. I appreciate your input on this.”

He shuffled his feet a little. It wasn’t...it was just how he was, how he’d survived so long on his own with a little brother to look after, not anything special. “Tch...’ts nothin’. What’s all this about? And what’s it got to do with food?”

“Dr. Ray was acting strangely when I first woke up this afternoon. I pressed the call button and he walked in instead of one of the nurses. He told me that I’d been unconscious due to an accidental overdose. He followed that up by being weirdly insistent that I eat, and...call me paranoid, but I didn’t trust him not to ‘accidentally’ add something extra to my food.”

His grip on his magic slid a little, and he felt his eye burn. An accident? Attie had been separated from her mother, unsure of whether she’d live or die...and the doctor was calling it an accident??

He couldn’t believe it. And from the look on Frisk’s face, she didn’t believe it either.

“Calm down,” she said. “There’s nothing we can do now. He said that the matter was being handled, and that it wouldn’t happen again. Of course, then he tried to take my phone.”

“What? Why would he do that?”

“Consider this. If you’re right, and he was trying to protect himself - his reputation, his job,
whatever - he wouldn’t want me communicating with people who knew the truth, at least until he could run damage control. Make sure he got his story straight. I assume someone *does* know the truth?"

“Uh, yeah. Attie ‘n I were just leavin’ when you were...attacked.”

“Wait, so I *was* attacked?”

“You don’t remember?”

“No!”

Attie gave a wet sniffle. “It was really scary. There was an assassin lady and somehow she got past the dogs, but she was wearing the nurse clothes. Sponges?”

“Scrubs,” he corrected.

“Right. She was wearing the nurse scrubs, but she was on your bed and you were trying to get her off of you and she put some kind of poison medicine into your bags. Then she started fighting Mr. Sans even though you told him not to fight her, but I think that’s okay because he didn’t let me get hurt. Not even a little bit!”

Frisk looked at her daughter for a long moment, gripping her arms like she wasn’t sure the kid was really in one piece. Then she looked over at Sans. “Maybe you should start at the beginning.”

He did. He explained how he’d tried to contact Frisk on the day of the incident, but how she’d been unresponsive most of the day and asleep when they’d arrived. He told her how they’d been kicked out of the room by the nurse. He considered telling her that the nurse had made him uneasy, but...he didn’t want to make it sound like he was some kind of *hero*.

Instead, he played up Attie’s concerns: how she’d been worried, and had insisted they go back to the room. The actual fight he described as factually as he could: the order of events, what he knew of the nurse’s movements, and the arrival of the dogs.

Frisk nodded along, looking a little overwhelmed. “I...don’t remember any of that,” she said, finally. “I remembered weird flashes of emotion, but nothing detailed or reliable. I mostly just recall...burning?” She rubbed her arm above where the needles were taped to her arm.

“I believe it. Alphys ‘n some of the human doctors are still tryin’ to figure out everything that was in that bag the nurse hooked you up to. They think she may’ve dosed you with something over time as well, but gotten impatient when it didn’t work as fast as she wanted.”

“She *was* a nurse, then.”

“Yeah. ‘M kinda out of the loop, but I did a little digging on my own. She was employed by the hospital as of three weeks ago, at least.”

“How do you know?”

“The local paper ran a story about the hospital and she was one of the nurses interviewed. Gave her name as Graciela Lira, though I heard rumors that might not be her real name. ‘Ts hard to tell; she apparently was a foster kid at some point, so her paper trail’s a bit hard to follow. No one expected her to go after *you*, though.”

“Interesting. Let me guess: she’s a monster specialist.”
“Worse. Monster pediatric specialist.”

Frisk gripped Attie a little tighter. “And...they still let her practice here?”

“Well, not right now. Attie 'n I saw the whole thing, as did Alphys’s security cameras; whatever the hospital told Undyne, she pushed back hard with evidence. She’s got the nurse - whatever her name is - in custody.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want someone like that around children.”

This was definitely outside Sans’s comfort zone. It was almost like they were allies or something. Granted, Frisk was probably still high on painkillers, but she wasn’t being nearly as aggressive as she usually was, even after his little joke earlier with the can of tuna.

Was this how Ambassador Frisk Dreemurr treated people she could actually stand to be around? If so, he wanted to-

-DEFINITELY not do anything, especially after Attie’s stupid comments earlier.

He coughed. “Well, hopefully you, uh, don’t go through that again. The Guard’ll hold her until you feel better so you can interrogate her yourself.”

“...The human government is just letting this happen?”

“Yeah, not sure why. My guess is they want something from us; your mom’s been in meetings all day, every day.”

It was traditional among monsters for the victim of an attack (or, in the case of a child, the victim’s guardian) to be the chief interrogator when bringing the attacker to justice. The human government tended to frown on the practice, what with the ‘innocent until proven guilty’ thing they believed in, but they had been strangely accommodating in this case. Either there was something about this lady that would’ve been dragged to light in a human court system or they were using her as a bargaining chip to get what they wanted out of Tori. The Queen of Monsters was notoriously vindictive towards anyone who harmed her family, to the point where it clouded her judgement.

“...Sans?”

“Hmm? Sorry. Just...thinkin’.”

“Anything important?”

It still sat oddly with him that Frisk - of all people - was asking for his input. “Just...theories. Can’t prove anything. It just...nothing about this seems right. The timing of the attack, the way it was planned, the person who carried it out...and now what that doctor told you; it doesn’t add up.”

“If it was planned, it was done quickly. Very quickly. Either that, or...well.”

Or she didn’t really have appendicitis. It was unlikely, from what he read, but still. Either situation was worrying. Was it easier to induce a medical condition or to organize an assassination attempt in a matter of days?

“Are you done with grown-up talk?” Attie asked, wiggling impatiently on the bed.

Frisk laughed. “For now. Sorry.”

“Can I show you my pictures? I made you a whole lot while you were sleeping.”
“Sure! Show me what you’ve got.”

It took almost a full hour for Attie to go through all the pictures she’d made. Most of them, to Sans’s eternal embarrassment, featured him in some way. And of course, each one had a story.

“This is Mr. Sans when he accidentally put his shirt on inside out and backwards because he was so sleepy. You can see the tag on the front. Oh! And this is when we went to the park with Undie, and Mr. Sans tried to swing and fell off. That’s why he’s on the ground. I thought he was hurt, but he wasn’t. This one is Mr. Sans and I drinking our juice after training. It tastes reeeeally bad…”

And so on.

“All of them look wonderful,” Frisk said after Attie had arranged the pictures back into a stack. “I’m glad you’re doing well.”

“Me too. I was worried I’d miss you a lot, and I did, but it was also fun doing schoolwork with Mr. Sans. He knows a lot ‘bout science! Do you think he can help me with my science sometimes after you’re better?”

Sans tensed. As busy as he’d been, he’d almost forgotten that Attie wasn’t going to be in his life forever. Frisk was going to heal, then she’d take her daughter home. And he’d probably never see either of them again outside official functions. After all, he’d seen Attie only two or three times in seven years, not including the time she’d been living with him.

All Frisk said was, “We’ll see.”

Which, in his experience, pretty much meant “no.”

It didn’t matter, he told himself as Attie chattered on about something. He hadn’t even wanted to watch the kid in the first place. He’d be glad when she was gone.

Well, he amended, not glad. A week ago he would’ve been happy to see her go; but after so many nights of worry and nightmares, and so many days of tutoring and kitchen accidents, he’d maybe gotten a little...attached.

That really wasn’t good, under the circumstances.

A knock on the door interrupted Attie’s story of something Undyne had done the other morning. He knew the routine well enough to know who it was. “Time to go,” he said, collecting the empty container from dinner. “Say good-bye to your mom.”

Attie sighed. “Good-bye, Mommy.”

“Good-bye, Attie,” her mother responded. “I’ll miss you.”

“I know. But I’ll be back tomorrow!”

There was a strange look on Frisk’s face when they left; something resigned and a little sad. She hid it well, but Sans was a master of reading expressions.

He just didn’t know what to make of it.

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact of the chapter: Getting up in the morning gets easier when you have something to get out of bed for.

Sorry that I'm a bit behind schedule at the moment! It's been a bit of a rough weekend for me. It's not an excuse, but I should be back on track tomorrow.

Thank you so much to everyone who has left kudos and comments; your support and feedback keep me going!
In Which Leaves are Crunched

Chapter Summary

...And Sans starts to realize just how lost he is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturdays, Sans decided, were breathtakingly beautiful when caring for Attie. Not quite as good as Sundays, but amazing all the same.

He was laying on his bare mattress, eye sockets barely open, looking at his phone.

“9:05,” said his phone screen.

Beautiful.

He didn’t have to go to his hot dog stand (or any of his other jobs) because he was watching Attie. Boss and Undyne did something with the Royal Guard on Saturday mornings, so they were both occupied. Attie hadn’t had a nightmare, so she was still asleep in Boss’s room. It was just Sans, his phone, and a lazy Saturday morning.

He quickly crushed the thought. He had too much bad karma for it to last-

Ding!

Aaaand there it was. He reluctantly tapped the message notification on his phone.

Bundle of Joy 9:06 AM
Hello Mistr Sans!!!!!!!!!!!!

You 9:07 AM
Hey kid

Bundle of Joy 9:08 AM
Are you awake?????

You 9:11 AM
Nah

Bundle of Joy 9:12 AM
Okay!!!!!!

There was a long pause. A few reckless birds that hadn’t flown south for the winter were making some kind of racket outside the window, but he decided to consider it a comforting reminder of being on the surface rather than an annoyance. His eye sockets had started to slide shut again when-

Tap tap tap tap tap tap TAPTAP
He curled in on himself, willing away the sound of tiny approaching footsteps from the hallway.

The door to his room creaked open slowly. _Painfully_ slowly. He could _feel_ Attie’s eyes on him, but she insisted on opening the door one millimeter at a time. It was an amateur mistake; there was no way he could see the door in his current position so sudden movements weren’t a concern, and opening the door slowly made the squeaking long, loud, and obvious. She would’ve been better off opening it quickly, hiding, then sneaking in through the open door when his guard was down.

The urge to tell her all this faded after a moment. He just hoped she’d go away.

“I know you’re not really sleeping, Mr. Sans,” she whispered. She whispered like Boss did: loud enough to raise dust.

He stayed quiet.

“Okay. I’m gonna go make a peanut butter waffle like you showed me yesterday.”

“Yer not allowed t’use th’ toaster without a grown-up,” he grumbled.

“Then you should probably come and help me?”

“Not the way it works.”

He knew she was pouting.

“Hey. Why don’tcha give me...hmm...another five minutes, then we can make breakfast.”

She made a funny noise that sounded excited, but he wasn’t curious enough to figure out how she did it. “Okay! I’ll wait back in Mr. Papyrus’ s room!”

The pitter-patter of little feet disappeared back down the hallway. Sans noticed that she’d left his bedroom door pointedly open.

Exactly four minutes and fifty-two seconds later, he rolled himself off the mattress. He landed on the floor next to it with a dull _thump_ and a clatter of bones, and gingerly pushed himself upright. A beeping noise from down the hallway made him grin; he’d shown Attie how to use the timer function on her phone for cooking purposes, and she used it for everything she could now.

The kid herself appeared a moment later. “Are you awake?” she asked, cocking her head at him.

“Ugh, yeah.”

“Great!!” She bounced on her toes.

“...Let’s go make you peanut butter waffles.”

“Okay!”

Sans still felt half asleep, but he managed to get a pair of waffles out of the back of the freezer (where he’d hidden them from Boss) and into the toaster. Attie had perched herself on the counter with the peanut butter, eating it by the spoonful.

“Attie, I’m pretty sure your mom wouldn’t be happy about you doin’ that.”

“But you’re not my mom.”
“...Fair enough. But you hafta eat all your breakfast.”

“Okay!”

He started a pot of coffee. The human internet was a wonderful source of information: he’d been able to find clear instructions (with pictures!!) on how to operate and clean Boss’s fancy coffee machine within seconds of searching for it. Coffee went a long way towards improving Undyne’s mood, so he’d been getting up a few minutes early to start a pot before she showed up each morning. It was a self-defense measure. The idea of having a whole pot of coffee to himself, instead of sharing it with a fish-faced Royal Guard, was tantalizing.

“Can I try some coffee?” Attie asked. She’d started asking every morning after Undyne praised the benefits of caffeine once too many.

Sans responded as he always did: “Gotta ask your mom. Besides, I think you’re crazy enough as it is.”

“Okay!”

The waffles popped out of the toaster and Sans put them on plates. (He would have happily eaten his right out of the toaster, but Attie insisted on the plates.) His little helper spread peanut butter on each waffle, then handed one to Sans.

“Bone appetite,” she said, face solemn.

“And to you.” He saluted her with his waffle.

He finished his quickly and texted Frisk a picture of Attie, slightly melted peanut butter oozing through her fingers and onto her plate. A good four texts in, he remembered that Frisk was actually conscious now and reading her messages, and by then he’d already rambled on about peanut butter and waffles longer than any self-respecting monster would admit to.

The advantage of having the house to himself was that Attie could take her time getting dressed. He’d figured out last Saturday that she liked wearing strange color combinations that even he - a complete fashion heathen - knew looked bad together. He indulged her for most of the morning until she got tired of changing clothes and wound up in a red and blue striped shirt and jeans.

“How do you want your hair?” he asked, once she was dressed and bouncing around the living room.

Attie was prepared for this question. She pulled her phone out of the pocket of her jeans, opened a web page, and showed it to him. “I want this one! ...Please.”

“That looks a little complicated. Sure you wanna sit still that long?”

“Yyyyyep!”

“Okay, but you asked for it.”

The hairstyle was the most intricate one she’d asked for yet. The picture showed a little girl’s hair braided along her hairline in a kind of circlet shape. ‘Crown braid,’ the instructions called it.

Sans gave a mental shrug. It didn’t look like any crown he’d ever seen, but humans were strange. It took half an hour of pulled hair and false starts, but he managed to get Attie’s hair woven and
pinned into the desired shape. “Done,” he said, collapsing back onto the couch.

“Thank you!” she yelled over her shoulder as she dashed down the hallway to the bathroom. A squeal told him that she’d seen herself in the bathroom mirror and either really liked his work...or was very upset. He was willing to bet on the former, but there had been that incident with the French braid...

The smile on her face when she finally reappeared was contagious. “Thank you, Mr. Sans!” she said. “I look really beautiful like a real princess!”

“Oh...aren’t you kinda a princess? I know your mom is, ‘cause her parents are the king ‘n queen.”

She tilted her head to the side. “I don’t know. I don’t get to go to the big parties and everything, and no one calls me ‘your highness’ or anything like Mommy. Do you really think I’m a princess?”

“You sure look like one today.”

“Yay!! Oh, should I wear a dress, then?”

“Woah, hey, didn’t you...uh...just get dressed? Yeah, you wouldn’t wanna get your pretty hair all messed up changing clothes again, right?”

“Okaaaaay. But will you at least take a picture and show Mommy?”

“Sure, kid. I do every day, don’t I?”

Once the picture and nothing else was sent to Frisk, they sat down on the couch with their phones. “Okay,” he said. “Same as last week. You pick a place and show it to me, and I’ll check with Undyne.”

Attie hummed happily in agreement and got to work. After a moment, she handed her phone over. “This one?”

The map app on her phone was displaying a huge wildlife refuge at the base of Mt. Ebott, winding between monster territory and the city itself like a fat slug. “That’s...I’m not sure that counts as a park?”

“Look at the name!”

He did. ‘Mt. Ebott National Park,’ the phone said. “Well. Huh. I’ll check. But you know there won’t be other kids at this “park,” right?”

She shrugged. “Most kids are weenies. The kids at the embassy are okay, but mostly other kids don’t want to play tag or wrestling or capture the human. And they cry if you push them over, and then parents get mad. The kids at the embassy don’t cry when they fall over; they just get back up and keep playing. ‘Cept the really little kids, but no one pushes them over on purpose because we’re s’posed to look after the little kids.”

“...Welp, okay.”

He texted Undyne about going to the park Attie had picked. She texted back almost instantly with a slew of questions, but since she gave her approval he ignored those.

“Undie says we can go. She’s busy, but since there shouldn’t be anyone else there we don’t need
an escort. We just can’t leave trash and stuff behind, okay?”

“Okay!”

“Now. What do you want for picnic lunch?”

Attie wanted peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. That was fine. What threw a wrench in the plan was her desire to *make* the sandwiches, and despite how much she practiced spreading peanut butter on bread it still seemed to get *everywhere*. Sans resigned himself to following her around with a wet dishcloth cleaning up as she splattered peanut butter and dripped jelly across the kitchen.

“Done!” she finally declared, brandishing two lopsided sandwiches at the skeleton hovering behind her.

“Woah-hey! Watch where you swing those!”

“Sorry!”

The sandwiches were wrapped and packed in Sans’s inventory, along with a bag of apple wedges (the easiest snack aside from potato chips, which Boss didn’t allow in the house), a water bottle for Attie, and as many napkins as he could fit. By some cruel quirk of the inventory system, each napkin took up an entire inventory slot. He reluctantly removed his trombone and stashed it in his room to make space for the blanket Attie wanted to sit on. Hopefully they’d be back before Boss, anyways.

“Okay, kid. You ready to go?”

“Yyyyyep!”

“A’ight, then. C’mere.” Once Attie was secure, Sans concentrated on the map he’d been shown of Mt. Ebott National Park and took a step forward.

Long-dead leaves crunched under his sneakers, and Attie wiggled almost out of his hold. He kept his fingers tangled in the kid’s jacket as he evaluated his surroundings. Only leafless trees, interspersed with the rare pine, surrounded their clearing. They were alone.

Seasonally-challenged birds aside, Sans considered the area he lived in to be pretty quiet. Sure, the neighbors and the traffic from the nearby highway made *some* noise, but it was a background hum he didn’t notice anymore.

He certainly noticed the lack of it, standing there in the middle of the wilderness. He could barely hear *any* sounds, actually. He was tempted to check his hearing, but the sound of Attie’s feet kicking up leaves confirmed that he wasn’t falling down just yet; it was just unnaturally silent. There were no birds or other animals that he could hear. The slight breeze ruffled no leaves. A few dry branches clattered somewhere in the distance, sounding a little like bones, but it was distant and gone in seconds.

“Can I make a leaf pile and jump in it?” Attie asked, wiggling harder.

“Eh, sure. But stay where I can see-”

She had already bounded off. Sans followed at a much lazier pace. He gave her about an hour - an hour and a half *tops* - before she wore herself out and needed to eat to refuel.
Eventually, Attie collapsed into her giant pile of leaves and declared herself hungry.

“Oh thank the stars,” Sans groaned from under the neighboring pile. She’d buried him - he checked his phone - an hour ago when he’d gotten tired of helping her gather handfuls of leaves into piles. It was surprisingly cozy…

...until little hands began shoving the leaf pile off him. “C’mon!” their owner said. “It’s lunchtime!”

He spread out the blanket and handed Attie her sandwich, the apple slices, and all the napkins. He wasn’t really an outdoors-y person, not like some monsters he could name, but he had to admit that there was something kinda pretty about this place she had picked. The trees were varied enough that it wasn’t a copy of the pine forest near Snowdin, but the atmosphere reminded him a little of his old home. He’d hidden in that forest often enough to have an appreciation for trees in general.

“The trees are really pretty even without their leaves,” Attia said between bites. “Did you take pictures and send them to my mommy?”

“I took pictures, but I don’t have reception out here. Gotta get back to town to send them to your mom.”

“Okay.”

They sat in silence for a bit longer. Sans gathered up the trash in a bag and found - to his amusement - that once categorized in such a way, he was able to store all the leftover sandwich and apple bags and dirty napkins in a single inventory slot. Magic was weird.

“I wish we could stay out here forever and ever,” the little girl said, sounding half-asleep.

“Oh? Wouldn’t you miss your mom?”

“She could come out and live here with us too. She has to go to work, though.”

“What about, uh, school? And friends?”

“I do school from books, silly! And I could visit my friends. They all work at the embassy, at least sometimes, ‘cept you.”

It was a strange thing, that tingling that spread outwards from his soul at those words. When was the last time he’d had a friend? Had he...? Sure, it was just a little human kid, but...well, it made him regret not being a little nicer to the kid’s mom a few years back. Had Frisk been this carefree and innocent once upon a time? Had monsters taken that from her? Had...?

Had he...

“Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah, Attie?”

“Am I your friend too?”

He leaned back onto his leaf pile and closed his eye sockets. “Yeah, kid. You’re my friend too.”

She sighed and laid down beside him, her fingertips tapping on his in a strange rhythm. For once, he didn’t mind the contact. He knew with absolute clarity in that moment that he would willingly die for this obnoxious, precocious, brilliant little girl. Laughter bubbled in his empty chest at the
thought. There was no reason to suspect that they would ever be in a situation where that would be necessary, or would actually do any good, but that was the first thing that came to mind.

She was going back to her mother as soon as Frisk was released from the hospital, probably in a few days. Granted, it could be a few weeks with how bad Frisk’s luck had been lately, but the fact remained that eventually Attie would go home. She would go home to her mother and move on with her life. Would she even remember him? She’d only known him for a week and a half. Sans himself couldn’t remember much from when he was seven years old, and considering what he’d gone through at that age it both relieved and frightened him.

Attie would forget him, someday.

“Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re thinking too hard again.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s okay! I just don’t want you to be sad.”

“Uh, thanks.”

She hummed a little. “Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we go back to your house now and call Mommy?”

“Sure, if she’s awake.”

He hauled himself upright and held out a hand. She took it without hesitation, smiling so wide her eyes squinted.

She...trusted him. It was almost inconceivable, after less than two weeks, but she did.

Sans knew with a sinking feeling that he’d betray that trust somehow. The thought made his shortcut a little more bumpy than usual, but instead of complaining Attie immediately demanded that he always make his shortcuts that “fun.”

“...No promises. Now don’t you have someone to call?”

She squealed and ran off to locate her phone.

You 2:14 PM
*12 picture messages sent
Picnic at mt ebott

There was no response. Was Frisk alright? He caught himself worrying that she hadn’t eaten anything since the mac ‘n cheese, but forced the thought away. She wasn’t his problem.

...But what if she had eaten something, and it had been poisoned? Humans were weirdly susceptible to poison. He curled his twitching fingers into a fist to keep them from drumming on the table. This kid and her mom were going to be the death of him.
“Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah, Attie?”

“I can’t call Mommy. She isn’t picking up her phone.”

“Yeah, she hasn’t texted me back, either. Whaddaya wanna do while we wait for her?”

She thought hard for a long moment. Sans braced himself for anything. “Friend” or not, this kid had a downright disturbing sense of humor sometimes.

“How about we play…TEA PARTY!”

Disturbing, indeed.

By the time Undyne vaulted dramatically into the apartment several hours later, Sans had resigned himself to his fate. He’d been forced to ‘dress up’ (in nice clothes, which meant he had to do laundry, which Attie - the little goblin - absolutely loved) and was wearing his single formal outfit: a button-down white shirt and black slacks. Attie had changed into a flowery skirt and top, and had insisted on finding an old bedsheet to use as a tablecloth for the skeleton brothers’ stained dining room table.

What made all that worth it was the look on Undyne’s face when she realized they had raided her ‘secret’ tea stash. Coffee may have been her one true love, but tea came in a close second. Boss kept some on hand for emergencies.

“What the eff?!” she screamed, waving a spear wildly. “SANS, WHY?!”

“Attie wanted to play tea party.”

“Yeah!” the girl piped up, taking a tiny sip from her coffee mug. She’d been pretty upset to find that the skeleton household didn’t have any proper teacups.

Undyne looked more conflicted than Sans had ever seen her. On the one hand, she was known to be extremely protective over her property, which automatically included all caffeinated beverages within arm’s reach. (And she had a surprisingly long reach.) On the other...she had a proven fondness for Attie, and Attie was obviously happy.

To his surprise, fondness for the little human won out...this time.

“Well you’d better pour me a cup, nerd,” she said, dispensing her spear and throwing herself into the chair across from Sans.

Attie giggled and dashed into the kitchen for another mug.

“So,” the captain said, eyeing him, “You’re still alive.”

“You saw me literally yesterday morning. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s an ongoing surprise. I thought the kid’d run you ragged after a day or two, especially after you collapsed the first time you worked out with us.”

He shrugged. It was a fair assessment.

“You’re not half bad at this, y’know.”
“What, at tea parties? You know me, Cap’n; never one to pass up the pretty dresses.”

Undyne took a point of HP off him with her swat. “Don’t be cheeky with me. No; I mean you’re good with Attie. It’s downright weird.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” he drawled, winking.

Whatever she was going to say was interrupted by Attie prancing back into the dining room with another mug of tea balanced carefully between her hands. It was made more complicated by the fact that she was wearing oven mitts. Sans braced himself to mitigate the almost-inevitable splash of hot liquid, but she managed to get the mug onto the table in front of Undyne without incident.

“Thanks,” Undyne said after a gulp of piping hot tea. “You’re becoming a real chef. You’ll give Papyrus ’n me a run for our money someday, huh?”

“Yyyup! I’ll beat you both, and then Mr. Papyrus will have to be nice!”

“He’s still gettin’ mad at you?”

“No, but he yells a lot. Mr. Sans usually sends me to a different room when it starts so it doesn’t hurt my ears.”

“...Well, as long as you’re both okay.”

All three sipped their tea in silence for a moment.

“WAIT!” Undyne slammed her mug down on the table with a firm thud. “I almost forgot! Attie! Your mom’s getting out of the hospital!”

“YAY! ...When?”

“Tomorrow or Monday, we think. We’re waiting on some tests; don’t think they’ll let her go tonight, someone’s being a real ass about things. It’s stupid. Now that she’s awake she can pretty much take care of herself.”

“Wow! That’s great! Then I can visit her at my house instead of the stinky hospital!” She hummed to herself a little.

Sans shared a glance with Undyne. “Hey, uh, kid...don’t you wanna go home?”

“Yep! But Mommy’s still sick, right? I always have a babysitter when Mommy’s sick or I’m sick, so we don’t get germs all over each other.”

“I don’t think germs are a big concern here. Appendicitis isn’t contagious.”

“...What?”

“Nevermind.” He turned back to Undyne. “So, uh, when’s the kid goin’ home?”

“We’ll see. Frisk might need some time to get settled. We’ll arrange something.” She sighed, downing the rest of her tea. “Well, it’s been great, nerds. Gotta go check on the Dogi; Dogaressa might be going into labor.”

She left in a whirlwind of color and sound only marginally less intense than the one she arrived in.

“Mr. Sans?”
“Yeah, kid?”

“What’s a labor?”

“Work. In this context, it means...uh, it means she’s having her puppies. Y’know how they’re inside her right now?”

“Yeah…”

“Well, they’ve gotta come out.”

“Oh.” She pondered this for a long moment. “Does that mean they’re getting born? Mrs. Dogaressa promised that I could pet them when they get born.”

“Uh, sure, kid.”

There was a blessed moment of silence, before:

“Mr. Sans?”

“...Yeah?”

“How did the puppies get inside Mrs. Dogaressa?”

“Just...finish your tea.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans and Attie have trained each other well.

Apologies if anyone got a notification about a chapter being posted last night. I tried a few times to post this - I had everything edited and converted to AO3-friendly format, and the preview looked great - but when I tried to post 90% of my chapter went missing. Turns out AO3 doesn't like emojis, and in the original version of this chapter Attie's texts at the beginning included a bunch of random emojis. Because she's a 7-year-old with a phone. This version will (hopefully) stay up properly, but please let me know if there are any formatting issues.

And now I'm off to respond to all my lovely comments from the past few days. Thank you all for your support! It means the world to me! Stay safe and happy, and we'll try this again over the weekend!
In Which Nothing Good Lasts Forever

Chapter Summary

...Which is unfortunate, because we have so many good things to lose.

Chapter Notes

Please be advised that this chapter includes non-graphic descriptions of domestic abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Frisky Dreamer 7:47 PM
Sorry, I was doing my discharge tests and exams.
Thanks for the pictures. It looks like Attie had a great time.

You 8:01 PM
U leaving the hospital or going to school?
And no problem

Sans glanced over to where Attie was munching on apple slices, dressed in her favorite pajamas with kittens on them. Boss had a late meeting to either guard or attend - he hadn’t quite caught which - and had sent a flurry of texts demanding that he and Attie delay dinner.

He wasn’t going to let Attie starve waiting for Boss’s bony ass, so he was keeping her placated with snacks. She was finishing up the last apple in the house.

“You okay?” he asked. “Still hungry?”

“Not really.”

“You still gonna eat whatever Boss makes when he gets back?”

“Maybe…”

He didn’t blame her. A few times they’d had to perform some pretty slick maneuvers to dispose of food that just wasn’t fit for human consumption.

“If I check it for you and it’s not poisonous, will you try it?”

“Okay. But if it’s really gross I’m gonna spit it out.”

“Fair enough.”

It hadn’t come to that yet, but there was a first time for everything.

His phone vibrated again.
Is everything okay? Attie just assured me that dinner was “probably not going to be poisonous.” I thought you guys were getting better at making food? Then again, I’ve only seen your lunch experiments.

Boss makes dinner
Sometimes it isn’t exactly edible
But we try
If it’s not ill find something else for the kid

Good luck.

Who needed luck when Grillby’s was an option? They were both in pyjamas, but if they put jackets on no one would notice. Probably. “Say, Attie, wanna punt and-”

The door slammed open to reveal a dripping - and very angry - Boss.

“SANS, I REQUIRE ABSORBENT MATERIALS!” he shrieked, hopping awkwardly from foot to foot in the doorway, as if that would prevent water from soaking into the carpet.

Sans took off down the hallway and returned with every bath towel they owned. (Except the one he kept in reserve for Attie; that one was off limits.) He dragged Boss inside, closed the door, and sent Attie to her room before beginning to unbuckle Boss’s armor.

It was an awkward and difficult process that reminded Sans of getting a young Papyrus ready for bed when he was...oh, six or seven. There was a lot of wiggling, a lot of yelling, and far more leather straps than a self-respecting monster would ever voluntarily wear.

Eventually they managed to extricate Boss from his battle armor, which lay abandoned and wrapped in towels. He’d had worn his leather armor; the DEF wasn’t as high as his metal set, and it absorbed water and weighed him down, but at least it wouldn’t rust.

“It’s been a while since we’ve done this,” Boss said, looking uncharacteristically introspective.

“What, dig you out of your battle armor? Yeah, it’s been a few years. Why’d you come home wearing it, anyways?”

“I was late for supper. I am capable of extricating myself, you know.”

“Yeah, but I’m your big bro. It’s-”

“UGH! DON’T REMIND ME!”

“Yeah, yeah, sorry.”

“You’d better be. It’s shameful.”

Sans collected the armor and began patting it dry. He’d need to rub it down with an oil and vinegar mix after it dried out to keep it conditioned, but at least it wasn’t dripping anymore.

“Why don’t you start dinner, Boss? Me ‘n the kid’ll look after your-”

He was cut off when one large, skeletal hand on the back of his neck forced him face-first into the wall.
threadbare carpet. He tensed, but didn’t move; he didn’t want to worsen this sudden change of attitude.

After a long moment, Boss leaned in. “Do NOT tell me what to do. WHO IS IN CHARGE IN THIS HOUSE??”

“Y-you are, Boss.”

“YES. And DON’T forget it! I MAKE THE RULES! I DECIDE WHO COMES AND GOES! AND I, FOR ONE, AM SICK OF HEARING YOU GO ON AND ON ABOUT THAT...THAT CHILD!”

“But-”

“SILENCE! Ever since you brought her home, it has been ‘kid’ this and ‘kid’ that. WELL, I’VE HAD ENOUGH!”

“She’s-”

The fist that thudded into the carpet an inch from his skull probably would have dusted him if it had connected, so Sans stayed quiet.

“Enough. Go to the basement and stand in your corner. I will make dinner AND take care of my battle armor, which I am FULLY CAPABLE of maintaining ON MY OWN!”

He shuddered in relief when Boss let him up and stalked into the kitchen. With a single glance back at the hallway that led to his room, he staggered out of the apartment.

The basement of their apartment building was split among all the residents. Each housing unit had a storage area that they could lock - magically or otherwise - however they wanted. Most used it for storage. Boss used it as a punishment.

With Sans’s HP as low as it was, a beatdown wasn’t really an option. Unfortunately for him, Boss had dug through human military manuals and found another method of enforcing his displeasure: stress positions. Telling him to stand in ‘his corner’ was an old favorite.

The corner in question had a piece of wood laid diagonally on the floor across it. It had been a wooden pole or something similar before Boss had chopped it in half lengthwise, leaving one flat side and one rounded side. Sans was expected to stand on this bareboned as it dug into the arch of his feet until...well, whenever Boss came down to get him. If Boss had been supervising he would’ve been expected to hold his arms out or something to make holding the position harder, so thank the stars for small miracles.

It didn’t hurt much at first, though he knew from experience that an hour or so would change that dramatically. No; the really torturous part about this was the sheer boredom. Sans hated being bored, which probably would’ve surprised some folks who saw him at his hot dog stand or his sentry post. While he was working, there were things to catch his attention: people, wildlife, even the slow-moving clouds. If all else failed, he had his phone. Or he could nap.

There was very little in the basement: a camera, some tools, and a few other pieces of equipment for when Boss was feeling...creative, but Sans couldn’t even see any of that from his position. There were no windows and very little sound. It was cold; even skeletons would freeze at some point, and he was definitely starting to feel the lack of heat. He couldn’t eat, or drink, or sleep. In short, there was very little to take Sans’s mind off his worry.
Why had Boss reacted like that? He’d been the one to force Sans to watch the kid, after all.

A horrible thought came to mind. What if Boss was going after Attie? Should he...should he leave? Boss could check on him at any time through the camera. He hadn’t avoided a punishment in a long time, not since right after they moved to the Surface, and he’d been locked out of the apartment without food, money, or his jacket for a full week. It had been back when all monsters were required to wear magic blockers, so he couldn’t even teleport back in overnight.

Boss...would probably dust him if he tried something like that again.

With shaking fingers, he slipped his phone out of his jacket pocket, angling his body to block most of the motion from the camera’s view. Hopefully Boss was cooking and not watching the camera feed. He’d definitely be strung up if he was caught, but Sans needed to know.

You 8:23 PM
Kid u ok?

To his relief, a response came immediately.

Bundle of Joy 8:24 PM
Were are you?

You 8:25 PM
In the basement
Like the time last week remember?
Just stay very quiet

Bundle of Joy 8:28 PM
Im scared.
I think Mr Papirus is going to come down the hallway and hurt me.
Why do I have to sleep in his rom?

You 8:35 PM
Weve talked about this
Boss’s room is the only free room
And its less messy than mine

Bundle of Joy 8:39 PM
Can I stay in your room until your back?
Im rilly scared!!!!!!!!!!!!

He leaned his forehead against the wall, ignoring the start of a twinge in his feet.

You 8:41 PM
Sure
Be quiet
And lock the door
Turn the little knobby thing to the right

Bundle of Joy 8:46 PM
I dont seen the little nobby thing!

You 8:50 PM
Dont be scared
Look by the doorknob
Its the little thing above the doorknob
It should be tilted a little to the left
Tilt it to the right
But make sure the door is closed tight first

_Bundle of Joy 9:01 PM_
I got it!!!!
Are you sure you kant come back up stayrs?

_You 9:05 PM_
Im sure
Ill be up when i can

After double-checking that there were no more texts from Frisk, he turned his phone off and shoved it into his jacket pocket.

His feet were starting to draw a bit more of his attention. He breathed deeply - the motion soothing, even if it wasn’t necessary - and braced himself on the corner of the little room to take some of his weight. Then he let himself drift.

There was a certain state of mind that got him through Boss’s punishments, a combination of clearing his mind and filling it with static. It didn’t always work, but at least it kept him from feeling the full effects. As uncomfortable as it was to put himself into such a state - lack of awareness made him feel vulnerable - it was close enough to giving up that it felt almost natural.

Sometime later, Sans heard the telltale tapping of Boss’s boots on the basement stairs. He barely had time to straighten his posture when the door slammed open.

“SANS! ENOUGH LOLLYGAGGING! Get back upstairs THIS INSTANT and find that insufferable child! I haven’t heard from her in HOURS!”

Sans gingerly settled himself back on solid ground. It felt great not to be standing on that piece of wood anymore, but now any movement hurt. “I’ll find her, Boss.”

“Good. You are allowed supper as well before coming back down here to finish your punishment.”

He was willing to bet that Boss didn’t even remember what the punishment was supposed to be for, but arguing only made things worse. He grunted and slouched up the stairs, doing his best to put as little pressure as he could onto his feet.

...It was a failed endeavor.

He made a show of checking the kitchen, the living room, and Boss’s room before Boss got bored and wandered off. Once he was out of earshot, Sans tapped on his own bedroom door. “Coast is clear, kid,” he said.

There were a few moments of scrambling as Attie tried to open the door, failed, then struggled with the deadbolt. Eventually the door creaked open.

“Hi,” she said in a very small voice, one hand tangled in her pyjama top over her stomach. “I’m really hungry and I thought you left me all alone here.”

“Nah. Sorry. I got sent to the basement, remember?”
“But I haven’t ever seen your basement.”

“That’s because it’s dark and cold. Uh, not really a nice place for a little kid.”

“Then why do you go down there?”

“You sayin’ I’m a little kid?”

She laughed, quietly.

“Nah. Does your mom ever send you to your room?”

“Um...sometimes? But only if I beat someone up. Mommy says I need to use my words and shouldn’t punch people in the face just because they say something mean.”

“Your mom’s pretty smart. But yeah, it’s kinda like that. The room thing, I mean; not the punching people thing.”

The little girl looked disappointed that he hadn’t been starting fights in his basement.

“Aaaaanyways, wanna head to dinner? I smell Boss’s lasagna, and that’s not somethin’ you wanna miss. It’s one of, like, five things he actually remembers to cook properly, and that’s because your mom taught him how.”

“Oooh! I like Mommy’s lasagna!”

The lasagna had just come out of the oven, unfortunately, so Boss shooed them away until it cooled a little. They wound up on the creaky old couch with their phones out.

“I wanna try this one sometime,” Attie whispered, tilting her phone screen towards Sans. On the screen was a pasta and chicken dish with a cream sauce.

“Hmm...trying to keep milk around long enough to make the sauce is gonna be a challenge.”

“We could put a sign on the milk that says ‘do not drink?’ Or a sign that says the milk is really something else?”

“Huh. That...actually might work. What else could milk be, though?”

“...A trap?”

He narrowed his eye sockets at her. “You remind me of him, sometimes.”

“DO NOT SCOFF, SMALL CHILD,” Boss said, walking up behind the couch and looming imposingly over them. “THAT IS THE HIGHEST COMPLIMENT THAT SHALL EVER BE GIVEN TO YOU, EVEN IF IT IS SEVERELY UNDESERVED!”

Attie looked from Sans to Boss and back again, her brow knitted in confusion. “Okay? Thanks?”

“YOU SHOULD BE GRATEFUL! NOW COME JOIN ME FOR LASAGNA OF SUPREME VICTORY! IT IS A DELICACY LACED WITH LAYERS OF THE FINEST OF NOODLES, THE SAUCIEST OF SAUCES, THE TANGIEST OF CHEESES…”

Sans ignored the monologue and served three pieces of the lasagna, doing his best to cut Boss’s piece perfectly square with none of the outer edge. He was pretty sure he succeeded; Boss only paused long enough to glance down briefly at his plate before continuing with his diatribe on the
quality of his lasagna ingredients.

There was enough steam coming off Attie’s piece to worry him, so he mimed waving steam away from her plate before he put it in front of her. She nodded.

Unfortunately, she either didn’t get the message or decided to disregard it, because Boss’s speech - which had gone from ingredients to prep work - was interrupted by the sound of a little human child spitting out his masterpiece.

“ARE YOU INSULTING MY COOKING, HUMAN?”

Shit. “B-Boss, she-”

“I DIDN’T ASK YOU, SANS.”

He shifted, but stood his ground. He could feel his knees shaking. “It’s too hot for her, Boss.”

The taller skeleton’s eye sockets narrowed. “SO YOU FAILED IN YOUR DUTY AS A CARETAKER BY FEEDING HER FOOD OUTSIDE HER ACCEPTABLE TEMPERATURE RANGE?”

“He warned me it was hot,” Attie piped up.

“SO YOU WERE NOT PAYING ATTENTION TO MY AWESOME AND TERRIBLE DESCRIPTION OF MY CULINARY SKILLS??”

Sans sighed. There was no winning this argument. “Sorry, Boss.”

“FOR THAT, YOU CAN GO BACK TO THE BASEMENT WITHOUT SUPPER!”

He nodded. He’d sneak food later or something.

“That’s not fair,” the little girl said before he could take a step towards the door. “And Mr. Sans is a much better cook than you are, anyways!”

There was a long pause. Sans felt his life flashing before his eye sockets. He was coming to the strange conclusion that Boss was... jealous of Attie. It didn’t make sense to him - it was like comparing froggits to whimsums - but Boss could be very irrational at times.

This...surpassed jealousy. Boss was furious, so furious he was just sitting at the table bending his fork and grinding his teeth. The expression on his face was enough to make most people of any species run for their lives.

Sans was no exception. “I’m, uh, gonna put her to bed.”

“Do so. Then come down to the basement.”

He retreated to Boss’s room.

“I don’t wanna sleep in here,” Attie said. “I’d rather sleep in your room, even if it’s smelly.”

“You sure? I think your mom’d kill me if she found out I let you sleep somewhere so messy.”

“Please? I’m scared of Mr. Papyrus.”

“Okay, okay.”
He’d thrown his bedsheets in the wash when they were doing laundry earlier (more on a whim than anything else; they rarely made it onto his mattress in the first place) so at least she had something clean to sleep on. He awkwardly shuffled his pile of dirty laundry into the closet. It helped the smell, but not by much.

“You’re okay?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. She’d grabbed the skull-print pillow from Boss’s room and was curled around it in a tight ball.

“You want me to lock the door?”

“No thanks. I might have to get up and go potty.”

“Okay. Oh!” He reached into his inventory and brought out a plate of lasagna with a single bite missing. “Here. Grabbed this for ya. Just in case you’re hungry, or somethin’. Don’t worry ‘bout makin’ a mess…”

Attie leaned over and gave him a hug that creaked his ribs. “Thanks, Mr. Sans,” she said to his slightly stained pyjama shirt. “You’re my favorite friend besides Mommy and maybe Undie.”

He snorted. “Just maybe?”

“Undie does training with me, but she doesn’t like to play very much.”

“Fair enough. Good night, Attie.”

“G’night, Mr. Sans. Love you!”

He didn’t know what to say to that. “I, uh, you…too?”

His head was spinning all the way down to the basement, where a quietly furious Boss was waiting.

“Stand in your corner,” he said, voice quiet but quivering slightly. “Arms straight out from your sides.”

Sans assumed the required position.

“You will remain there, silently, until I am finished with my superior dinner AND with treating my armor. I have the camera and microphone turned on. If I look in and see that you have so much as shifted, you will do this instead of eating supper every night until you can do it right. Am I understood?

“Y-yeah, sure.”

“AM I UNDERSTOOD?”

“Yes, Boss!”

For a long moment, Sans was sure that Boss was going to lash out at him - physically, verbally, magically, something. He didn’t. Instead, he left the storage closet, turning off the light as he went.

Sans closed his eyes against the darkness and tried to bury himself somewhere deep in his mind where he wouldn’t have to think.
Time seemed to jump, then crawl. The walls - tantalizingly far away in the darkness - felt like they were closing in. It was awful. It felt like being back in the Underground, which was probably why Boss liked this particular punishment.

It could have been minutes or days (though the rational part of his mind estimated that it had been a couple hours) before Boss came back downstairs. He was wearing his full plate armor, which was odd; he usually only wore that when meeting important people or making a public appearance with Undyne. His leather set was probably still wet. He also smelled faintly of car fumes. Had Boss gone somewhere, Sans wondered? He felt a little cheated; if he’d known Boss wasn’t even in the building, he could have relaxed at some point.

Then his mental block fell and he found himself choking on the agony shooting through his feet, shoulders, elbows. He tried to keep his feet still and arms out; as bad as it was, any movement seemed worse.

But Boss was dragging him upstairs by the back of his shirt, so movement was inevitable. He tried to block the pain out again, tried to go back to that small, quiet, dark place inside himself where nothing could touch him, but everything was bright and loud and it hurt-

Boss said something and shoved him at the closed door to his room. He felt his hand turn the knob as if from a distance, as if it was a prosthetic and not really his own bones. It was all he could do to stumble inside his room and over to his mattress, where he collapsed. He felt his eye sockets sliding closed, exhaustion finally catching up.

He was missing something, he was sure of it…

*Attie!*

The thought sent him upright, even as waves of pain radiated from his arms and feet. It was duller than he expected, and he glanced out his window.

It was morning. Wait...*that* wasn’t right…? How had he fallen asleep?

His mind was still a little fuzzy from exhaustion (what time *had* he gotten to bed the night before? He hadn’t looked at his phone…) and from the attempts at dissociation. He was sure Attie should be with him, but he couldn’t-

Oh, right, he had let her sleep in his bed because she was terrified of Boss. Sans looked around. Attie was...nowhere to be found?

Had she gotten up already? But no, he couldn’t remember seeing her the night before. Surely, he would’ve noticed if there was a little human girl there; if nothing else, she would have wanted to make sure he was okay.

Boss had probably moved her back to his room, then. Sans needed to...he slowly sat up and crawled over to where his jacket lay, feeling in the pockets for his phone.

Nothing.

He’d probably left it downstairs. Hopefully he hadn’t left it in the basement; that would be a disaster and a half.

He unlatched his door, lifted it on its hinge, and pulled it open. The door swung with the barest whisper of a creak. Perfect. He made his way down the hallway to Boss’s room, only to find it trapped.
...The hell?  Boss wouldn’t actually put Attie in danger, right?  Even if he was jealous of the her, he did like Frisk.  Frisk, Undyne, Toriel and probably Asgore would roast Boss’s bones if they found out he’d done something to the kid.

Sans shuffled into the living room warily.  “Boss?” he called.  He could see his brother’s form on the couch, phalanges fiddling with something, but if Boss was still grumpy about the affront to his cooking he wouldn’t respond.  “Attie?”  He couldn’t hear the kid.  The apartment felt unnaturally quiet.

Something flew at Sans’s face, and he barely caught it before it hit him square in the eye socket.  His phone…?

“She’s gone,” Boss said, getting up from the couch slowly.  “Ambassador Dreemurr was discharged from the hospital last night, so she can watch the child.  You are no longer required.”

“Wh-what?”

“Your shift at that despicable hot dog stand begins in ten minutes.  You had better hurry.  No teleporting around the humans.  If I hear that you’re slacking off, even for something as absurd as hot dogs, there will be... consequences.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“And I expect you to be at your sentry post tonight.  You have nearly two weeks’ worth of missed shifts to make up; you will be on time for once.  Lesser Dog will give you your revised schedule during shift change.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Boss stood in the living room, staring down at Sans as if he expected some other response.  Sans didn’t know what else to say.  This was...this was too quick.  He couldn’t process.  Less than 24 hours ago, he and Attie had been playing out in sun-drenched leaves.  She’d called him a friend.

Now...this?

“WELL?”

“I’m gone!”  He dashed out the door, pausing only to grab his tennis shoes and coat.  He crouched on the front step of their apartment building and slipped the shoes on, tucking the laces in instead of actually tying them.  It seemed like too much work.

Coat in hand, he traced the familiar path back to the park and his hot dog stand.  He was halfway there before his feet and arms protested again, but physical pain seemed insignificant just then.

Attie...was gone?

Attie was home?

That was good, right?  All those days of...of frustration and interrupted sleep were over.  He could finally get back to his miserable life.

It was strange, that feeling of loss.  He thought he’d be relieved that he no longer had to worry about missing a check-in.  He hadn’t realized before that moment that constantly updating Frisk on her daughter had brought some semblance of structure to his day.  It felt like a small lifetime that he’d lived to the tempo of a seven-year-old human’s school and sleep and meal schedule, violently enforced by Undyne, instead of the two weeks or so it really had been.
He was...going to *miss* Attie. Not just the activity she brought to his normally lackadaisical life, but just... *her*. Her presence. Her smile. Her constant, nagging questions. The little giggle she gave when she was taunting someone.

Just...Attie.

At least, he thought as he slid into his seat at the hot dog stand and pulled out his phone, he still had…

...Wait…

...Where had all his pictures gone?

He searched through his phone, then searched again. Every picture he’d taken after the day he’d first brought Attie to his apartment had been deleted. Frisk’s and Attie’s numbers had been deleted. The hundreds of messages he’d sent and received had been deleted. The charges he’d racked up for going over his data plan were still there, but everything else was...gone.

A wave of anger surged through him. He knew who had to be responsible.

*Boss.*

Wasn’t it enough that he’d taken Attie away without even the chance to say goodbye? Wasn’t it enough that life had been, once again, turned upside down on Boss’s whim?

He just *had* to steal everything Sans had left of Attie, didn’t he. He really must have been *jealous* of the kid. And for what? Sans had dedicated his life to Boss; he’d taken care of Attie for all of two weeks.

“So you *are* here,” Boss said, appearing as if thought had summoned him.

Sans growled and drew the asshole into an encounter, too furious to worry about little things like self-preservation.

“Are you MAD? Stop this AT ONCE! You’ll draw attention to us! This is neither the time nor the place for one of your little tantrums!”

*The Great and Terrible Papyrus is sparing you.*

Sans shook away the unease that trembled in the back of his mind at the thought of defying Boss. “How *dare* you! How *dare* you mess with me like this!” He swung at Boss with a conjured bone and missed entirely. The movement sent waves of pain down both of his arms, which he tried to push aside. Boss hadn’t even moved.

“You are getting emotional. I thought better of you. Is this the monster the ambassador entrusted her daughter to for the past few weeks? I’m surprised the child was even alive after so long in your care.”

*The Great and Terrible Papyrus is taunting you.*

Sans growled. “You - why would you *do* this to me? Why would you mess with my phone like that?” Another swing, this one aimed at Boss’s femur. It was blocked almost lazily by a large bone that appeared in Boss’s own hand. For the first time in his life, he was tempted to show his brother what he could *really* do.
“Oh? THAT’S what this is about? Some pictures? A few text messages? The ambassador’s daughter is too important a secret to be entrusted to the likes of you. You can’t even keep track of your phone half the time. Why should we risk the safety of a member of the Royal Family just so you can, what, hold images of her daughter over the ambassador’s head as blackmail? Is that what you’re after?”

* Smells like bones.

“What? I would never hurt Attie - haven’t I proven that? Why does everyone think I want to use the kid against Frisk?”

“Because that’s what you’ve ALWAYS done! The only things you care about are sleep, food, and aggravating those around you for your own amusement! LOOK at yourself, Sans! You’ve been wearing the same clothes for three days! Do you think Frisk wants a filthy pest like you in her daughter’s life?”

* The Great and Terrible Papyrus is disgusted with you.

Sans ended the combat, will to fight gone, and felt through his numbness that Boss had done the same. He stared at the grass.

“…A filthy pest like you…”

“Thank you, Sans. Thank you for everything...”

“I love you, Mr. Sans!”

Of course it was a lie.

Of course.

He’d never been worth anything at all, had he.

A hand grabbed the front of Sans’s collar and dragged him eye socket-to-eye socket with Boss. He dangled limp, avoiding the other’s glare. He didn’t even care about the agonizing pressure it put on his vertebrae; he deserved whatever Boss dished out. He’d thought Boss was jealous of Attie, but clearly he was just looking out for the kid.

Like Sans should have done.

“You will sell your greasy food. You will go to your sentry shifts. And I will never - never - hear Atlas’s name from you again.

“Is. That. Clear?”

“C-crystal, Boss.”

“We will discuss your punishment when you get home from your sentry shift.” Boss dropped him and stalked away, back towards the entrance to the park.

Sans sat, slumped against the side of the hot dog stand. He couldn’t feel the passage of time. He was too busy trying to hold onto memories of Attie - Attie playing, Attie smiling, Attie eating, Attie doing homework, Attie...uh, Attie…

He cursed his poor memory. How was he going to remember her when he could barely remember to get himself up in the morning?
Did he even have a right to? She wasn’t his kid. He had nothing to do with her, really. He was just a stupid bum who’d started to feel responsible for her with no real justification.

A knock sounded against the wooden counter of the hot dog stand, and Sans tensed.

“Hey, man,” said a rather annoyed teenager, peering around the side of the stand. “You sellin’ hot dogs today or what?”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: vinegar and olive oil is a homemade leather conditioner, but I've seen some claims that olive oil will damage leather over time. Substituting a few drops of lemon essential oil prevents this. However, given that essential oil isn't exactly a household item, I don't think much of it would've fallen into the Underground; thus, the skeleton brothers use olive oil and vinegar - both of which they probably would've been able to find - to treat Papyrus’s leather armor.

So! Are we still enjoying ourselves? I’ve seen some stories where an evil Underfell Papyrus beats Sans up, but the little guy doesn't really have health to spare. So that put me in the awkward situation of trying to find ways to hurt someone that probably wouldn't invoke intent. Stress positions really are used in the military as a punishment, so Papyrus could feasibly have come across them: there are many different kinds, but they all involve holding an uncomfortable position for extended periods of time. And I now have all of this in my search history. Between this story and Bullet Hell, I'm probably on some kind of watch list.

Sans would probably rather stand in his corner for a lot longer if it would bring Attie back, though.

On that note: if you or a loved one is the victim of any kind of abuse, please get help. Tell a friend or family member, inform your teacher at school or the HR department at work, report it to your local police department. Here are some US resources, and some international resources as well. But please, don't be like Sans. He is not a very good role model in this area.

Well, stop by in a few days for more! There's a lot going on. Papyrus and Sans, Frisk and Attie, and even Undyne and Toriel: what will these new developments bring for them? Anyone have any guesses? I mean, I know what's going to happen, but if I drop spoilers I'll lose my time machine license. Thoughts?
In Which Much is Explained

Chapter Summary

...And Undyne plays therapist.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Weeks passed in a similar manner. Though Sans didn’t breathe a word about Attie, or Frisk, or his missing phone data, he thought about them almost constantly. It seemed like Attie and Frisk took up almost as much of his life in their absence as they had when they were actually part of it.

He made sure not to walk past Frisk’s house on his way to and from the park where he sold hot dogs. It was pretty far out of his way, actually, especially on sore feet. He couldn’t even remember why he’d started using that route in the first place. It was much easier to take the straight path through the heavily monster-populated part of town, even if he could feel eyes on him.

The feeling was particularly strong one evening as he was walking home from his sentry shift. He was almost sure someone was following him, but that could’ve been a trick of his half-mad mind. Pulling double shifts on top of selling hot dogs was utterly exhausting, even though - or, perhaps, because - it had been such a boring job lately. Sure, sentries were technically supposed to keep humans out of Mount Ebott and dangerous monsters in, but few people were stupid or reckless enough to try crossing either way. Every once in a while some dumb human teenagers would dare each other to go up the mountain, but they were easily turned back. Sans hadn’t had that pleasure in...well, since long before he met Attie.

He glanced over his shoulder. His shadow didn’t duck behind the building fast enough, and he caught a glimpse. A single figure, humanoid, face covered by the hood of a jacket. Dark clothing. Short, around his height. Slender. The faint outline of a rounded chest.

...What was a lone woman doing out at night in this part of town? And tailing him, no less?

She was following him relatively closely, which was...not as annoying as Sans thought it would be. At least if someone got stupid and jumped her he’d be close enough to hear the ruckus and intervene if things got out of hand. He resolutely ignored the idea that he wouldn’t have cared before Attie came into his life.

The woman stalked him past Grillby’s, and he resisted the urge to stop in for a drink. Grillbz would report to Boss if there was enough money in it for him, and Boss was still unusually cranky. The last thing Sans wanted was a repeat of his punishment from the day Attie disappeared; that had been nearly a month ago, and he still felt a little sore when he stood for long periods of time.

Sighing to himself, Sans cut back towards his apartment building. Hopefully she’d just confront him and get it over with.

He held the door to the building open with one foot and shifted, watching the woman tense from the corner of his eye socket. “You comin’ in or what?”
She sidled along the building, a little unsteadily, and put a hand on the door. As she passed him, the yellow glow of the bare bulb in the hallway highlighted the curves of a familiar jaw and cheekbone.

“F-Frisk?”

Frisk held a finger to her lips and stepped into the hallway, letting him close the door behind her. She made a motion with her hand that took Sans a moment to decipher.


He lead the way up to the apartment he and Boss shared, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

“SANS! You sack of SHIT, you’re LATE!”

Sans dodged Boss’s attack on instinct, then felt his very soul stutter. Frisk had been behind him. He turned to look, but thankfully she stood…

...well, mostly unharmed. She had a scratch on her left arm from wrist to elbow, skin and a thin line of blood showing through the tear in her jacket. Considering the trajectory of Boss’s attack and the fact that she’d been caught by surprise in the narrow hallway, it was impressive.

“Kiddo, let’s-”

“Oh, Ambassador Dreamurr! I apologize. My underling-” Boss kicked Sans out of the doorway-

“Neglected to tell me that we would be having such a prestigious visitor in our humble home. Are you harmed?”

Sans heard Frisk confirm that she was mostly alright. The attack had been aimed at him, after all; it hadn’t been very damaging. She accepted Boss’s invitation to enter the apartment, but not his offer of dinner.

“SANS, GET OUT. The Ambassador has something to discuss with me.”

He nodded and limped towards the door. Grillby’s it was, then.

“Actually,” Frisk said, not moving from her spot in the doorway, “I need to speak with Sans for a moment.” She glanced between him and Boss, amusement evident in the slight quirk of her eyebrow; Sans could only imagine what their expressions looked like. “Alone, please, Papyrus.”

“Yes, your highness.” Boss saluted and strode back towards his bedroom, shooting a very nasty glare at Sans as he went.

Screw this up, and you’re dust, the glare said.

Sans gulped audibly. Message received.

Then they were alone.

“Do you, uh, want to sit...down?”

“Alright,” Frisk responded. She headed not towards the couch that he’d been vaguely indicating but towards the dining room table. He shrugged lightly and followed her.

They sat across from each other for a long moment, neither speaking. He wasn’t sure how to break the silence without violating Boss’s rules, so he waited for Frisk to start first.
“I owe you,” she said, finally. Her voice was low, like she didn’t want Boss to overhear.

“Uh…”

“What do you want?” The question held a lot less animosity than Sans had been expecting, especially considering how completely she’d cut him out of her life.

“I…” I want to see Attie again, he yearned to say. Just for a moment. Just to make sure she’s okay, and doing her Science and Math, and eating properly; nothin’ weird. Just to say goodbye.

“Do you think Frisk wants a filthy pest like you in her daughter’s life?”

“I don’t…want anything,” he said, fiddling with his fingers.

“What? Nothing?”

“Nope. Never...uh, never did.”

And it was true. From the day he’d found Attie in the bushes outside her house he hadn’t even considered collecting payment for his actions. It showed a stunning lack of self-preservation on his part - Frisk was a powerful woman, and her favor could get him nearly anything he could ever want - but he was just...tired.

“Then, why-”

“I just didn’t want a kid to watch her mom die, okay?” He took a deep, needless breath, fighting to keep his voice down. “I don’t…I don’t know where this idea came from that I want you dead’n a ditch somewhere, but that’s…not true, okay? We…you ’n me, we haven’t always gotten along, sure, but I don’t get along with most folks. Hell, I don’t get along with Grillbz half the time. Doesn’t mean I’m waitin’ in a back alley for him, tryin’ to extort money off ’im whenever he’s having a bad day.”

“Okay, but you’ve done so much for us. For me.” Frisk’s hands pressed to the dingy tabletop without regard for the stains that littered its surface as she leaned towards him. “Even if you didn’t help us so you could have something to hold over my head, isn’t there something you want? I…I can talk to Papyrus about getting your shifts reduced, at least? It isn’t fair that you should have to make up time when you were helping me. It’s not like you were slacking off.”

“It’s fine. Someone’s gotta watch the old place.” And most of the other sentries had families, which was more of a consideration now than Sans wanted to admit.

“Okay, well…are you sure? Is there anything you want? Anything at all?”

A picture, he wanted to say. You and Attie, smiling. Just one - just something to remember the both of you by. Something to remind me that you aren’t just the pretty painted statue I always see on TV.

“The ambassador’s daughter is too important a secret to be entrusted to the likes of you.”

He shook the thought away. “Just…be happy, okay? And make sure the kid does her Science.” He couldn’t meet her eyes.

Weak, whispered his mind. This is why you should stay away from them. You’ll only drag them down to your level.
Frisk nodded, slowly, looking almost as lost as he felt. “I...okay, I will.”

He gestured towards her ripped sleeve. “And get your mom to patch that up, okay?”

“Alright,” she said. She fidgeted with the ragged edge, apparently not bothered by the wound. “Are...are you okay as well?”

“Fine.”

“Are you sure? It looked like Papyrus kicked you-”

“I’m fine. Really.”

Silence dragged on until it felt uncomfortable, then a few seconds past that. Frisk watched him carefully the entire time, as if trying to peek into his soul by way of his eye sockets, but he forced all emotion down, down and away from her prying eyes. There was no need for her to worry about scum like him. “Well, then. I suppose...I’d better leave you be, then. And truly, Sans, thank you.”

He nodded. He didn’t think he could form words around all the things he couldn’t say.

“I’ll...see myself out. If he asks, please let Papyrus know that I’m not happy with him; he’ll understand what it means.” She stood, pushed in her chair, and was gone before Sans could think of a reason for her to stay.

He retreated to his room before Boss realized Frisk had left. Passing on a message like that would probably cause a screaming fit, and he didn’t think he could handle another screaming fit. His bones felt strangely fragile, like he was about to fall apart at any moment. And what was there to keep him together? Sans had just given up his best chance of getting everything he wanted, and he couldn’t tell if it was the right thing to do or the worst mistake of his life.

For most of the night he just sat on the edge of his mattress, face in his hands, and tried to ignore the tears that streamed down his cheekbones.

The next morning, he felt awful. He hadn’t slept much at all but managed to drag himself out of bed on sheer force of habit. The apartment seemed too quiet, just like it had every day for the past month. How long would it take for him to get used to normalcy again?

Boss was out, as usual. It abruptly occurred to Sans that he didn’t know what day it was. He’d been counting days, sure (it had been 26 days since he’d last seen Attie), and it should be possible to figure out the day of the week from that, but he didn’t think his foggy mind would stand up to that much math.

He shuffled around in various pairs of dirty pants until he found his phone, only to find that it was dead.

Great.

It took only a moment to plug it in on his way to the kitchen, but even that felt like too much work. It was surprisingly early; if he actually needed to go to his hot dog stand, he wouldn’t even have to run. He stared for a long moment at the coffee machine, debating whether it was worth the effort. On the one hand, it was even more work and he felt exhausted. On the other hand...caffeine.

Deciding that caffeine was necessary to keep him going through the day, Sans dumped water and coffee grounds into the machine and started it up.
The door to his apartment slammed open just as the final drips of coffee were disappearing into the carafe. For one terrible moment, he thought it was Boss; he nearly tripped over his own feet in an effort to get his back to the wall.

“...The hell, asshole?”

“Oh. Hey, Undyne.”

“It’s CAP...y’know what? Never mind. Where’s your brother?”

“Oh...not here?”

“Don’t eff with me. I can smell coffee.”

Sans wondered just how long Undyne had gone without sleep. She looked nearly dead on her feet. On the other hand, it was hilarious that she was still censoring her language around the apartment. “You do remember that I can make coffee too, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, right. Just didn’t think you’d bother.”

He sighed. “Sit down, I’ll get you a mug.”

She grabbed at the piping hot carafe, ignoring the potential for burns. “MUGS ARE FOR-”

“Yeah, yeah, but I want some too. Go sit down or somethin’.”

Undyne actually sat down (in a chair, no less), which said a lot about her mental state. She growled something under her breath when Sans moved the carafe, but settled down a little when he poked a mug of coffee into her field of vision. The carafe itself followed, minus the contents of his own mug.

“See,” he said, sitting across from her at the table, “We can pretend to be all civilized.”

A skeptical eyebrow begged to differ.

“So, uh, whaddaya need Boss for?”

“He’s supposed to be on patrol around town this morning and he’s not answering his phone. He always answers his phone. So, that’s worrying. Especially since there’s been an increase in weird stuff in the past few weeks, ever since...well. You remember when Frisk was attacked by that bitch in the hospital?”

Sans did remember, but he was pretty sure the real “bitch” was the one who brought down the would-be assassin, not the assassin herself. He knew better than to say that out loud, though.

“So, now that Frisk is able to perform the official interrogation we’re getting ready for the trial. There’s a weirdly vocal group of humans who think we targeted this lady for some bullshit reason. Don’t know who spread the rumors, but some of them are saying that we, I dunno, accused her at random because of her skin color?? Hah. I don’t discriminate when taking down people who threaten my besties.” She took an aggressive gulp of coffee, then refilled her mug.

“That’s weird. Do they have any proof? I mean, we caught this lady in the act. We have video evidence of what happened. ‘Ts not like we lined up a bunch’ve humans and framed the one that’d cause us the most trouble.”

“Eh, most of the human media won’t touch our footage; they say it’s fake. Lotsa folks are saying
we made up the whole thing, especially since the hospital’s official stance is that it was some
t kinda huge accident. HAH! I’m glad we got Frisk out of that place; one of the doctors was
apparently bein’ a real creep.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Someone was tryin’ to get the hospital to keep her locked up for ‘mental distress’ or some
kind of bullshit like that. Kept tryin’ to turn away visitors, too. That’s why there was the big rush
to get her out of there. Didn’t think you’d dump the kid on her right away, though.”

Sans’s head was spinning. A doctor? Was that Dr. Ray? And: “…I didn’t dump the kid, Undyne.
Boss sent me out and passed off the kid before I got...uh, back.”

She stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“We’re talking about...about Frisk’s kid, right?”

“Yeah. Attie. You know her name, I know you do.”

He fidgeted. He didn’t want to be having this conversation,
especially not in his own dining room.
If Boss found out…

“Hey.” Undyne leaned over. “What the hell is going on in this dingy little apartment, anyways? I
get one story from Papyrus - and he’s my vice-captain; I know exactly how trustworthy he is - and
I get another story from you. What’s your game?”

“...Nothing? Look. I...I like the kid, okay? Yeah, she was a little annoying at first, and I’m not
convinced she won’t grow up to be a tyrant to rival Asgore, but...she kinda grew on me. I tried to
do my best with her, but Boss...he got worried. He didn’t want Attie around someone like - well,
like me - any longer than necessary. I’m an asshole, remember?”

“Hmm.” She finished up the last of the coffee, tilting the mug back to catch every last drop.
“Y’know, Papyrus can be a manipulative bastard sometimes, but usually I can call his bullshit.
This is just weird. There’s no motivation for any of it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I texted him as soon as I heard that Frisk was released. We needed security to escort her home
and all that, especially since she wasn’t in particularly good shape. He was in charge of that part.
He showed up with Attie and without you, which was weird. Said you were tired of watchin’ the
kid; to me, at least. Told Frisk she missed her mom too much.” She paused, rubbing her eyes.
“Actually...I guess I knew something was up. Attie’s story didn’t match his, after all, but she’s
scared enough of Papyrus that we figured she didn’t have the full story. Dammit.”

“I mean...it’s not a big deal?”

A forceful punch made a dent in the tabletop. “It IS a big deal, you ASSHOLE! My vice-captain
lied to me! I mean, that’s normal - he’s overdue for his annual assassination attempt, after all - but
I’m supposed to RECOGNIZE it! I’m LOSING my EDGE!”

Sans shuffled around the table and took the chair next to Undyne. He had the weird urge to pat her
on the back, like he’d do for Attie when she was upset, but thankfully quashed it. She’d probably
bite his arm off if he tried. “Hey, it was a weird situation for all of us. Boss, uh, explained things
to me after; I think he was just lookin’ out for the kid. I’m really not the best caretaker,
remember?”
“What did he tell you?”

“Uh, what?”

“What did he ‘explain’ to you about this?”

He thought back to his battle with Boss in the park. “He, uh, said that Attie was too important to be trusted with me. He pointed out that...well, I’m not the most reliable guy, y’know? And Frisk and I haven’t really gotten along.”

Undyne examined him through her single narrowed eye. “And yet, she snuck out of the house, past our defenses, and wound up here last night. Now, why would that be?”

She knew about that? Was it a setup? “Uh...she was sayin’ thanks? She thought she owed me somethin’.”

“IT WAS A RHETORICAL QUESTION, YOU BAG OF BONES! She came here because she DOESN’T hate your guts! She CARES ‘bout you! You impressed her! She realized that you aren’t just the lazy shitstain you pretend you are!”

“But I am...”

“SHUT UP. I’m Captain of the Royal Guard; I’ve seen your employee file. Your real file. The one without bizarre grease stains blotting out half the information.”

Sans hadn’t realized he’d missed a copy of those documents. Good to know.

“I know what you’re capable of. I know what you’ve done. Oh, and while we’re on the topic: expect Asgore to give you a call sometime this afternoon about your... other job.”

“Okay...?”

“My point is, you pass yourself off as a lazy asshole. Heck, most of the time you are a lazy asshole. But somehow, Frisk saw something different. Something she, well, doesn’t hate. She really was grateful that you, y’know, saved her freakin’ life and took care of her kid out of the blue for a couple weeks, and she was a little hurt when you didn’t contact her at all after giving Attie back. By the way, why didn’t you contact her after...well, after Attie went home? They haven’t heard from you at all, which backed up what Papyrus said, but when they tried texting you their numbers were blocked. That’s just not right.”

“So, uh, Boss kinda...messed with my phone.”

“What?”

“He took off Frisk’s and Attie’s numbers, all the texts, the pictures…”

“What? Even the ones where we were doing training poses?”

He grabbed the carafe, started another pot of coffee, and scooted down the hallway to grab his phone. It gave him whiny messages about having a low charge, but it turned on.

“Here,” he said, sliding it in front of Undyne. “I don’t know how he blocked numbers, though.”

He didn’t want to watch her look through it - the missing pictures and texts still stung - so he retreated back into the kitchen to watch the coffee finish up instead.

He didn’t have many pictures left, so he was still fiddling with the coffee machine when she
shrieked in outrage. “THIS IS AWFUL! Those were GREAT poses!”

“Yeah. I sent ‘em to Frisk, y’know; she still has ‘em, I bet. She’d probably send them to you if you wanted.”

“HELL YEAH! Hey, do you want them too? You took ‘em, after all. Even if he’s blocked Frisk’s number somehow, he wouldn’t dare block mine in case I need to text you for work.”

“Better not. Boss still goes through my phone sometimes; if he finds a pic of Attie he’ll be pissed.” He brought the full carafe to the table and set it in front of Undyne. She needed it more than he did, and if it kept her talking…

“Hah. Never understood why you put up with that bastard. I mean, I put up with him because he’s got a good head for strategy and he’s a natural leader and I outrank him, but he just yells at you. And beats up on you, if Frisk’s right about that. That’s grounds for you to leave the family. Why stay?”

“He’s...Boss? I mean, we’ve always been that way. Him ‘n me against the world.”

She downed an entire mug of coffee in one go. “You know the world’s not like that anymore, right? There’s only so much I can do as his boss, but there are other people willing to - urgh! - help. Hell, go make puppy eyes at one of those human abuse rehab programs; they literally throw parties every time a monster shows up at their door. They’d get you set up somewhere else.”

“C’mon,” he sighed, “Does that really sound like me? Whatever you think you know about me from those files, I gave up a long time ago.”

A strange look grew across Undyne’s face. It was the same look she wore when she had defeated a particularly challenging enemy, but without the wide-toothed grin. “Attie misses you,” she said, voice carefully neutral.

Sans had no response to that.

“She told me so yesterday morning. She’s sad that you won’t call her. Thinks you don’t like her anymore.”

“Undyne, stop.”

“Hmm? Why should I? I thought it didn’t matter. I thought it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Look. It really is better if she just...forgets about me or somethin’. ‘Sides, Boss said I’m not allowed to even say her name. How’m I gonna-”

A fishy fist left another dent in the table. “THAT’S THE POINT! If Papyrus isn’t around, he’s not your ‘Boss’ anymore, right?? Yeah, I know it’s not normal for us to break up families, even now that we’re on the surface. And I know that he’s the head of your family. But...sometimes you just gotta pick your battles, okay? Besides, I KNOW you pay the bills around here. You can move out any time you like. File for emancipation so he can’t drag you back and all that. And then maybe my besties will stop talking my gills off about how much they miss your bony ass.”

The thought of anyone missing his ‘ass’ was laughable, but he felt his skull turning colors anyways. “...uh, well, maybe. I mean, it’s not so bad ‘round here, y’know? And like you said, we’re family and I pay the bills. Who’d take care of the ol’ place if I leave?”

“STARS, HAVE SOME SELF-RESPECT, WOULD YOU?? THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO
ACTUALLY CARE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU!” She chugged the remainder of the coffee. “NOW I’VE GOT A CAFFEINE HIGH AND IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT! I’VE GOTTA RUN THIS OFF BEFORE MY MEETING! LET ME KNOW IF YOU SEE YOUR BASTARD OF A BROTHER!”

She slammed the door behind her, the sound echoing around in Sans’s skull. She had a point, he knew. There would be plenty of advantages to living alone. No more punishments, more free time, the ability to cook his own meals…

...missed shifts because he didn’t get out of bed on time, time lost staring into nothing, crippling loneliness…

No, he wasn’t ready to go it alone, no matter how bad things got. Boss was just...Boss. Just the same as any other monster. They were family, and that meant something to monsters. Abandoning your family meant you were the lowest class of monster, worse than froggits. Worse than dirt. If Undyne and Frisk were worried, well, maybe they had forgotten just how bad things had been in the Underground.

He owed Boss, and that debt would never be repaid.

With a heavy soul, he tied his sneakers on and made his way over to his hot dog stand.

Boss, as it turned out, had been summoned by Asgore sometime early in the morning. Undyne came down from her caffeine high long enough to text Sans about that, and to send him forceful messages in all caps warning him not to repeat anything she said while sleep-deprived. He smirked. Over the time he’d been taking care of Attie, Undyne’s attitude towards him had changed. It was strange, having the excitable and ruthless Captain of the Royal Guard as some kind of...of friend, but it wasn’t bad. He respected her, actually.

And in light of that respect, he reconsidered her words. She had said that Attie missed him. Just the thought of that tugged at his soul. It shouldn’t have, of course; he’d only known her for such a short time. And she was a little human kid. Why should he care about a little human kid?

He deliberately did not think about the kid’s mother.

Luckily, he had bigger problems to take his mind off things. Just as Undyne had predicted, Asgore called him just after Greater Dog and Lesser Dog stopped by the hot dog stand for lunch. Sans cleared his nonexistent throat, willing himself to keep calm; the King of Monsters was terrifying, even over the phone. “Uh, hello, your majesty.”

“Hello, Sans. I am calling to discuss your return to a job you have not held in quite some time.”

Fear locked his bones. “Uh, w-which job?”

“Hmm. You have held several positions, have you not? I feel that a phone conversation is not the best place to discuss this. Come to my castle in the Underground immediately.”

“Yes, your maj-”

The king had already hung up. Sans texted Undyne with shaking fingers, letting her know that he’d be late to his sentry shift due to a meeting with the king, then sent the same to Boss. Better safe than sorry.

He grabbed a spare ‘dog and closed down the stand. A sudden thought prompted him to glance down; he was still in his pyjamas.
Teleporting from an alley to his room saved him a lot of time and potential embarrassment. He listened closely, but everything seemed quiet; with any luck, Boss was occupied elsewhere. A sharp ding from his phone made him jump, but it was just Undyne telling him to take the first of his shifts off.

He changed into his button-down shirt and slacks, still clean from the last time he wore them, then stepped into a shortcut. He couldn’t teleport all the way to the top of Mount Ebott - even if the distance wasn’t too much, there were magical protections in place - so he went in stages. His first teleport brought him to his favorite lookout spot, just a short jog from the sentry station he handled most often.

The air was crisp and cool and the forest smelled like winter. From his lookout spot he could see the town laid out below, rows and rows of houses and hospitals and schools and businesses tied together by thin veins of black. There was a bit of activity in the streets, probably humans and monsters getting ready for Christmas (and maybe Takersfaire, if the monsters were feeling bold), but it was barely noticeable from such a distance.

A slight breeze wiggled its way between his bones as he walked towards his station. There were two barriers on Mount Ebott: one just below the sentry stations, and one closer to the entrances where the original once stood. The first - designed to alert sentries when someone approached the mountain - didn’t do anything in particular to block normal entry but he couldn’t teleport through it. It was annoying to have to stop, walk through the barrier manually, then teleport again, but it was an old routine and he managed.

The second barrier, the one that protected the Underground from most intrusions, was one of his least favorite spots in the whole world. It was almost entirely Frisk’s work. Her magic always felt hostile against his bones; no matter how many times he climbed the mountain, he was always a little afraid that her barrier would refuse him entry...or dust him outright.

It was a surprise, then, when he didn’t feel the familiar crackle of angry magic as he approached. Worry niggled at the back of his mind; had Frisk not refreshed it recently? It had been a month since she was released from the hospital; surely she’d climbed the mountain at some point...right? King Asgore still lived Underground most of the time, after all, and she loved him like a father despite everything.

The low hum of powerful human magic filtered slowly into his senses, more noticeable the closer he got. Within arm’s reach of the barrier, it was so strong that it rattled his bones a little. It felt nothing at all like he expected. He carefully held out one hand towards the barrier, and found…

Gentle. Welcoming. “Hi, Sans!”

“What the hell?” This...wasn’t normal. Actually, what had Undyne said?

“She CARES ’bout you! You impressed her! She realized that you aren’t just the lazy shitstain you pretend you are!”

...Yeah, Frisk had refreshed the barrier, alright. He felt his entire skull turning colors. Beads of sweat began to form under his collar and his breathing picked up.

Magic, even Frisk’s weird human magic, dealt a lot with intent. When he and Frisk had been passive-aggressive enemies - and they had been as long as he could remember, exchanging japes and the occasional harsh word off and on - her intentions toward him had been wary and antagonistic. Now…
Well.

Sans crossed the barrier and stepped into a shortcut before he could think too hard.

A pool of brilliant light met him on the other side. Once upon a time this had probably been a majestic hallway, a tribute to the golden sun the monsters hadn’t seen for generations, but with so many more urgent problems and a general lack of reliable builders it had fallen into disrepair. By the time he had seen it for the first time it had been half-buried and caved in, more of an obstacle to reaching the palace than an entryway. It had only gotten worse over the years.

Now, it looked like someone was in the process of repairing the old place. Most of the rubble had been cleared out and the weak parts of the ceiling and walls had been reinforced with scaffolding. The shattered stained glass windows had been removed; lead scraps were piled in a corner, waiting to be repurposed. The artificial light sources were harsh without the scraps of color the broken windows had provided.

The world...really was changing.

“Sans?” a deep voice boomed through the hallway, shattering his reverie. “Come through to the throne room. You and I have business to discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Undyne ships it.

So! Things are looking a little bit up for Sans. He knows Frisk and Attie are thinking about him, at least. But to what end? And what could Asgore possibly want?

A huge thanks to everyone who's left kudos and comments on this story! I'm sorry I was a bit behind at responding to all the comments this week, and there were so many great ones, but I'm caught up now. Please have a great week and be kind to yourselves. See you in a few days with more!
In Which Sans is Hired

Chapter Summary

...But does it really count if he doesn’t have a choice?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sans followed the path from the Judgement Hall through the grey corridor to the king’s garden. It had been years since he’d been there but the flowers looked the same as they ever did: bright green and yellow, providing comically cheerful contrast to the dilapidated and faded walls of the palace and the violence that took place within.

Like the hall, the throne room appeared to be undergoing renovations. Parts of the crumbling walls had been torn down and cleared away, and there were a few pallets of stone brick waiting to be put in place.

“Frisk insisted on making our home a little more presentable, now that we have the resources,” the king said from somewhere behind Sans.

He jumped. For such a big monster, Asgore sure was quiet when he wanted to be. “Your majesty,” he mumbled with a sharp bow.

“Sans.” Asgore passed him and continued on to the thrones in the center of the room, settling himself on the largest one. Tori’s, which had been a mess of bent metal for as long as he could remember, had been either rebuilt or repaired and placed at Asgore’s right. To his left was a smaller, simpler chair with the Delta Rune carefully painted across the top.

It took Sans a moment to realize that he was distracted by the scenery. He jerked his attention back to his king. “S-sorry.”

“Do pay attention. I called you here to discuss you taking up a certain job you previously held.” He held out one giant paw. It took Sans a moment to register that a small, familiar badge was being offered to him.

It was...not unexpected; after Undyne’s unsubtle hints that morning, it was one of the outcomes he’d considered. Still, he felt his knees shaking. That badge - a small, black circle with an insignia heavily embroidered in red - was something he’d never hoped to see again.

He took it carefully, ensuring that his sharpened claws didn’t scratch the material. “...Why?” he finally asked, not daring to glance up at the huge monster hovering over him.

“It is your position. Just because you threw your badge away does not make you any less the Royal Judge. You have been on hiatus, yes, but we have need of a Judge once again.”

Sans took a deep breath, trying to still himself and think. “What...happened? I thought we were getting along with humans?”

“Are you questioning your king?” Asgore’s tone was one of idle curiosity, but the implied threat...
was clear.

“N-no, just trying to get the facts.”

The giant horned head tilted slightly in acknowledgement. “That is...reasonable, considering your position. Very well.

“About a month ago, my daughter - Ambassador Frisk Dreemurr - was attacked while recovering from a serious illness that nearly claimed her life. I am told you were involved in that situation, correct?”

Sans nodded.

“The aggressor, a human woman who sought to weaken the Kingdom of Monsters, was apprehended by the Royal Guard soon after the fact. She was passed into human custody in accordance with the agreements between our peoples, but the human courts did not...find enough evidence to punish her, or so we were told. The hospital's refusal to hand over certain documents did not help.

“The humans were persuaded to give us a say in the matter. Since she attacked one of our citizens - a member of our royal family, no less - this woman has committed crimes against the Kingdom of Monsters directly. We have agreed to judge her fairly in accordance with our laws.”

It made a sick, horrible kind of sense. In the years since the fall of the Barrier, most monsters had moved to the surface. Crime on the surface was dealt with by human cops and the Royal Guard, depending on jurisdiction. Sans knew from living with the Vice Captain of the Guard that particularly serious or delicate cases were referred directly to Asgore or Tori, respectively.

Any incidents involving humans had, as far as he knew, been handled as diplomatic affairs and processed through the Embassy. The humans hadn’t refused to punish one of their own who’d attacked a monster before; even before they were made citizens, humans had treated them fairly in that regard.

Then again, Frisk wasn’t biologically a monster. In the eyes of humans, this was probably just a case of a human attacking another human. To monsters, this was a human attacking the most important monsters in the kingdom.

And there was one person in the Underground charged specifically - though not exclusively - with passing judgement upon humans who had wronged monsters.

“You will not be expected to take up all the duties of Judge right away,” Asgore said. “You will focus on this singular case for the time being. If another serious incident takes place between now and then, we shall adjust your duties accordingly.”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Your conditions of employment are the same as they were previously. That will change, given the circumstances, but for now you will be held to the terms you agreed to when you first took this position. I still have your old contract if you wish to review it. You may tell no one of your involvement and must keep to your normal schedule. If we have need of you, either to judge a human or a monster, you shall be summoned and an appropriate excuse given.”

“'kay.”

“What was that?”
“...Yes, your majesty.”

Asgore rose from his throne, looking out at the carpet of flowers. “You have some time to prepare for the confrontation. It has been delayed until after the holidays while we attempt to settle the diplomatic side. Dr. Alphys has been ordered to give you access to any and all information you ask for without question; I recommend availing yourself of that. Should the humans protest our judgement, we may need to give them evidence.”

“Yes, your majesty. Uh...where will the judgement be held?”

“In the usual spot. I am sure you saw the repairs in progress. We have teams of monsters working to ensure that it will be ready for use by the appointed time.”

There was a long pause. Sans tried to think of anything to say and came up short. (He very deliberately did not laugh at that thought.) The king was much more...stable than he’d been back in the old days, probably due to some serious therapy, but his temper was still unpredictable at best and explosive at worst.

“Very well,” Asgore said finally. “You may go. Either the queen or I will contact you in a few weeks to evaluate your progress and establish new parameters for you to operate under.”

“Thanks, your majesty.”

Sans ducked out of the throne room and leaned against a crumbling brick wall, trying to calm himself. It felt like his soul was getting ready to pound out of his chest from the stress and anxiety.

He was alive, though. That was good.

In his distraction, he forgot about Frisk’s weird barrier. He wound up teleporting a little closer to it than he intended and instinctively braced himself against the harsh snap of her magic...only to be wrapped up in a big fuzzy blanket of happy curiosity and welcomeness that made his skull turn colors.

He wouldn’t have any trouble crossing that particular barrier for the time being, he thought wryly.

Of course, that could all change with his new job. One of his claws worried at the edge of his badge. Someone had cleaned it up a little; the familiar mustard stain and the ragged bit of cloth that should have been there from when he “retired” were both missing.

Did Frisk know Asgore had made him Judge once again? Probably not, given her magic’s downright friendly reaction to him. The one time he’d encountered Frisk as Judge, towards the end of her journey through the Underground, had been...well, unnecessarily harsh, to say the least. It had been the catalyst for years of antagonism, and not without reason. Despite what the law said he’d judged her unfairly, he knew; it was one of the reasons he’d tried to give it up.

(That, and the fall of the barrier made a glorious excuse for getting out of the job he hated the most. He was a lazy asshole at heart, after all.)

To his surprise, Undyne was waiting at his sentry station. She hid her flinch well, but he caught the tail end of it as he appeared and grounded himself back in reality.

“Uh, hey, Undyne?”

She grinned with all her teeth. It looked like she still hadn’t gotten any rest. “Hey, nerd. Looks like you survived King Stabbybuns, huh.”
“Yeah…? Why are you here…?”

“Figured I’d catch you on the way back. Did he ask you?”

“Nope.”

There was a moment where Undyne tried to determine what he meant, and ultimately failed. She settled for glaring at him with the dark hatred of one who hadn’t had nearly enough sleep to allow for higher brain functions.

He relented. “When does he ever ask for anything? Nope, he gave me my badge back and that was that.”

“Huh. No arguments? That doesn’t seem like you.”

“Hey, I’m stupid, not suicidal. I’m not gonna piss ‘im off without a good reason.”

She hummed a little, lounging against his sentry station in a manner that fell just short of being casual. “And…you’re gonna take the case?”

“…It’s part of the job? I don’t think I have a choice?”

“Yeah, okay.” She shifted a little. “Listen. So…Papyrus doesn’t have clearance to know about this. Still. We figured it would be better, given the circumstances.”

“Circumstances?”

“The Judge of Monsters is a position of respect and authority. D’you think he’d actually show proper respect if he knew you were the Judge? I mean, that’s true for most people-”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“SHUT UP! Anyways, most people’d probably laugh if we told them that you were the Judge, but Papyrus would flip and that would look bad. So don’t leave your stuff lying around the house or anything.” She tossed him a key. “Locker 237, down at the old Pumped Gym. Papyrus won’t go near the place, the elitist bastard. Don’t mind the look of the building; the people who run it are real friendly and shit. Your locker is in the private section so you won’t have to watch naked humans running around.”

“Thanks…?”

She grinned sharply. “Unless you wanna look at naked humans running around. ‘Course, they’d be naked human guys, but-”

“Nope, nope, nope, done with this conversation.”

He tried to escape back towards town. She caught up to him within seconds, still laughing - his short legs were a curse - and slowed down beside him.

“She doesn’t know.”

Sans glanced up. “Uh, who doesn’t know?”

“Y’know who I’m talking about. Well, actually, it could be two someones, but… you know.”

“…Spell it out for me?”
“FRISK!” Undyne growled through gritted fangs. “Frisk doesn’t know, okay? She has no idea. Not very many people do; just me, you, and the king and queen. I don’t know what happened between you and her before she broke the barrier, but she hasn’t made the connection between you and the Judge.”

His mind reeled with the implication. Frisk...didn’t know? How?? He pushed the thought aside, glancing back towards his station. “And the Royal Scientist.”

“Huh?”

“You were talking about it real openly near my sentry post. I know for a fact that she’s got my station - probably every station - bugged.”

Something hard hit him in the skull without warning and he flinched, but his HP didn’t drop. He caught the small objects before they fell. There in his hand was a tiny microphone and a few of the little cameras Alphys favored, all of which had been crudely ripped away from their wires. “I know when a place is bugged,” was Undyne’s excuse.

“Gee, thanks. She’s gonna be pissed, and I’ve gotta deal with her to get the info I need for my job.”

“Then you won’t mind returning her stuff to her, right?”

Sans was tempted to throw the equipment right back at her, just on principle, but he shrugged and stuck it in a pocket of his jacket. If Alphys went looking through her recordings for the person who’d disabled her cameras, she was going to see Undyne. Watching her try to connect him to Undyne was going to be fun, if potentially explosive, especially with that obsession she had for the captain.

He sighed dramatically. “If she dusts me, you’re my pick for the next Judge.”

“What?? You can’t be Judge AND Captain of the Royal Guard!!”

“Exactly.”

“Tryin’ to get your brother promoted?”

“It’d serve him right. Heh. I’ve seen you after a few days on the job. He’d finally be busy enough that I could grab a drink in peace. Hell, maybe he’d wear himself out long enough to sleep through the night.”

Undyne snorted. “Whatever. I was actually up here for a job; we’re all pulling weird shifts to cover for Dogamy and Dogaressa while they’re out on family leave.”

“You didn’t say anything to me about that…”

“You’re pulling double shifts half the time anyways. Besides, I know you doze off up here; we need someone actually awake and watching for humans.”

He waved her off and continued on past the outer barrier alone.

The talk with Asgore had been shorter than he expected; he had a couple hours before what should have been his second shift started. He had some time to process that strange meeting and try to make sense of it. Asgore was doing much better, but he’d been called the Mad Tyrant for a reason. Still, Sans felt a little silly for being so nervous leading up to the the talk.
Then again...being appointed Royal Judge was nothing to take lightly.

Few knew the identity of the Judge - it kept the revenge killings to a minimum - so no one knew how the previous Judge had...left the post. It had happened when Sans was a young teenager, still trying to make ends meet for him and Papyrus, so digging further into the circumstances hadn’t been his top priority. What everyone did know was that the Judge hadn’t left an heir or an apprentice, so there was no line of succession.

Sans heard about the ‘auditions’ for a new Judge and had gone on a whim, giving some bullshit excuse to his brother for his absence. It had been brutal. Half his scars and most of his EXP had come from that one day. Monsters had been pitted against each other in battle royales, then in groups and one-on-one combat: it had been a bloodbath.

To his surprise, though, it hadn’t just been an outright fight to the death. All competitors were given masks and numbers to hide their identities from each other, so no one knew if the monsters they were fighting were friends or strangers unless they had the somewhat rare ability to detect the differences between monsters’ magics, or they recognized bullet patterns. Some had taken advantage of that to gain as much LV as possible; others, like Sans, had taken a more cautious approach.

He’d never been told why he, of all the survivors, had been selected as the Judge. He’d put up a good showing, but he’d hardly been the strongest person there. No one had questioned him on his motives or his past. His number had been called and he’d stepped into a small room with the King of Monsters, sure he was about to be dusted.

Instead he’d been given his badge, a uniform, and a small guidebook that had apparently been passed down from Judge to Judge.

It wasn’t a bad job, most of the time. His main duty - judging humans who had committed crimes against monsters - had been considered a bit obsolete in the old Underground, but he’d still been called in to preside over a few cases each year that the king didn’t want to deal with. The traditional stipend wasn’t anything to scoff at; it had paid for the house in Snowdin, even though Boss had declared himself the head of their little household soon after the move.

The guilt that came with the thought of that money was old and easily pushed aside. Over the years he’d come to terms with the fact that he’d essentially been paid in advance to kill Frisk.

And he had.

Many times.

He was never quite sure how much she remembered of their fights. Did she forget when she turned back time? He closed his eye sockets, brow crinkled in thought. His own memory had been patchy at best during back then, shredded by overexposure to time magic, but he thought he remembered...hadn’t she changed her stance? Hadn’t she dodged differently after dying? All the loops ran together; it was hard to tell.

There was no reason she wouldn’t have remembered, since she was the one in charge of the timelines, but...even after eight years of antagonism she’d never brought it up. She had never asked if he remembered the way her weak human bones had crunched beneath the weight of his magic, if he still knew the smell of her blood on the tile floor.

She’d never asked why, after so many loops, he’d eventually just stepped aside and let her pass without a fight.
Then again, Undyne was under the impression that Frisk didn’t know the Judge’s identity. Could it be that...that she really didn’t know it was him who’d killed her? Had she hated him for years just for being himself, not for what he’d done to her?

That train of thought was making his knees shake and his head feel funny, so he shoved it aside. He had a rare few hours to himself; he decided to check out the locker, then figure out whether he wanted to brave that lair of horrors Alphys called a lab.

Searching for the gym Undyne mentioned took his mind off more unpleasant things. There were two “Pumped Gym” locations, according to the mapping app on his phone; he picked the closer one and teleported over.

If by “the old Pumped Gym” Undyne had meant “the old run-down, abandoned building that was a gym at one point,” then Sans had wound up in the right place. It was located in one of the more monster-heavy areas of town, but it looked like it had been empty longer than monsters had been on the surface. There was some suspicious movement in one of the windows and rather confusing (and possibly obscene) graffiti on the walls; nothing useful. He ducked back into the alleyway he’d appeared in and teleported again.

The other location was bigger and much more lively. It was a little shabby, sure, but there was a steady trickle of humans and monsters coming and going. No one would question one more monster arriving.

Or so he thought.

“Hullo, mister! Welcome to Pumped Gym! How may I help you?” asked a bubbly young human woman behind a desk in the lobby.

Sans carefully placed the key from Undyne on the counter. “My, uh, friend set me up with a locker. Think she’s trying to trick me into exercising or somethin’.”

The change in the young woman’s face was immediate. She looked at the tag on they keyring - a plain white plastic oval with his locker number and the gym’s logo - and nodded seriously. “I’ll get my father. Please wait right here; I’ll just be a minute.”

Almost exactly a minute later, a tanned, graying man in a tank top and sweats came out of the back room. He was taller than Papyrus and had muscles that rivalled Undyne’s, but there was a keen intelligence in his piercingly blue eyes that made Sans shift uncomfortably in his sneakers. This was one guy he didn’t want to face in a real fight.

“So you’re with the Captain of the Royal Guard, hmm?”

“Undyne...set the locker up for me, yeah.”

He eyed Sans for a long moment, then laughed. Loudly. “Well! Any friend of ol’ Gills is a friend of mine! Name’s Bruce Volks; come back this way and I’ll show you where we have you set up.”

Sans found himself ushered back behind the front desk, through a door marked “PRIVATE,” and down a flight of stairs. The basement appeared to be composed of a single hallway bent into an angle, lined with yellow lights and numbered doors. Bruce led him around a corner to a door near the end of the hallway.

“Gills said you’d need some privacy, and that you have your own ways into and out of places. ‘S that true...uh, mister?”
“Uh, yeah. And the name’s Sans. Sans the skeleton.”

“Nice to meet’cha, Sans. So. Locker.” He deftly opened the door with the key and waved Sans inside. “Most folks share these rooms based on scheduling or preference, but you’ve got this one all t’yourself. That locker in the corner is yours; feel free to put your own lock on it, or magic it up however you want. Just don’t do anything we can’t take off when you’re done with it. Actually,” he scratched his scruffy chin, “If you wanna do something awesome just ask me first. If it’s cool enough, I’ll let you go for it.”

“Good to know.” Sans could see why Undyne liked this guy. He made an effort not to resort to his default crankiness; he didn’t want the captain angry at him.

“Let’s see...what else. Oh! Feel free to come and go as you want; front desk opens at 6 AM and closes at 10. You technically have a membership if you wanna use it. Though...from what Gills said, we won’t be seeing much of you upstairs.”

“Probably not. Don’t really have any body to work out with.”

“Hahaha! Guess not! Well, if you need to come in after hours...just don’t go wandering around, if you get my drift. Security won’t alert us if you’re just in this room, but if they catch you outside here they’ll investigate. As for magic, we only ward our main locker rooms upstairs; these private areas are left up to you to put up whatever protection you want. That means you’ll have to work around what other folks already have here, so keep that in mind. D’ya need someone to do any spellwork for you?”

“Nah, I’ve got it.”

“A’right. Well, I won’t keep you. Let me or Tanya know if you need anything, okay, Sans?”

“Okay.” The man was out the door before Sans realized that it probably would have been proper etiquette to thank him. Oh well.

He looked around at the room he’d been provided. It was a simple concrete cube, nothing fancy but sturdy enough to hold up under some serious use. Along one wall sat the actual lockers with a bench in front of it; along the other was a longer bench and a mirror. A small curtain along the far wall offered access to a toilet and shower. Ignoring that, he stepped up to the lockers.

Undyne had been down there at some point, he noticed. A new combination lock sat on the shelf inside the first locker in the row, enthusiastically bright packaging letting him know how difficult it would be to crack and how he could go about setting a combination. Sans snorted; it was a nice gesture, but he didn’t need it. Plus, he’d been picking locks like this one since he was a babybones, fresh on the streets.

Neatly hung up on a bar below the shelf was his uniform. It looked the same as he remembered it, if a bit cleaner. The magic woven into the fabric snapped a little against his fingers like static; someone must have renewed the enchantments that kept his magic hidden. It felt like Tori’s work, strong and possessive and a little like a bonfire just barely contained.

His helmet lay in the bottom of the locker. It was polished, but someone had left fingerprints around the edge. He grinned; Undyne must have been trying it on. It looked a lot more comfy than the one she wore as Captain of the Royal Guard, so he didn’t blame her. He made a mental note to tease her about it all the same.

As he moved to close the locker, his attention was caught by a note taped to the inside of the door:
NERD,
Try this on and make sure it fits.
ACTUALLY DO IT!!!!!!!!!!
The magic is new and needs to recognize you.
IF YOU WAIT IT WON’T WORK RIGHT!!!!!!

Sans sighed. He could probably get away with draping the uniform over himself and taking a nap on the bench, but he was curious. He carefully unhooked the hangers and separated the pieces of his uniform.

First he put on the undershirt and pants, both made of black cloth and padded to give his bones a little more...body. He’d made both himself, but the little patches and tears had been mended with a steadier hand than his. Over that went his leather gear. It had been a while since he’d worn it, but someone must have kept it maintained; the dyed black leather was still soft, if a bit tighter than he remembered, and the protective plates - made of dark opaline shell from some kind of creature he didn’t recognize - were still attached firmly. The soft rasp when he moved let him know that he would need to oil the gear before he did any stealth work, but overall it was in good repair.

He tugged on his gloves and boots next, wincing at the feel. The gloves had shrunk and stiffened; he’d need to find replacements, or find a way to stretch them back out. It wasn’t a big deal. They had never fit him properly anyways; he might as well find some good human gloves and wrap his hands in something to make them fit.

The boots were another story. Even with the shrinkage from time, they were still terribly large. The bulky socks Sans wore under his sneakers didn’t do much to help in that regard. He couldn’t remember how he’d ever gotten them to fit right, but made a mental note to pick up extra socks along with the gloves.

His sleeveless overcoat came next. It, too, was made of leather, though it was much softer with stamped embellishments across the shoulders and embroidery down the front. It was more ceremonial, designed to be decorative and easily discarded should the need arise, but it had its uses. The Delta Rune on the back blazed with protective magic as he settled it over his shoulders, and he winced as the magic pressed against his own. His hands shook a little as he did up the clasps in front. He’d grown a little since the first time he put it on, but the coat still hung down to mid-calf on him.

Finally, the head coverings. The mask that covered his face was made of a stiffer leather, formed to give the impression of a nose and ears where he had none. There were no openings; instead, small enchantments over each eye socket allowed him to see without hampering his peripheral vision. Something similar sat over his ear holes. The design had a closure in the back that allowed him to wrap it around his head completely, protecting his identity should the helmet be dislodged and padding his skull as well.

The helmet itself was made of shiny black metal, similar to Undyne’s but far simpler in design: a smooth dome covered his cranium and lower face, with a narrow opening for his eye sockets. He settled it over his skull, curious. It still fit. The smell of leather and metal brought back memories, though - most straight out of his nightmares - and he ripped it off a little too harshly when he realized he was close to tears.

Breathing deeply, he set it back in its place. He didn’t have a choice in this. Whether he wanted it or not, he was the Judge once again. Unless he wanted to punt and move to the Arctic Circle,
which - to be honest - was looking more and more appealing.

He was tempted to shuck the uniform off and leave it a pile, like he did for his own clothing, but old habits died hard. He carefully removed each piece and hung it back up, slipping the gloves and boots into his inventory for reference.

With one last glance around, he teleported straight to his bedroom.

The messiness of his room clashed with the rigid formality he’d developed as Judge, and he felt the sudden, Papyrus-like urge to clean. He took a deep breath and deliberately relaxed. There was no danger. There was no case. He was Sans the skeleton, lazy asshole extraordinaire. No more, no less.

Outside his door, the apartment was still quiet. A quick check of his phone revealed that Undyne was calling him in early, and had roped Boss into helping out with those extra sentry shifts since there were so many sentries missing. She probably thought she was helping.

Mostly, Sans just felt...tired.

When he thought back - really thought, the way he had back when such things mattered to him - he recognized how much he had changed. People still remembered him the way he’d been in the Underground, angry and spiteful and cruel and clever, but he hadn’t felt that way in years. He couldn’t pinpoint when he’d started to change. Like a glacier in the winter sun, his facade had melted away.

He was still angry, but that had been eaten away by complacency. He was still capable, but the relative ease of living on the surface had lulled him into apathy. Maybe he’d always been that way. Maybe all he ever wanted was to be needed, and in the absence of that he’d been dying slowly inside.

It was silly. Boss didn’t need him. Attie and Frisk didn’t need him. Even Asgore, for all his overbearing condescension, didn’t need him.

But...it was nice to pretend for a while.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: I'm honestly not sure if many gyms have private rooms like this (I've only been to small ones that had nothing like this), so my excuse is that this is something that came about because of monsters. Monsters hate being vulnerable, and these smaller changing and locker rooms - accessible only by a select group of friends - would be greatly preferred. There's an added cost, but the Kingdom of Monsters is footing the bill for Sans's room.

Also, I tried to come up with a visual for Sans's uniform and failed spectacularly. I am no artist (I can barely draw a straight line) and I couldn't get the look I wanted by piecing together pre-made pieces. I'm afraid you'll have to use your imagination. Mine says that Sans looks pretty badass in his getup, but to each their own.

Also also, this was very nearly where the story ended. I have a rather scatterbrained note in my documents to remind me that while putting the first draft of this chapter
together, I was nearly taken out by a reckless driver. I was making a turn and he didn't want to put his brakes on, and tried to swerve around me instead. (Bad move, from a physics perspective.) If he'd been going any slower he would've gone straight into my driver's side door. So if any of you are authorized to operate motor vehicles, please stay safe.

Well, that's it for another few days! Sans actually has a reputable job now. Good job, Sans! I'm sure this will in no way cause tensions in certain relationships you're slowly developing.

As always, thanks so much for taking the time to read my humble story, and double thanks to everyone who's left comments and kudos! You brighten my life.
In Which Monsters Celebrate

Chapter Summary

...A holiday that is actually rather tame, given the circumstances.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans stared at the items in his hands. Why he’d ever thought this was a good idea was beyond him.

It had started off so simply. In the Underground, clothing either had to be made by hand or repurposed from whatever fell into the old dump in Waterfall. It had been Sans’s job to clothe himself and his brother, and he’d been...decent at it. They were hardly fashionable (Papyrus had started dressing himself as soon as he was physically able, and wound up looking like a goth Halloween decoration) but they had adequate protection against attacks and the elements.

So. Soon after Papyrus declared himself Boss and began enforcing his rule with more violence than Sans had been comfortable with, he’d found a door. It was stupid - he couldn’t open it, and without some idea of what lay beyond he really couldn’t teleport to the other side - but he’d liked the door. It represented something new, something different. Something to hope for. An escape. Kinda like the barrier, now that he thought about it.

And yeah, okay, he may have told a few shitty jokes to himself out there, just for the sake of hearing his own voice, but it wasn’t like he’d expected anyone to talk back to him.

And yet, someone had. Tori - though he hadn’t known she was Toriel, Queen of Monsters at the time - was funny. Depressed as hell, and more than a little morbid, but when she put her mind to it she was hilarious. For someone who hadn’t heard a decent joke in years, even from his own mouth, she was a small miracle.

They bonded over dumb jokes and self-loathing, even if they would never have admitted to either. Maybe it was their sincere love of bad jokes, or maybe it was because there was a very solid door between them, but they became...allies, of a sort.

As allies, they exchanged stories and experiences. Sans heard all about life in the Ruins (the most boring place in the Underground) and Tori heard about Snowdin (a very close second). Once they realized that their respective lives were awfully dull, they moved on to something a little more practical: survival tips.

Like her daughter, Tori had an impressive fashion sense...and was very aware of the fact that Sans did not. She was hardly subtle about it. When he’d described the clothes he and his brother wore, she immediately offered her collection of knitting and crocheting patterns for him to choose from.

Yarn made from spun fiber was fairly common in the Underground, thanks in part to Muffet and her wild bands of spider mercenaries, so he agreed. He was never sure how she got them outside the door - there was never evidence of any evidence that it opened in any way - but from time to time he would find carefully copied patterns waiting for him at his spot.
He’d gotten pretty good at crocheting, actually, before everything went to hell in a handbasket.

Sans would’ve been content to live his life that way: avoiding Boss, swapping dumb jokes with Tori, slacking off work and bugging Grillby. A few cases as the Judge here and there, a few run-ins with Muffet, maybe a trip over to MTT’s arena if he needed to blow off some steam; everything was pretty good.

Then Alphys - mad scientist that she was - tried to come up with ‘the ultimate weapon’ and accidentally brought a certain prince back to life as a weepy, over-sensitive flower with horrifying powers, and Sans’s life had gone to shit.

Which led, more or less directly, to a skeleton sitting at his sentry post one evening in the middle of December with a bunch of soft brown yarn and a crochet hook he barely remembered how to use.

He had pulled and reworked the little disk he was trying to make several times already, but it still looked lumpy and misshapen to his eye sockets. With a sigh, he pulled the trailing end of the yarn to unravel his stitches - again - and grabbed the pattern out of his inventory.

What he was trying to make was a hat and mittens. Simple, right? He’d made much more complicated things Underground. Hell, he’d made Boss’s first few undershirts for his Royal Guard uniform; the Guard had armor aplenty, but hadn’t been equipped to deal with someone as...skinny as Boss. Some sort of padding to protect bone from harsh metal - and to keep the large armor on at all - was necessary, but trying to crochet around bones without a reliable pattern was awful.

He’d gone through a lot of yarn on those undershirts, more than he could’ve afforded at the time if he’d been inclined to pay. That was probably when Muffet had started that bounty on his head.

The point being, he should have been able to pick crocheting right back up. It was easy. Once upon a time he’d practically been able to do it in his sleep. He probably had done it in his sleep at least once.

But no matter how he twisted and looped and tucked and wrapped, everything kept coming out lopsided. The urge to tear the wimpy human yarn apart was growing stronger. Hmph. Muffet was one of the monsters who hadn’t elected to move to the Surface - she was ruling her extended family-slash-crime syndicate from a roomy cave on the border between Waterfall and Hotland, last he’d heard - but maybe he could armor up and pay her a visit?

Nah. He didn’t have the guts to go back to the Underground so soon after his confrontation with Asgore.

(Heh!)

He dutifully made a new loop and started crocheting a few stitches. He wanted to give up, but...sentry duty was terribly boring after dark. He adjusted his lantern so he could see better, then carefully connected his row together so it formed a small circle.

Well. That try didn’t look half bad, actually. Maybe he was actually getting somewhere. He made a few chain stitches and started on the second row.

It took him a few more false starts, but he managed to create what looked like a small skullcap by the time one of the heavy-armored guards who hailed from Hotland stomped up to his post, leaving steaming footsteps in the snow.

“...,” said the guard. “... ...”
Sans narrowed his eye sockets at the guard. “Whatever, pal. You here to take over?”

“....”

“Ooookay.” He barely remembered to snatch his project and slip it into his inventory before leaving his sentry post and heading back into town.

‘Christmas present in progress,’ his inventory called it. He felt his skull turning colors. How...embarrassing. Accurate, but embarrassing. Why did magic have to work on intent, anyways?

Okay, so he’d decided to make Frisk a Christmas gift. She was human; Christmas was a human holiday. If only she was a monster...but no.

Monsters were so much easier to deal with, sometimes. Their winter holiday - Takersfaire - was traditionally a time when everyone put out the crap they didn’t want in booths, and folks snuck around and stole what they liked from other booths. It kept them sharp, especially on the Surface where stealing was generally discouraged.

And sure, humans sometimes celebrated Takersfaire (even if they were too nice about it; most wouldn’t even take a half-hearted swing at a monster caught stealing from their booths) but he didn’t know if Frisk was one of them. He’d never seen her steal anything while watching his and Boss’s booth, but then again that was the point.

So...Christmas gift it was.

He felt stupid. He and Frisk were barely kind-of friends. But...he’d been cleaning out his closet, looking for a place to hide his new sock collection, and he’d come across his folder of crochet patterns. There was a pattern for a neat hat with matching mittens that he’d never gotten a chance to try, and on a whim he’d picked up some yarn while he was getting socks and gloves for his uniform.

Frisk just happened to be the only human adult he really knew; that was it. And the mittens, at least, were clearly designed for a human; he wasn’t sure how Tori had gotten ahold of the pattern, now that he thought about it. They were far too small for her and far too big for a skeleton, at least without serious modification.

He was going to justify it by making a matching set for Attie, but Christmas was only two weeks away. With the way his crochet skills were going he doubted he’d be able to finish anything.

Sans shuffled into his apartment (Boss was gone again) and flopped onto his couch. He didn’t know where this motivation to make things was coming from. Maybe it was because he’d taken to secretly working out between jobs sometimes; Undyne had been getting on his case, and he’d noticed shifts in his magic from the exertion. It was almost like he was...getting more energy, or something.

Mostly, it made him twitchy.

He sighed and took the ‘Christmas present in progress’ out of his inventory. Might as well do something useful.

That was his routine over the next week or so. He got up, went to his jobs, worked out (but not too much; he had a reputation to uphold) and slowly made progress on Frisk’s present. He was getting better at stitching; by the time he finished up the mittens, he was no longer pulling out rows for uneven stitches. He did have to redo a good portion of the left mitten because he’d gotten stressed...
out and pulled the stitches too tight, but that was just because he was a neurotic mess.

He was sitting in his sentry station one evening having just finished tying off the second mitten when he got a text from Undyne.

_Capn Undie 4:52 PM_
SO
You ARE coming to Takersfaire in New Home, RIGHT???

_Shit._ Right. Takersfaire was that evening. He knew he’d told Boss he wasn’t going, so he was probably working...right? He checked his inventory. The crumpled piece of scrap paper he’d written his work schedule on was one of five items labeled ‘Piece of junk,’ so it took him a bit to find it.

_You 5:03 PM_
Uh u have me working a double shift 2nite

_Capn Undie 5:12 PM_
CRAP I DO

_You 5:15 PM_
Yeah bcuz the dogi r still out
Puppies need food n stuff
Who knew

_Capn Undie 5:20 PM_
BUT THEN WHO WILL WATCH YOUR BOOTH???

_You 5:22 PM_
Boss...?

_Capn Undie 5:25 PM_
NO
HE’S TOO HARD ON THE KIDS
YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO DUST KIDS ON TAKERSFAIRE

_You 5:30 PM_
Wait he dusted a kid?
When was this?

_Capn Undie 5:34 PM_
Nah, I got him in time
BUT HE ALMOST DID

_You 5:39 PM_
I dont know what u want me to do about it

_Capn Undie 5:43 PM_
I WANT YOU TO
Wait
Oh. Nevermind.

_You 5:48 PM_
So am I working or what
Hello
Undyne?
Hello?

He leaned back in his seat, propping his feet up against his sentry post. Weird. What was that about?

Sans hadn’t actively participated in Takersfaire since he was a babybones, but he did usually watch his and Boss’s booth. He hated it. Strong monsters sometimes used Takersfaire as a time to show off: the fancier the booth, the more confident its owner was that he’d be able to hold onto all his items. It ran a little contrary to the spirit of things, but traditions were weird.

Because Boss was Boss, the skeleton brothers’ booth was always one of the most elaborate in the Kingdom of Monsters. Also because Boss was Boss, most of the items were bones. There were a few real goodies as well - electronics that Sans fixed up, plates of whatever Boss’s favorite dish was, envelopes of money, etc. - but mostly it was bones. Bone attacks, at that, just to make things a little less fair. Touching them wasn’t exactly what most folks would call safe. And yet, Sans was expected to guard it. And stay awake while doing so.

It worried Sans that Boss had taken the news that he was on duty during Takersfaire so well. A calm Boss always had something up his sleeve. He had no idea what it could be, though.

About an hour later, Sans was woken up from his usual nap by his text alert.

Capn Undie 6:55 PM
*1 picture message received
PUT YOUR EYE SOCKETS ON THIS

The picture was Undyne in full armor, posing dramatically, her helmet was tucked under one arm and the other around the shoulders of a human woman. The woman was wearing a beaked mask of dramatic red and orange feathers that matched the hues of her long, flowing dress. Sans couldn’t place the outfit’s reference (some sort of bird??), but after a careful examination he was stunned to recognize the woman as Frisk.

He was so distracted that he almost missed Attie by Frisk’s side, which would have been a tragedy. Her face was painted in an obvious facsimile of a skull, and she was wearing a hooded onesie with the pattern of a skeleton printed on it. He considered being mildly offended (humans and their obsession with naked skeletons were a source of constant confusion for him) but Attie had put a pink skirt on over top.

You 7:04 PM
Wow
I don’t recognize those monsters
Who r they?

Capn Undie 7:10 PM
*3 picture messages received

The first two pictures were both of a twirling Attie. Behind her was a booth decorated in ribbons and strands of beads, a large Delta Rune symbol on the front. The ambassador and her daughter had brought what looked like chocolate cookies in cheerful baggies, as well as some small toys and colorful pieces of clothing. There was nothing particularly expensive, but the items were personal and useful...especially to those who still lived in the Underground.

The final picture was of Frisk. She was looking at something off to her left, her head turned to
expose the gentle curves of her neck and shoulders. One hand was raised, lifting the mask just enough to reveal her face. She was smiling, the same way she always smiled at Attie.

On the table behind her, one of the bags of cookies was missing.

Sans put his head down on the counter of his station, trying to control his trembling arms. This was the woman he’d killed - sometimes slowly and painfully - dozens of times. Maybe hundreds of times. His memories of previous timelines had always been a little fuzzy; he didn’t know, really, how much pain he’d caused her.

And yet…

Don’t. Don’t even think it. It’s pointless. It will only bring heartbreak.

...and yet...some part of him seemed to gravitate towards her. She wasn’t just the young woman who broke the barrier, or the Kingdom of Monsters’ primary ambassador, or even Attie’s mother. She wasn’t just someone he’d had an on-and-off passive-aggressive feud with for the past eight years.

She was someone who cared enough to advocate on his behalf. He had no doubt that she was the one who had sicced Undyne on him. Undyne rarely cared for anyone but herself (unless caffeine was involved), and yet she’d gone out of her way to help him on multiple occasions. She’d befriended him.

He owed Frisk a lot.

Staying out of her life so he wouldn’t drag her down seemed like a small price to pay for all she’d done for his sorry ass, but…

“Attie misses you.”

...was that really the best option? He really didn’t know what was “best” anymore. He was beginning to doubt that Boss knew what was best, and the past ten years of his life had revolved around the fact that Boss always knew what was best. The obvious course of action would be to talk to Frisk or someone close to her, but his soul clenched at the thought.

It was a fear of rejection, he realized. If Undyne or Tori or someone else who knew Frisk well told him to stay away from her, he would have no reason to wonder. He would have no reason to hope. It was...more frightening than he wanted to admit.

Capn Undie 7:58 PM
OF BONEHEAD!!!!
ARE YOU ASLEEP???

You 8:05 PM
Nah
They look cool
Thanks for the pics

Capn Undie 8:07 PM
YEAH!!! They clean up nice, don’t they?
Hey, Attie wants to stop by your station after this.

You 8:10 PM
You wanna let a kid go tramping down the mountain in the dark and the cold?
Also it just started snowing
Again

*Capn Undie 8:19 PM*
Fishsticks
Frisk got pulled into a meeting
Maybe another time
BUT
I’m gonna take LOTS more pictures
So many pictures it’s gonna BLOW YOUR PHONE UP
But I’m NOT gonna send them to you YET
I HAVE A PLAN
GO VISIT ALPHYS SOON
I PUT UP WITH HER FOR AN HOUR AND I WON’T LET IT GO TO WASTE

*You 8:31 PM*
Fine

Sans groaned. He’d been putting off going to see Alphys as long as possible (her broken surveillance equipment was still burning a hole in his inventory), but it looked like his luck had run out. He really did need to see her records, and if Undyne was willing to consult the Royal Scientist about something...well. It was probably important.

Everyone knew Undyne and Alphys had hated each other for years, ever since that little incident where Alphys had ‘accidentally’ added something experimental to the captain’s tea during a meeting, and Undyne had responded by trying to get the scientist fired. Neither had ever forgiven the other, though Alphys remained disturbingly obsessed in that odd way she tended to fixate.

Regardless, Sans had a pretty good idea of what Alphys was messing with, and he didn’t blame Undyne for her reaction. It was one of the reasons he avoided Alphys in general. If she was trying to dose people with what he thought she was using...

He put his head back onto the sentry station counter. Dozing through the rest of his shift seemed like a great option. He almost managed it, too, but a distant bark from Lesser Dog at the next station over woke him up about half an hour before the end of their shift.

Teleporting over, he evaluated the situation. There was an abundance of dog tracks in the thin layer of snow, but Lesser Dog was...completely fine??

“Heya, LD. Heard your alert. What’s up?”

*Lesser Dog is fine! And not hiding anyone!*  

“Oh-huh. Do I need to get Undyne?”

*No!*  

“’Cause you know she’ll be upset if she has to leave her party to deal with something out here.”  

*Lesser Dog is not hiding anyone!* 

“LD...”

A shifting under Lesser Dog’s station revealed two white pointed ears and a small black nose against the backdrop of snow. The nose twitched, then retreated.
Lesser Dog tried - and failed - to look like he hadn’t noticed.

“And who was that?

The sentry gave a huff and woofed something Sans didn’t catch. A sleek grey female dog and a white puppy wiggled out from under the wooden counter, ears pulled back and tails low.

It took him a moment to recognize Lesser Dog’s mate and pup. The puppy had been born not long before Frisk fell into the Underground, and was - if Sans recalled correctly - the only survivor from his litter. He didn’t know how long dog monsters took to grow up, but the pup was still in stripes. So...longer than actual dogs, then.

“Celebratin’ Takersfaire, then?”

*Yes,* the female woofed. *Darker Dog was a bad girl for bringing Tiny Dog up here. Sorry. Please do not report Lesser Dog to fish-captain.*

The sadistic part of Sans wanted to, just because it was funny watching the dogs squirm. Besides, he knew Undyne wouldn’t be too hard on them; she needed every available sentry, she didn’t believe in dusting kids, and it wouldn’t make sense to punish Darker Dog when the other two were off the hook.

“Eh, don’t worry about it. You helpin’ your dad keep an eye out for humans, pup?”

Tiny Dog yipped excitedly. He clearly shared none of his parents’ concerns about consequences.

“As long as everyone’s safe. Hey, let me know if you run into any trouble, ‘kay, LD?”

Lesser Dog woofed his surprised agreement and gave his mate a fond lick on the mouth. Sans immediately retreated back to his own station; the dogs were notoriously shameless when it came to PDA, and he did not need to see that.

He’d just sat down and settled in when his phone buzzed again. He unlocked it, expecting to see more pictures from Undyne, but was instead greeted by the harsh and imposing features of his younger brother.

**Boss 1:44 AM**

IN YOUR ABSENCE, I HAVE SUCCESSFULLY DEFENDED OUR BOOTH!!

*I picture message received*

Boss had decorated the booth himself over the past week, entirely without Sans’s help (for once). It was black and appeared to be covered in tiny white painted bones of various kinds. Whatever Boss’s flaws, he had a good eye for style...and a lot of patience with things that held his attention.

An elaborate bone display was set up on and around the booth. A few plates of something (lasagna, maybe) were barely visible through the latticework, but he couldn’t quite make it out.

**You 1:48 AM**

Nice boss

**Boss 1:54 AM**

I WILL HAVE NONE OF YOUR SLANDER!!
I AM NOT A NICE MONSTER!!
I AM CRUEL AND FEARED BY ALL, HUMAN AND MONSTER!!
THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE PAPYRUS, SCOURGE OF THE UNDERGROUND!!
“I’m here to take over for ya,” said a gruff voice.

Sans pocketed his phone and looked up. “Heya, Doggo.”


“Uh-huh.”

“Grrrr. Get out of here, bone bag.”

Sans smirked and walked back towards the barrier. As soon as he was clear, he teleported straight home. He didn’t care if Boss punished him for it; two six-hour shifts back to back were exhausting enough without having to walk an hour back into town.

He fell asleep to dreams of a little skeleton girl in a pink dress who kept burying him in leaf piles, and asking him why he was crying on such a happy day.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: There's quite a bit of scientific evidence that doing good things for someone, even if he doesn't notice, can improve your relationship with him. It boosts your personal happiness, motivation, and empathy as well.

Just...apropos of nothing.

Also, I have visuals for this chapter! Frisk is wearing an outfit based on the idea of a phoenix, or fire-bird. The closest I've found to what I'm picturing:

Mask: Phoenix mask by taeliac (WIP here)
Dress (style, colors are different): Party Dress by Ever-Pretty

Attie is wearing:
Onesie: Skeleton Costume by Mega Fancy Dress
Skirt: Spring Mood A-line Skirt in Lilac by chicwish

Thanks for putting up with my nonsense, y'all. More...on Sunday, probably.
In Which Alphys is Terrible

Chapter Summary

...And Sans, for once, is not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mornings after a double shift were always a wash for Sans. At least it was the weekend; no one expected his hot dog stand to be open on weekends, though it often was.

Boss had long since headed out. The remains of the Takersfaire booth were occupying the dining room, making navigation difficult, but Sans managed to get into the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. He figured he might as well run errands since he had nothing planned until his sentry shift that evening.

Since he hadn’t quite come to terms with facing the Royal Scientist just yet, he made his way down to the bus stop instead. He needed to pay a visit to the one person who would probably be willing to pass on his Christmas gift without either freaking out or telling Boss.

Tori’s place was in a real fancy neighborhood. Real fancy. Guards-posted-outside levels of fancy. Lobbyists, politicians, businessmen who’d done well for themselves...it was like a gathering of the most powerful people in the city, possibly the country. The level of protection was such that Sans didn’t even want to think of teleporting, so he took public transportation as close as he could and walked.

Tori had admitted to him, once, that she felt a little uncomfortable in such a large and elaborate mansion. She’d lived in the Ruins longer than Sans had been alive, after all; she was used to a much more modest lifestyle. Having her own house was a condition of her reconciliation with Asgore, though, and she’d been angry enough at the time to take full advantage of it.

Sans let himself through the gate, ignoring the stoic monsters stationed there. He didn’t recognize them. The Queen’s Guard was mostly comprised of really old monsters and monsters from the Ruins, though, so it wasn’t surprising.

With a smirk, he knocked on the door.

There was no answer. Not unusual - Tori was a busy monster - but disappointing. After all, he was pretty sure he’d promised to visit her at some point...and it had been a while since he’d seen her...

He took the hat and mittens out of his inventory and, feeling a little silly, put them on the doorstep. He had a notepad and pen handy for when he went record-diving with Alphys, so he tore a page off and wrote:

for frisk

His handwriting was distinctive enough; Tori would know who it was from. Actually, that would probably make her less likely to give it to Frisk. After a moment’s thought, he added:
There. He felt like he’d actually achieved something.

He rode the bus just long enough to clear the protections, then slipped into a deserted alleyway behind a bus stop and teleported. It took him half an hour and several jumps, but he finally made his way back up to the top of Mount Ebott.

A new, separate entrance to the Underground had been carved out a few years back so people coming and going didn’t have to pass through the Palace. Sans teleported there, instead of to his post in the Judgement Hall, in the hopes of avoiding Asgore. No need to test his temper.

The walk through Hotland was a lot nicer than it used to be, especially the visitor-friendly portions. Reflective shielding had been put up over most of the walkways to protect squishy humans from the heat and water stations stood on almost every corner.

“Wanna buy some water, sir?” An enterprising young pyrope in striped shoes was standing by one of the stations, balancing a stack of paper cups carefully. A small plume of smoke rose from where he was holding them.

Sans smirked. “Don’t con a conman, kid. The water’s free ‘round here. Can’t have humans dropping dead left and right. ‘Sides, I’m all bones.”

The kid jerked back, apparently realizing that he was speaking to a monster instead of a short human. “Shut up, you stupid jerk! Humans buy water all the time! They’re dumb like that!” His agitation made flames erupt and consume the cups, and he dropped them with a curse that wasn’t exactly age-appropriate.

The anticipation was getting to him, making his fingers twitch in his pockets. “You’re lucky I’m in a bad mood today,” he grumbled as he wandered off.

“Oh? Why’s that, you dumbo?”

“Because otherwise, you and I would have a great time.” He let his eye socket flare for a moment, the threat of a beatdown burning bright.

The kid shrieked and stumbled off.

See? That was the reaction most kids had to Sans. Not the hugging and the questions and the dressing up as a skeleton. He ignored the part of himself that felt a little guilty made his way further into Hotland.

Alphys’s lab was a little off the beaten path, literally and figuratively. The fastest way to get there involved cutting through two businesses, an abandoned sentry post, and someone’s basement. Sans was pretty sure the basement was one Alphys had commandeered for her projects, though, so he wasn’t too worried about being caught.

The lab entrance itself was disguised as a suspiciously-shaped outcropping of rock with a very conspicuous keypad to the side, between signs that read “DEFINITELY NOT A LAB” and “DANGER: DO NOT ENTER (ACTUALLY, PLEASE ENTER, WE NEED MORE TEST SUBJECTS).”

Subtlety was...not one of the Royal Scientist’s strong suits. Unlike killer robots.

Sans could have teleported inside quite easily, but he was trying to conserve magic. Also, it was
funny watching Alphys try to run around trying to figure out how he *always* discovered her passcodes. He punched the most recent passcode in, dodged both mechanical arms that lashed and tried to grab potential intruders, and ducked inside.

The upper portion of the lab looked like a mix between a child’s bedroom and the set of a cheesy, low-budget human horror film. A rickety old iron bed stood in one corner, half-hidden behind a wall of zombie posters and half-decapitated dolls with glassy eyes. Every light bulb in the place flickered, to the point where Sans - who normally wasn’t sensitive to changes in brightness - found himself wincing. Dilapidated shelves had been scavenged for the sole purpose of hanging broken and empty in rows along the walls, draped in spider webs. A big flat-screen TV had been rigged to only display black and white, and was currently flickering between a rotating security feed and ominous static.

The scientist herself was nowhere to be seen. Sans checked around the place, tripping over rocks and detritus and a disturbing amount of glass eyeballs, until he finally located the trap door to the *real* lab. The dumb lizard had put a bookcase and a rug over it, which was a pain. Just because *she* liked relying on the shaky and accident-prone elevator didn’t mean people with less HP wanted to do the same.

The ladder from the trap door descended several floors down to an abandoned storage closet, which was *also* barricaded. Guess he hadn’t been down in the real lab for a while. He broke the door open with a wave of bones, utterly fed up with this shit now.

“AAAAAAAAaaooh, Sans, it’s just you.”

The skeleton took a deliberate glance around the room, brow raised. He wished he’d thought to record that; Undyne would probably have paid good money for it. Also: “*Just* me? Why, Alphys, I’m *hurt*. Is that any way to greet an old pal?”

“Sh-shut up,” she growled. She brushed herself off - apparently whatever had been in front of his door had narrowly missed her, which was a pity - and stomped further into her lab, growling obscenities.

The real lab was more practical than the movie set above, with white walls and grey concrete floors that hid the dust. A heap of broken electronics filled one corner of the work room, dead camera eyes glaring out from it. There was no evidence of live test subjects at the moment, which left Sans more relieved than he cared to admit; he didn’t need any reminders of how far Alphys had fallen.

“So. Why are you here, Sans?”

She looked irritated, and probably with good reason. He decided to lead off with a peace offering. “Here,” he said, removing the broken cameras and microphone from his inventory and putting them *gently* on a nearby work desk. “Thought you might like these back, for a start.”

“YOU...YOU ASSHOLE!!!”

Okay, so, *that* plan was a bust. “Why’re you yellin’ at me? I ain’t the one who broke ‘em.”

“THE HELL YOU WEREN’T, YOU…AGH...SH...PFFFFFF!” She sputtered, as if no language she knew could adequately convey her outrage.

“Really, though, I’m just doin’ you a favor here. You could thank me.”

The hand gesture she made was somewhat less than polite and not really useful to a skeleton.
After a bit more sputtering and a few failed attempts at obscenity, she did eventually scuttle over to the work desk to evaluate her equipment. She sniffed a little at the torn wires and immediately started scavenging replacements from the mechanical nightmare in the corner.

“What are you here for, a-anyways?” she asked, once she was settled in with a pair of wire strippers and some tiny screwdrivers. “You aren’t exactly the philanthropic t-type.”

“Well, as it happens, I need access to files.”

“Which ones?”

“The ones on what’s-her-face...y’know, the freak who attacked the ambassador.”

“Graciela Lira? What do you need to know about her for?”

Sans grinned wide. “You’re not supposed to ask questions about that. King’s orders.”

“I wa-wasn’t...I was wondering aloud! Y-you jackass!”

“Oh, sure. The king’ll love to hear how you’re ‘wondering aloud’ about things you’re not supposed to question. Or maybe the queen will be interested? You had another loooong talk with her a few weeks back, didn’t you?”

“How the hell did you find out about that?!?”

“I’m a skeleton of ineffable mystery.” Also, he was a patron at Grillby’s and was good at going unnoticed while certain individuals got roaringly drunk. And if one of those individuals knew someone who knew someone who was a member of the Queen’s Guard, well, that wasn’t Sans’s fault, now was it?

Whatever Alphys grumbled under her breath probably wasn’t pleasant, but it was quiet enough to ignore. He glanced around her workspace as she shuffled off to grab his files.

She’d been working on something that was shaped vaguely like a hand, but with unpleasantly long fingers. It wasn’t finished - the palm was an open mess of wires and half the fingers were still in pieces - but the quality of the work looked good, from what he could see. The framework had the bluish tinge of new metal and the neat bundles of tiny wires were coated with bright rubber. This wasn’t scavenged; this was being built from new materials.

A loud thud shocked him out of his examination. “Here’s your crap,” Alphys muttered. “It can’t leave the lab. There’s an empty o-office in the back. Now get l-lost and stop messing with my projects.”

The three-ring binder Alphys had retrieved was hefty, and seemed to contain more loose pages than punched ones. “And you couldn’t just put this on a thumb drive...why?”

The lizard grumbled something about security and how paper couldn’t be hacked. Her paranoia had only gotten worse, apparently.

“Also, I heard you have video files?”

A DVD rolled lazily into his line of sight. Sans looked askance at her.

“Can’t put video on paper,” she sighed. “And the king forbade me from using cassettes y-years ago. Probably because I used a security tape to s-strangle an uncooperative test subject that one
Oooookay. “Welp! I’m off. You want me to just leave this back there or…?” He waved the binder.

“Yeah, just...w-wait, I almost forgot.” She pulled a small black box out of a drawer in her desk and tossed it at him. “Now get your boney a-ass out of here before I decide to s-stick a needle in it.”

“Why, Alph! I didn’t know you cared!”

He dodged a small bullet shaped like a scalpel on his way over to the office she’d indicated. A sigh of relief escaped him once there was a closed door between him and the mad scientist. That hadn’t been nearly as bad as he’d been expecting; Alphys must be having one of her better days.

He’d nearly been dusted by a wayward laser the last time he’d visited the lab, a few years back. Between the weird goopy monsters she’d sicced on him (and Tori had not been happy to find out about the goopy monsters) and the magic dampening field she’d been working with, he hadn’t had the room or the energy to teleport. If he’d been a few moments slower…

Shaking off that line of thinking, he slipped the box into his inventory to examine later and opened the binder. Pages and pages of printed photos fell out, so he looked them over first.

The young woman in the pictures bore a strange resemblance to Frisk, actually. He laid his phalanges over a picture of her in a white sundress, standing on a pier over what looked like an endless ocean. Seeing her in a different light (both literally and figuratively) emphasized the shape of her cheekbones and the point of her nose. She was built a bit differently - taller and scrawnier than Frisk, if his eye sockets weren’t lying to him - but the way she carried herself was familiar. ‘Course, that could be because humans were a lot harder to tell apart than monsters were. They all looked so much alike: two arms, two legs, two eyes, one head. It was confusing. He set aside the pictures and flipped through the binder until he found Alphys’s summary. Why she was the one in charge of summarizing the report Sans wasn’t sure, but the Royal Scientist had many responsibilities that were a little strange. It probably kept her out of trouble, so that was a plus.

The document was messy, full of crossed out words and handwritten notes. Alphys had never gotten into the habit of using a computer for her reports, or - at the very least - using white-out instead of scribbling over herself when she made mistakes. He sighed; he was lazy, but at least he could write neatly enough when it counted.

What he gathered from the haphazardly-written pages was this:

Graciela Lira was born Maria Lopez roughly 32 years back. She was the second-oldest of seven children born to a human baker and her mage husband. Little Maria had been a problem child from a young age - there were old school reports attached that some reporter had dug up, showing everything from absenteeism to outright assault of other students - but her family insisted that it was because of mental illness. Her grades were surprisingly good, despite that.

Which made figuring out her mental illness somewhat challenging. Sans was personally of the opinion that the girl was just a little shit, but apparently she had been sent from doctor to doctor in search of a diagnosis. Someone had finally pegged her with some kind of behavioral disorder (the terminology didn’t make a lot of sense to him) and given her enough medication to make her parents happy. She’d seen some kind of shrink through high school and medical school, then had abruptly stopped shortly after.
Interestingly, the time when Maria stopped her appointments corresponded very closely to the breaking of the barrier. There were some scribbled notes in the margins of the report that indicated Alphys had realized this as well, though Sans couldn’t make out what, exactly, she was so excited about. Regardless, Maria had seen the news about monsters, then...disappeared.

She showed up a few years later as Graciela Lira, a pediatrician specializing in monsters. She was respected by her colleagues but not very well-liked. Her official record revealed that she had been involved in three accidents that ended in monster children dusting, but she had been cleared of any fault. Sans made a note to look into those further; accidents happened, even in healing, but it wouldn’t hurt to be sure.

And...that was it.

The copy of the human investigative report (typed up very neatly) gave a little more detail. Graciela had no friends, and didn’t keep in touch with her family. No significant other. The only hobby she’d admitted to was her involvement in some kind of anti-religion protest group; nothing that gave any sign of resentment against monsters.

Although...there was something interesting in one of the interview transcripts the human police had attached. There were rumors (unconfirmed, unfortunately) that Graciela had been involved in a group called Equality for All shortly out of college. Despite the name, the goals of the group had been downright sinister: complete segregation of humans and monsters under the guise of “equal rights.”

Sans remembered meeting with their representatives when monsters first came to the surface and he’d found himself dragged into all kinds of political debates to provide “a different perspective.” They had spun some pretty story about safety and equality, painting vivid pictures of how “oppressed” monsters couldn’t be expected to live with their “oppressors,” but when Tori supported an integrated monster-human school system they had gotten upset. Really upset. Throwing-rocks-through-school-windows upset.

They had even started attacking people in the street, in broad daylight, claiming that those people were "monster haters." Actually...now that he thought about it, some of those protests were recorded. The group had never gained widespread support, but the videos had helped push public opinion in favor of monsters and against EFA, especially when Tori had been ambushed for a few hours by the group after one of her meetings. Maybe something useful was still floating around on the internet.

The laptop that Alphys had left him was powered, but not connected to the internet. Of course. He sighed, but popped the DVD in anyways.

It was the security footage of the attack, neatly edited down to the actual events in question. The attack had been recorded from two different angles, shown side-by-side on the screen. Graciela had entered the room, woken Sans up, and sent him and Attie outside. After they were gone, she had very quickly swapped out Frisk’s medicine bag with the one she’d been carrying. She didn’t consult one of those tablets the doctors carried around, or even the screen on the wall above Frisk’s bed.

As she was making the switch, Frisk had woken up and asked her something. The audio was too low to make out what was said, but Frisk apparently took issue with the response and began struggling, forcing Graciela to hold her down. That was when the door opened and Sans and Attie walked in. The rest of the fight went as Sans remembered it, but he looked it over just in case.

Graciela clearly hadn’t been expecting any resistance. She carried no weapons (the police report
confirmed that nothing unusual had been found on her) and didn’t appear to be trained in any kind of combat. Her swings had been wide, uncoordinated and easily dodged.

So...why risk her job, her reputation, and possibly even her life to attack Frisk?

On that note: if she really was part of EFA, why would she attack the *monster ambassador*? Sure, the group was hardly working in the best interests of monsters, but most of them had at least gone after people who were supposedly working *against* monsters, regardless of what the truth actually was. Attacking people who disagreed with her also seemed like an odd hobby for a nurse who primarily worked with monster children. Unless...

Sans cursed the lack of internet access in the lab. He really needed to get out. He closed the laptop, stuck his notepad back in his inventory, and stepped back out into the hallway... and promptly tripped.

He glanced down. “Ugh...really, Alph?”

A stuttering chuckle came from further down the hallway. “Oh, don’t mind me...”

The object he’d tripped over was a small shirt. A small *striped* shirt. “You know you’re not s’posed to experiment on kids, you sicko.”

“Ha...ha...ha...and are you going to stop me, Sans?”

He followed her voice into a small examination room. A little maroon fire elemental was strapped to a table, dressed in only a medical gown. The kid looked like she’d been struggling; and from the look of the scalpel the mad scientist was holding, she had good reason to.

“Alphys,” he said, carefully keeping his voice slow and even, “That’s enough. Let the kid go.”

“Nooo...”

“Let the kid go, Alphys. Do you really wanna get in trouble again?”

“But I need to,” she whined, inching closer to the examination table. “I have to...you d-don’t understand! The way it feels, to hold a life in your hands...to watch someone wriggle and fight...to see the light leave their eyes as you-”

The blue bone that went through the arm holding the scalpel was half-formed, but it held.

“S-Sans, stop! D-don’t hurt me!”

“No one has to get hurt here. Just don’t move and let me take the kid.”

“I...I can’t! No one will miss it! It’s just an orphan k-kid!”

“You gonna tell me how to get the kid out, or do I gotta make you?”

There was a long pause. The fire girl on the table had returned from wherever she’d gone in her head and was shaking, her little pointed face turned towards Sans. He’d known Grillby long enough to read elementals’ expressions a bit, and he could plainly see her desperation.


He left her pinned while he tried out the code, and to his surprise it actually worked. The girl
flinched when he pulled the restraints off but didn’t fight him. She didn’t let him pick her up, though, and instead wiggled off the table to stand beside him on shaky legs, arms clutched around her in a sad parody of a hug.

“We’re gonna head out,” Sans said to the room in general. “The bone’ll vanish when we get out of here.”

Alphys didn’t like that and tried to struggle, but only succeeded in lowering her HP by a few points. She growled something surprisingly obscene at him when he stuck a second blue bone through one foot for good measure.

“Right back at ya. It’s been fun, as always.”

The fire girl followed him back down the hallway, through the work rooms, up the ladder and out of the lab. To his surprise, she didn’t immediately bolt, but trailed him at an easy distance until he reached a small alcove free of surveillance equipment.

“So. Kid. What’s your name?”

“Pele,” she whispered...out loud and in English, actually, which was surprising. “…Thanks.”

“Eh, ’ts nothin’, kid. Now. Is Alphys right ‘bout you not havin’ a place to go?”

“...Yes…”

“Hmm.” An idea began to form in Sans’s head. It was a stupid idea. A really, really stupid idea. But then, weren’t all his ideas stupid ones? “Hey. If you wanna stay here for a bit, there aren’t any cameras. I have another place you can go were I might be able to get you some more help. At least you’ll be safe. I can, uh, run and grab you some better clothes first; I’m sure you’ll be more comfortable.”

“...Why…?”

“Why do you havta wear clothes, or why am I gonna grab you clothes?”

“...Why...help...?”

“Oh. Heh.” It was a good question, actually. Monsters didn’t really do things like that unless they were related or stupid, but he’d already justified that to himself. “Let’s just say you remind me of someone. And that I’ll take any chance I get to piss Alphys off. How’s that?”

“...Okay…”

He hesitated as he left. There wasn’t any guarantee that the girl - Pele - would be there when he returned. Sans remembered living on the street; if someone had swooped in, rescued him, and offered to buy him clothes he would’ve been extremely skeptical. And possibly violent.

But...what else could he do? Leave her in Alphys’s hands?

There was a small store that catered to fire-type monsters not too far from the lab. It was open and rather busy; even the fire monsters who lived on the surface had a hard time during winter, and many chose to split their time between the surface and the Underground. Sans grabbed a striped shirt and some pants - guessing at sizes - and got in line behind a rather feisty Madjik.

The pyrope cashier eyed him very strangely. “Is this for...you?”
“No. Uh. Friend’s kid wrecked her clothes, ‘n he called in a favor to have me pick up more.”

“Ah. What kind of monster?”

“Elemental. Fire elemental.”

“I see. You’ll want the ones on the yellow rack in the corner, then, or you’ll be right back here in ten minutes. Not that I’d mind the business, of course, but I don’t want a kid to suffer because you’re a moron.”

Sans found the rack the pyrope had pointed out and grabbed a different set of clothes. These ones, he noticed, had tags in Elemental instead of Monster: a good sign, he guessed.

His purchase was rung up without too much hassle (though the pyrope clearly disapproved of his fashion choices) and he made his way back towards the alcove. The girl was still there, waiting for him, although from the way she jumped when he turned the corner he suspected she trusted him about as much as he trusted her.

*Fair enough.*

“Hey. I’ve got a change of clothes for ya. Wanna pop back behind that rock there and get changed?”

The girl did as he asked, confusion evident in her every movement. She returned with the burnt remains of her medical gown in one hand and a cheeky grin on her face.

“So. Uh. I have a friend on the Surface who’s always complainin’ about not havin’ enough help. I think you’d like ‘im. He gets a little *fired up* sometimes, but he’s alright. You wanna go see ‘im?”

“...Okay…”?

The walk out of Hotland was long, both because Pele’s legs were even shorter than Sans’s and because she refused to get close enough for him to teleport them both to the Surface. By the time they finally reached the entrance, it was dark. He was probably late for his shift.

Sans had resigned himself to a long, *long* walk down the mountain when he turned and...the kid wasn’t there. He backtracked a little. “Heh. Haven’t seen the sky, huh, kid?”

“...No…”

“Gotcha.” He relaxed his shoulders and let his skull fall back. The stars really were something.

“...We...can go...now,” she said after a few minutes of stargazing. She looked a little overwhelmed, and she hadn’t even seen the humans yet.

Sans grinned. “Sure thing, kid.”

Making his way back through the layers of magical protection was a little harder with a tag-along. He knew how to avoid sentries and keep from setting off alarms, but it was more draining than traveling alone. At least by the time they reached the edge of the outermost barrier, the kid had relaxed enough to let him hold her hand.

After several teleports (during which Pele seized up in a concerning way) the pair found themselves in the alleyway behind Grillby’s.
“Well, here we are,” Sans said.

Pele looked around very slowly, like she thought he’d drop her off in some random back alleyway.

The skeleton grinned and knocked on the bar’s back door. It took a few minutes, but a familiar grumpy face appeared.

“...Sans...” Grillby growled, before switching to his own native language. “What are you up to this time?”

“Got a...a business proposition for ya,” Sans said, shifting to one side.

Grillby’s grip on the door tightened, and his flames flared ominously. “Pele? Is that...”

The girl bolted.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: while technology is improving, there are very few things that can make life on the surface comfortable for many types of monsters. Many spend time on the surface seasonally, then retreat back to their homes when the weather becomes inhospitable. Frisk and her staff are in talks with several building companies to set up fully enclosed towns, designed to be self-sufficient and climate-controlled, but eight years is too short a time for such projects to reach maturity. Work has begun on a few of them, though, and many monsters are desperate for them to be finished.

The Underground is not a nice place to be.

That said, Sans may have improved life for one little fire elemental. Possibly. Guess we’ll see Wednesday, hmm?

Thanks so much to everyone who's read and left kudos and comments! We're approaching an average of 100 readers per chapter, which is my personal goal, and I cannot express how excited and grateful I am! You guys inspire me to write and post, even on weeks like this. Have a great one, and I’ll be back with more in a few days.
In Which Sans Has a Heart

Chapter Summary

...But only a figurative one. And he's still an asshole.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sans! Get her!” a voice crackled in Elemental.

Sans was already hot on Pele’s heels. Literally. Even if he didn’t have a trail of light and warmth to follow in the dark alleyway, she was disoriented and confused in a strange new place. He couldn’t let her disappear into the night with no way to find shelter, regardless of what was going on with Grillby.

It was easy enough to catch the sleeve of her sweater in his phalanges just as she reached the main street. She stiffened, just like she had when he’d held her hand to teleport, but didn’t lash out. A glance over his shoulder showed that Grillby was still a safe distance away, hands raised and flames carefully controlled.

“Hey, kid. Why don’t ya tell me what’s eatin’ you, huh?”

The fire girl just shuddered and curled in on herself while trying to put as much distance between herself and her captured arm as possible.

“Ooookay, wanna tell me why Grillbz knew your name, and why you don’t want anything to do with him? ‘Cause I thought I was real clever, y’know, findin’ you a place to stay, but we can try someone else if you’d rather.”

“...Who...?”

That was a good question, actually. “I...uh...I know the Captain of the Royal Guard. She’s pretty, uh, intense, but she could probably find you a warm bed. I’m gonna hafta tell her about you anyways, so she can get started on your papers and whatnot. Or the queen-”

“...That’s...alright...”

“I understand Elemental if it’s easier for you to speak.”

She started struggling. That didn’t seem to be the right thing to say at all.

Movement in the corner of Sans’s eye socket made him turn to see Grillby slowly walking up, carefully avoiding piles of snow that had blown in. A few intermittent snowflakes evaporated in the agitated flames of his exposed head, almost painfully bright against the night sky.

“Pele,” the bartender said in flickering Elemental, both hands raised. “Why are you here?”

She remained silent, but stopped trying to escape. Her flames gave resigned little flickers.
“I, uh, brought her here,” Sans said when it became apparent that she wasn’t going to respond. “She said she didn’t have anywhere else to go. Found her in Alphys’s lab.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Uh. Alphys said she was an orphan.”

Grillby stopped, his flames still wavering. He looked...devastated. Sans had never seen the grouchy bartender look anything but angry or frustrated. Not even when he left his old joint in the Underground, the one he’d built up for decades.

After a moment, the older elemental collected himself and gave a little sigh-like noise. He smoothed out a little, more like a candle flame than a wind-whipped bonfire. “Why don’t we go inside and talk. I need to tend to the bar and I am sure it would be more comfortable for both of you.”

The obvious joke was on the tip of Sans’s proverbial tongue, but he didn’t want to set Grillbz off. The guy’s temper was on a hair trigger at the best of times, after all. Instead, he carefully released Pele and followed her inside, ready to catch her if she decided to bolt again.

She didn’t. She did maintain a careful distance from both adults, but she stepped through the doorway without too much fuss.

Her flames flickered in obvious surprise when she got a good look at the interior of the bar. What could be seen from the back hallway - the doorways to the kitchen and one of the private rooms, and the stairs to the upper level - wasn’t fancy, but it was a definite step up from the old Grillby’s in Snowdin. Had she expected some seedy dive?

Grillby led them to the private room and left, citing bartending duties, but he looked a little shaky. Pele still wasn’t talking.

And Sans really didn’t know what to do. He texted Lesser Dog to ask him to keep an extra eye out and got an enthusiastic response, but that didn’t answer any of the real questions of the evening. Sans had saved the kid on a whim, really. If she’d been older, if he hadn’t found that little striped sweater in the lab hallway, he probably would have ducked his head and continued on his way. That’s what was expected of monsters. But…

“...Sorry…” Pele was curling in on herself, her flames flickering lowly like the dying embers of a campfire.

“Ts fine, kid. Were you, uh, down in the lab long?”

“...I...don’t know…”

He hummed. She couldn't have been down there more than a few days, not with the way Alphys was acting. Still...an awkward silence fell. What was there to say to a kid he’d pulled, pretty much at random, out of a situation where she’d been guaranteed a long and painful death at the hands of a mad scientist?

“So. You. Uh, you know Grillby?”

“...No...”

That didn’t sound like a lie, but it didn’t sound like the whole truth either. He wanted to scream.
Trying to get answers out of elementals was, in his experience, an exercise in futility. Getting answers out of an elemental who wouldn’t speak was on a whole ‘nother level.

It was a surprise, then, when she continued in broken Elemental.

“Grill-by was...father’s brother. What call?”

“Uncle is the word we use, kid. Can’t pronounce Elemental properly with this jaw,” he tapped the aforementioned body part, “so I’m not sure how you’d say it, but...yeah. Grillby’s your uncle, huh.”

“...Uncle...” Pele crackled in English before switching back. “There was...big fight. No talking for much time. Mother and father not want to go...up? Go out? Too much ties. Connection? But...hmm. Thought Grill-by...would be angry.”

“So Grillbz and your parents fought, and you lost contact. Then your parents didn’t want to go to the surface?”

The girl nodded.

“You said they had ties - some kind of connection - to the Underground. Were they part of a gang?”

“Sparks,” the girl said, holding her left wrist loosely in her right hand and looking away.

That made sense. The Sparks were a gang of mostly fire-type monsters based in Hotland; grabbing the left wrist (or comparable appendage) was one way they identified themselves to fellow gang members. Sans had heard rumors of some fire and rock elementals among them but he hadn’t exactly kept up with the latest news over the past few years. Still, it made sense that a group like that would choose to stay in their claimed territory instead of braving the rain and snow of the Surface.

“Pele, were your parents dusted?”

She tucked into herself further, which was confirmation enough in itself. Sans sighed. It was an old, familiar story: a kid orphaned by gang violence or infighting, then raised by remaining gang members. Her parents had probably died years back, if her choppy Elemental was anything to go by; it was a difficult language for most monsters to pronounce. Maybe she’d even been punished for speaking it, judging by her reactions.

The fact that she’d wound up in Alphys’s lab meant that the girl had either run away from the gang and into one of Alphys’s traps, or - and the thought was horrifying, even to a hardened guy like Sans - been traded off during one of her searches for test subjects. Neither said particularly good things about the state of the Underground. He knew things were getting worse since the Royal Guard was focused on the surface, but still.

Her reaction to Grillby explained why she hadn't gone looking for him, either. She'd said she thought he would be angry with her. She probably had her reasons, but...Grillbz was actually not bad, when nothing had set him off. Many of the kids from Snowdin had earned a spare meal or two washing dishes in the bar, which worked out well for both parties. It was why Sans hadn't thought much of bringing him a strange kid; that, and Pele looked like she could use a good meal or two.

Grillbz himself opened the door to the private room and entered carrying two trays. The one he slid to Sans held a burger, fries, and unopened bottles of ketchup and mustard; the other held a
stone bowl filled with what looked like glowing coals.

“Eat,” the elemental crackled to them both in his native tongue. “I have an employee coming in about half an hour, if the lazy ass shows up. We can talk then.” He walked back out, not once glancing towards the girl.

Pele looked over at Sans, confusion radiating off her. “...What...?”

He repeated what Grillby had said, paraphrasing a little. “So, you really don’t know much Elemental, huh.”

“It has been...long time since speak. Not...allowed? Care-takers...did not understand. Wanted...English. But...hard to speak...hmm.”

“Gotcha. Well, I understand it, and most of the folks ‘round here do. Hell, even most of the humans who are regulars at the bar have picked up the basics. At the very least they understand when Grillbz wants his money or is clearing out the bar.” He grabbed a fry, dunked it in a puddle of mustard, then gestured at her bowl.

She giggled and slowly - very slowly, as if she suspected a trap - brought one of the coals to her mouth. She didn’t make any kind of a chewing motion, but the glow of her flames brightened considerably over the next few seconds before dying back down.

The rest of the coals disappeared quickly after that.

Sans, on the other hand, savored his burg. It had been months since he’d had the spare time and cash to have more than a quick beer at the bar to eavesdrop for information. In fact - he checked his inventory - he probably had just enough left over from bus fare to pay for his meal. It was annoying that most of his earnings went to Boss or apartment bills; maybe he could spend some extra time at the hotdog stand to compensate?

He had just finished licking the extra ketchup off his fingers (not willing to let anything go to waste) when Grillby walked back in. The bartender was looking a lot more composed than he had earlier, his flames smooth and calm. Sans was probably one of the few who could sense the lingering agitation in the other monster, and that was after long years of association and tenuous alliance.

Grillbz settled himself into the third chair at their table. “So. Pele, you are...a long way from home.”

The girl nodded after a moment. The way she flinched whenever Elemental was spoken was hard to miss.

“Do you not speak?”

The way her flames curled screamed embarrassment. “…Hard…”

“I see. Well, let’s see how quickly you pick it back up, then. How did you get into the Royal Scientist’s lab of all places?”

The ensuing conversation was painful to listen to - a combination of hesitant English and broken Elemental - but by the end of it Pele was picking up more and more of what Grillby was saying. As it turned out, Sans was correct: the girl had been ‘traded’ to Alphys about a week prior for a favor. What favor the Sparks wanted from (or owed to) Alphys was anyone’s guess; Pele hadn’t exactly been invited to those conversations. She had tried to run away when she found out but had
only succeeded in injuring herself. The gang had been very unhappy about having to heal her before handing her over to the Royal Scientist, and she was still low on magic. She’d been locked away in one of the cages in the back of the Lab ever since.

Throughout this explanation, Grillby grew more and more tense. The flames that normally flickered up above his head to simulate some kind of crazy hairdo were so shallow that he looked practically bald.

Sans elected not to point this out; he didn't want to invoke the old elemental's *fiery* temper, after all.

After a moment’s consideration, the bartender stood and beckoned to the girl. “...Come.”

“...Where…?”

“...Upstairs.” Grillby’s English was always a little slow, but he was clearly trying to make it easier for Pele to understand. “I...have rooms. You will...be staying...with me.”

“...Really…?”

Instead of responding, he gestured the girl out the door a little more forcefully than such generosity required. She complied without questioning further, Sans tagging along behind out of curiosity and a lingering sense of responsibility.

The second level of Grillby’s bar held rooms that he rented out to drunk idiots, less-than-legal deal brokers, and the odd human who wanted to engage in...personal activities while intoxicated. Grillbz also had an apartment at the far end of the hall, but Sans had never been inside.

The group stopped at a door near Grillby’s private rooms, which he opened with a key strung on a loop of chain. He handed the key over to Pele. “Don’t...lose this. Get some sleep. You...start work...in the morning.”

The girl nodded, still looking a little lost. She stared at Sans for a moment before closing the door wordlessly.

“Welp,” Sans said, stretching a little, “It’s been great. I’ll be off-”

“Wait.” The switch into smooth Elemental was a relief to both of them.

“Ooooh yeah! Your money. Well. Here…”

“No. Not that. Come.”

Sans was stunned. Had...had Grillby, once the most notorious miser in Snowdin, actually *turned down* money? Or...did he want something more for dropping a kid on him without warning? The skeleton fought down his trepidation and followed Grillbz down the stairs and back into the private room.

“What do you want?”

Sans started at the unexpected question. “Uh…”

“You want something. That is the only reason you could have brought Pele to me. How did you know we were family?”

Memories of a young human woman sitting at his dining room table flashed behind his eye sockets. *How ‘bout that deja vu.* “I didn’t. Stars, man, I was just hoping you had a spare room or
somethin’ that could get ‘er magic levels back up. I didn’t know what Alph was doin’ to that kid but ‘er magic was pretty low. I’m hardly an expert in elementals; most of the ones I knew back Underground either hate my guts or are part of the gang that sold her off.”

“How did you find her?”

It was a fair question; the Lab was hardly open to the public. Or rather, it was, but getting back out wasn't guaranteed. “Alph had something I needed, and I had a permit from the King to go and get it. She must’ve forgotten I was in there. I was on my way out, found a striped shirt in the hallway and went to investigate. The rest...well.”

“Is the Royal Scientist going to come after her?”

“Uh, don’t think so? She’s more likely to come after me, really. I was plannin’ to get Undyne involved tomorrow morning; if nothing else, that’ll sidetrack Alph long enough to grab the kid and hide ‘er somewhere.”

For a monster whose concept of ‘eyes’ was a little vague, Grillby was a master at making someone squirm with a glare. Sans managed to keep from fidgeting only because of his long exposure to Boss’s intimidation tactics. “You really don’t want anything. You had a plan. What were you going to do after reporting her to Undyne? Have her arrested for gang affiliation?”

“No? I mean, has Undyne ever arrested a kid in stripes? Nah, I was gonna ask around, see if she really was an orphan. Thought she could get into a school or find some work or somethin’ to pay her way. Something better than whatever goes on Underground these days. Kid needs a family that’ll teach her surface manners and some way to earn money that won’t bring gangs - the Underground kind or Undyne’s happy little group - after her.”

There was another pause, then Grillby gave a strange, crackling laugh. “You really have...changed. I heard you were going soft, but this is the first I’ve seen of it.”

“Uh, r-really? I mean, haha, you don’t actually think-”

“The child changed you. Not Pele,” he said, amusement curling the ragged opening on his face that passed for a mouth, “The other one. The ambassador’s child.”

“You...you know about Attie?”

“There are no secrets in a bar. I am well-paid for my...discretion. But you? You aren’t the type to value money so highly, nor does your brother have nearly as good a hold on you as he thinks; his willingness to pay me for information about you says as much. You must be doing this for...personal reasons. Am I wrong?”

He wasn’t, but Sans didn’t really want to say so.

“It was certainly an unexpected development. You were one of the monsters I least expected to have a soft spot for children. Then again, you never did dust children, did you?”

“No. But that doesn’t mean nothin’.”

“I know several annoying teenagers who would disagree.”

“Hmph.”

Grillby did his funny laugh again. “Don’t worry; I haven’t distributed that information, and after
what you’ve done for my family...I don’t intend to. It isn’t even worth much at the moment. It is strange, though, isn’t it? Not too long ago, this would have been an incredible weakness for you. And yet…”

“...Here, it isn’t. Heck, most humans would see it as a good thing, bein’ too nice to kids.”

“Indeed.”

The warmth Sans felt wasn’t just because he was standing next to a man made of fire. There was a strange camaraderie, an understanding of shared hardships and shared joys, that passed between the two in that moment. For once, it wasn’t awkward to meet Grillby’s eyes, or whatever passed for them.

“I was emancipated by my brother shortly after Pele was born,” the elemental said, breaking the silence. “I haven’t heard from him, his wife, or his children in years. I thought they were all dead. I thought I didn’t care if they were.”

That he’d thought incorrectly went unsaid.

A crash and the sound of tinkling glass broke the moment, and both looked away. “Well,” Sans said, “I’d, uh, better get to my station. LD can’t cover for me forever. Uh. How much do I owe you for…?”

“Nothing; it’s on the house. Consider it thanks. And do let me know if you find anything more about the situation.”

“Sure will.”

Grillby left the room first, headed towards the bar. Sans went the other way, out the back door and into the alleyway. He paused before teleporting back up the mountain.

It felt good, having an ally. He seemed to be picking them up at a rapid rate lately: Attie, Frisk, Undyne, and now Grillby and Pele. He practically had friends. It was weird to think about, after living most of his life being the town asshole.

Speaking of which, he clearly wasn’t the only one who’d changed. Who would’ve thought that Grillby cared about family? Especially after he’d been emancipated? This was the guy who was more than willing to roast some bones if, say, a skeleton eating at his bar came up a few gold short in change. Not that Sans had ever been in that position, of course. His hands curled reflexively; dish duty at a bar was one of the worst jobs ever, in his opinion.

With a sigh, he teleported up towards his station.

It felt like only minutes later that he was walking back down the mountain, leaving a twitchy Doggo in his place. He’d been too preoccupied with going over his notes and wondering about Pele and Grillby, and time seemed to have jumped. It began snowing in earnest halfway home; the comfort of his apartment was welcoming to his cold bones. Boss was gone - as was the Takersfaire booth - so Sans had no interference getting to his room. He immediately flopped over on his mattress.

As he passed out, he realized that he’d really only gotten three hours of sleep the night before. Undyne was going to yell at him again if he stretched himself…

“SANS! WAKE UP!”
Sans rolled out of the way on instinct as a bone attack struck the pillow where his head had been moments before. “B-Boss? Wha…?”

“I’VE BEEN TRYING TO WAKE YOU UP FOR TEN MINUTES! GET OUT OF BED NOW, YOU LAZY SACK OF SHIT!”

He managed to climb to his feet despite the exhaustion dragging at his bones. He glanced at the clock. It was just past 7 in the morning, which was...not as early as it felt. He must’ve used more magic than he thought, to still be so tired after what was - for him - an early night.

Oh, shit. He’d forgotten to call Undyne, hadn’t he.

“GET TO YOUR HOT DOG STAND IMMEDIATELY!” Boss growled. “I WILL NOT STAND FOR ANY MORE LAZINESS IN THIS HOUSE!”

“It’s not a house, Boss, it’s-”

Thud.

The impact of bone on bone took away all the bonus HP Sans had gotten from sleep, and a few extra points besides.

“IMMEDIATELY, SANS!”

“I’m goin’, I’m goin’...”

He practically ran to his hot dog stand, not willing to give Boss any more reasons to punish him. Once there, he pulled his phone out.

Undyne picked up on the first ring. “WHAT??” she screeched.

“Wow. What a nice way to greet a pal.”

“Oh. Sans. What the hell. Is up with you. You were. So late. Last night.”

“Uh…”

“Don’t. You dare. Pun at me. I am not. In the mood.”

“No coffee yet?”

The growl was confirmation enough.

“Riiight. Uh, I’ll make this quick. Soooo...stopped by the lab yesterday to look at...stuff. Got what I needed, but picked up a...straggler along the way.”

“I swear to the stars, Sans, if you are calling me because you got involved in another shady gang deal trying to get drugs for a prank, I will rip off your skull and shove it straight up your-”

“I didn’t! I didn’t! Also: rude!”

“Don’t you talk to me about rude you little...no, y’know what? No. It’s too early for this crap.”

“Wait!” He could feel her trying to hang up on him. “I...it’s important. I swear.”

“You have five seconds of my time, asshole.”
“It was a kid. Alph had a kid down in her lab.”

There was a pause. For a moment, Sans thought she really had hung up. Then-

“WHAT???”

“Holy shit, that’s really not necessary!”

“You mean to tell me that the royal scientist is experimenting on children? Again?? Where? Who? How many??”

“I-”

“Tell me right now you asshole!!! NGYAAAAAAAAAH!”

There was a loud crash in the background. It turned out to be the first of several.

Sans waited for the noise to die down a little. “Uh...you done?”

The only response was heavy breathing.

“Oooookay. So. I only found the one kid. Fire elemental girl, claims she’s an orphan. The Sparks sold ‘er off a few days ago, we think.”

“We?” Undyne growled.

“Uh...I took her to Grillby’s.”

“You took a child. To a seedy bar.”

“Nnnnoooo? I took a fire elemental child to the only other fire elemental I know who isn’t involved in some hella crazy shit.”

“That’s...debatable.”

“Allright, what fire elemental do you know who would’ve been a better option? Yeah, thought not. And as it turns out, they’re family.”

“What the hell? Grillby has kids?”

“Nope. Niece, apparently.”

“You showed up with his niece, and he didn’t immediately toss you out on your face?”

“Nope. Weird, right?”

“You do know he was emancipated years ago, right? It was a huge fight, apparently. They still tell legends about it in the Guard.”

“He...may have mentioned something about that?”

“...It’s too early in the morning for this crap.”

“Whelp. I’ll, uh, leave you to it. Just wanted to give ya a heads-up so you’d know that there’s a new kid in town who’s gonna need paperwork.”

There was another muffled crunch in the background. “Sans. I hate you.”
“Uh…”

“Not only do you call me at SEVEN THIRTY IN THE MORNING, ON MY DAY OFF, but you DUMP A CRAPTON OF PAPERWORK ON MY ASS???”

“Well-”

“DON’T ANSWER THAT!!!”

“Y’okay.”

“AND DON’T YOU DARE BE LATE TO YOUR SHIFT THIS AFTERNOON!!”

There was a low scream as the call was terminated. Forcefully.

Well. That went better than he expected. And better yet, it was out of his sweaty little hands. It was a good day.

Or...so he thought.

Sans shuffled home later that night a tired, worn skeleton trying not to jostle a bad arm. Work at the hot dog stand had been uneventful, but his double sentry shift had been absolutely hellish. A group of teenagers, drunk or high out of their dead little minds, had decided to storm the mountain. Literally ‘storm;’ it had been alternating between snow and rain for most of the afternoon and into the evening before settling into a cold drizzle. Fortunately, their path had taken them within roughly two feet of one of the sentry posts so they didn’t just disappear onto the mountain.

Unfortunately, that post was the one Sans was stationed at.

The fight had been difficult. His blue magic only affected one human at a time, and the kids had been too impaired to really care about what was happening to one of their own. They also had a hard time registering pain; the weak bones he threw at them took tiny slivers out of their HP, but didn’t do much to slow them down. He was authorized to use magic - Mount Ebott was monster territory - but he didn’t want to risk killing them and starting a real incident.

At least they recognized him as a threat. The focus of the group went from getting up the mountain to beating up the monster who was single-handedly kicking their asses. Luckily for him, whatever they’d pumped into their systems made them both reckless and bad at aiming.

Even a complete idiot gets lucky sometimes, though.

It had taken twenty minutes for the other sentries to start trickling in, and by then the damage had mostly been done. Most of the kids, exhausted and finally feeling their injuries, had collapsed in various undignified piles across the clearing by Sans’s post. A few got away but...eh, that wasn’t his problem.

One of the dogs had called Undyne, who had called the police (after chewing out all the sentries collectively and individually for waking her up, again, on her day off). Sans had, naturally, been left to deal with the ensuing chaos of mediating between an angry, sleep-deprived Undyne and the extremely wary human police.

No one else had been hurt - thank the stars for small miracles - but it was still a literal and figurative mess. Mud was one thing, but trespassing onto monster property was a pretty big deal for humans, especially since monsters on their mountain had the legal right to defend themselves in whatever way they saw fit once provoked. He didn’t envy the cops or the kids; neither would have
a good night’s sleep for at least a week once Tori got ahold of them.

Regardless, all of that led to Sans wandering home in the freezing rain at an unholy hour of the morning, stiff and sore and trying not to jostle an arm that wasn’t quite broken. He really, really just wished that he could just take a shortcut home, but he couldn’t summon the energy. He needed to start working out again...it had fallen by the wayside over the past week or two.

He paused. That sounded like...a cry? He hesitated, remembering what happened the last time he’d responded to a crying child, but hearing it a second time broke his resolve. He’d just rescued a kid; couldn’t a guy get a break??

Responsibility really was going to be the death of him.

The sound was coming from a nearby alleyway, which wasn’t ominous at all. He summoned a bone, keeping his wits about him, and angled himself so his bad arm was protected by a wall. His magic gathered instinctively, ready to protect him despite how drained he’d been by the earlier fight.

The pavement of the alley was slick from the recent freezing rain and there were deep puddles where it had sunken. Sans avoided those. The noise seemed to be coming from a pile of garbage stacked around a dumpster further back, but he could see no movement.

He stalked closer. It sounded like the noise was getting quieter; he couldn’t tell if the kid was weakening or moving farther away. He paused and strained to listen over the patter of rain on pavement and trash. Weakening, definitely, but it was sounding less like a child. There were no words, for one, and no matter how close he got he couldn’t sense a human soul or any type of magic.

Movement from one of the boxes made him tense, bone at the ready. He felt silly; it was a small creature, not nearly big enough to be a threat…

...but it was the source of the noise, he realized as he watched it squirm. He dismissed the bone. He’d wasted enough time and energy chasing after...actually, what was that thing?

Curiosity got the better of him and he stepped closer. The box was soaked through and half-submerged in a puddle that was half frozen over. There was something hand-written on the box, but it was smeared by rain and he couldn’t make it out in the dark of the alley. The crying thing - whatever it was - clung to one side, trying to keep from sliding into the water.

It wasn’t until he stood right next to the box and looked in that he saw the other dark shapes in the water, sunken and unmoving. He thought of the Dogi’s litter of pups and shuddered.

Trying not to overthink what he was doing, he grabbed the little critter by the scruff of its neck. “Please don’t be a rat,” he muttered to it. He had too many awful memories of the little scavengers from his childhood on the streets of the Underground. “I will literally throw you right back in there with your friends if you’re a rat.”

He picked his way back out of the alley, gritting his teeth against the cries. Once back in relative light and safety, he held it up.

It wasn’t a rat.

He examined the thing carefully. It was furry, he could tell, even though the rain had matted its fur down to almost nothing. The fur was too dark to pick out colors, but it seemed to be covered in stripes of brown or grey. From what he could see it had big pointy ears, a wimpy little furry tail
that was curled up between its legs, and a huge green eye with a little slit.

Cat.

Well then. He’d always wanted a pet. But seriously, what was it with him and picking up strays lately??

Sans carefully brought his bad hand up under the cat’s butt, then released his hold on the scruff of its neck. Even the slight weight caused his arm to ache, but he held it steady. The cat shivered; humans and other creatures with fleshy bits shivered when cold, he remembered. (He deliberately did not think about Frisk shivering under her comforter, hours from death when her daughter dragged his sorry ass in to help.)

It seemed to be calming down, though. He knew from conversations with Att...with humans that they perceived the magic radiating off his bones as warmth. He was soaked through, but held the little thing close to his chest anyways. It wasn’t like a little extra water was going to hurt it at that point.

He walked home quickly, no longer caring about his injuries.

When he arrived at the apartment complex he carefully pressed his bad arm against his side. The little cat fit perfectly inside his jacket in the pouch formed by the crook of his elbow. It didn’t seem to like him zipping the jacket up, but Sans knew that Boss finding it would be a death sentence: for it, definitely, and possibly for Sans as well with how cranky Boss had been.

He slipped the door open quietly, listening for anyone else in the apartment. The only sound was the rain beating against the kitchen window. He started for the hallway-

“THERE YOU ARE!”

“Shit, Boss!” He shifted his arm, silently begging the cat to stay quiet.

“YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN HOME AN HOUR AGO!”

“I-I got a little banged up in a fight. I, uh, take it you heard from Undyne what happened?”

“CAPTAIN UNDYNE APPRISED ME OF THE SITUATION, YES.”

There was a shuffle somewhere over Boss’s head as the residents of the apartment above theirs came to terms with loud noises at unfortunate hours of the morning.

“Then, uh, I’ll just…”

“STOP RIGHT THERE!”

Sans paused.

“Remove your clothing. I must examine you for injuries.”

“Wha... hell no, Boss! What even??”

“YOUR GRAMMAR GETS WORSE EVERY DAY!”

“Why do you need to ‘examine’ me?”

Boss sighed, rubbing one knuckle along the smooth stretch of bone between his eye sockets.
“Because you were so careless as to worry the ambassador a few months ago, she is now under the impression that you are suffering from…‘abuse.’” He said the word like it meant a tendency towards screaming esoteric love poetry in public. “Absurd, I know. However, Undyne still demanded that I ensure you remain in good health to appease her highness. I MUST, THEREFORE, ENSURE THAT YOU HAVE SUFFERED NO LASTING DAMAGE AFTER THIS SCUFFLE OF YOURS!”

Sans shoved the flare of anger to the side, where he could deal with it later. “I’m pretty sure that was just when I was babysitting. I’m not babysitting anymore.”

“ENOUGH, SANS!”

Boss shot an arm out and made a grab for Sans, snarling when his prey dodged backwards into the hallway and made a desperate break for his room. Boss wouldn’t knock down the door and risk the wrath of the landlord, and thus, the queen.

...Probably.

He locked the door mere moments before Boss slammed into it fists-first. “SANS! OPEN THE DOOR!”

Sans tucked himself into the corner behind the door hinge. Boss was bad at picking locks, but even worse at noticing fine detail when he was all worked up. It was that or the closet, and he’d started checking the closet.

Thankfully, he seemed content with just yelling and banging on the door. He settled down pretty well after about half an hour and stalked back off towards his own room, muttering threats the entire way. Sans made a mental note to stay away from his brother for the next few days to avoid punishments.

No need to get the big guy into hot water with Undyne if she’d started poking her nose in their business again. It wasn’t a big deal; he could handle it, and there was no need to get Frisk involved.

He chuckled in relief, feeling his jacket. It was still soaked through pretty badly. The cat, however, had curled up between his arm and ribcage and was making a noise like a small motor.

That must be the ‘purring’ thing he’d heard about. It was incredibly soothing, actually.

Gently, he set the cat on his mattress and changed into dry clothes. After a long moment of consideration, he threw his jacket over the back of his desk chair to dry out. The rest of his clothes were kicked into the heap of laundry in the corner, but he wanted to wear his jacket sometime soon.

He flopped over on the bed to examine the creature he’d brought home. It was looking better, actually. It had pushed itself up onto four tiny paws and was wobbling around the bed; whether the wobble was due to weakness, injury, or the softness of his mattress he couldn’t tell. The long cuddle under his jacket had done it some good, at least. It was looking puffy and mostly dry across its back and the shivering had stopped.

Upon further inspection, it only seemed to have one functioning eye. Both its eyes were open, but one of them was milky and pale in a way that reminded him of Undyne and the other monsters he knew whose eyes had been damaged. For all that, it seemed to be getting around okay.

“Yer not sleepin’ with me,” he said as it crashed nose-first into his leg and flopped over. Little black paw pads waved wildly in the air. “I know your type. You make all kinds of wet, goopy
messes that I hafta clean up, and I’m not in the mood tonight.”

It started purring again, curled into a tight ball against his leg.

“Fine. Lemme see…” He scooped the thing up and looked around. A space heater he’d been meaning to fix up was still in the closet, buried under spare mechanical parts. It rattled when he turned it up, but that wasn’t the end of the world. He didn’t notice too much of a difference in temperature, but he wasn’t especially sensitive to temperature differences to begin with. Hopefully it helped.

He found a large cardboard box from...well, he didn’t really remember and it wasn’t marked, so it could’ve been from anything, really. Into the box went a pile of dirty shirts; if they were already dirty, the gooey mess the cat was going to make wouldn’t do much damage.

The cat protested Sans’s attempts to put it down, curling itself around his phalanges and struggling to find something to grip with its claws, but he was able to wrangle it into the box. For the amount of struggle it put up, it didn’t seem too upset once he got it settled; it curled right back up and started purring again.

He ran his phalanges over the cat’s head and ears, concentrating on the texture of the fur. It was a strange feeling. It was soft, but not like cloth; almost feather-like, really. It didn’t feel much like dog fur, though he hadn’t had many opportunities to study that in detail. Dog fur was...he didn’t know how to describe it. Thicker? He had given scratches to Greater Dog during his last shift at the hot dog stand (that guy was a real softy at heart, a secret Sans would take to his grave) and he’d been able to feel the individual strands of fur. The cat’s fur was so fine that it seemed almost like one solid thing until his phalanges passed through it.

The purring stopped abruptly and Sans paused, worried he’d upset the cat somehow. It didn’t react at all. Its eyes were closed and its head had drooped down to rest on the sleeve of one of his sweatshirts.

Asleep, then. He grinned.

Might as well join it.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: cats purr at a frequency that promotes bone healing. It's not a magic cure, but I imagine it would still feel nice to someone made of bones...especially injured bones.

Whew! A lot happened here! Sans, you've really got to stop picking up strays. Sooner or later you'll stop getting lucky.

And thanks to everyone who has supported this story thus far! I had a more elaborate thanks planned out, but Sleep Deprivation ran off with it (laughing, the bastard). Don't let Sleep Deprivation into your life; he's a jerk and doesn't even pay rent.
In Which Piracy is Encouraged

Chapter Summary

...But no one seems to mind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans came back to reality feeling disoriented and he automatically tensed. Pain was what woke him, and for a long moment that was all he could focus on. Taking a few deep breaths to calm down, he took stock of what was making his bones scream at him.

His injured arm felt like it had been shattered, which sent a pulse of fear through his soul. A quick glance down confirmed that it was still only fractured, but the sight of the injuries seemed to only increase the pain. He hissed, trying to find some way to release the tension that wouldn’t bring Boss to his door.

It helped - a little - and he fought to focus on something else instead. Why was he injured? Why was he so sore? Slowly, memories of the fight trickled back. The kids, the cops, Undyne. The damn dogs that ran off without a second thought. The alleyway…

The cat was mewling softly when he rolled over to examine it, looking a bit more wobbly than it had earlier. Abruptly, he realized that neither he nor the cat had eaten dinner. From its size, the cat was probably pretty young; babies needed to eat regularly, if he remembered correctly.

He pulled himself upright with a grunt and slipped his jacket on. It was still damp, and smelled awful, but it was a layer of protection.

The clock in the kitchen confirmed that he’d only been asleep for about two hours. He was feeling it in every bone of his body. He felt heavy and light at the same time, and he wondered idly what would happen if he just collapsed. Would he float, caught between the two odd sensations? Probably not, his logical mind concluded. He’d just tip over like an idiot and jostle his already-aching bones.

There was still some canned food in the cupboard, and Sans scanned the labels. Cats were carnivores, right? He thought back to the few times he’d encountered Mettaton’s torture assistant, a cynical and depressed cat monster. A hazy memory of the guy removing the bun and pickles from a burger tickled the back of his skull. It was unusual that any monster would turn his nose up at food, so the incident had stuck with him.

Hopefully surface cats acted on the same principle. There was a can of shredded chicken in the back of the cupboard; he grabbed it and, after a bit of quiet shuffling through the shelves, an old clamshell takeout container that Boss had insisted on washing. He filled one half with water, then carefully made his way back to his room.

The cat was extremely grateful for the water, which Sans found surprising considering it had nearly drowned just a few hours before. He let it do...whatever it was doing with its tongue (flicking water into its mouth? It looked inefficient) while he wrangled the canned chicken open
one-handed.

Thankfully, the chicken didn’t have any weird flavorings. He was fairly certain that it wasn’t the healthiest thing to feed a cat anyways, but it was that or starve. He carefully dished out some smaller pieces onto the empty half of the container and set it beside the water.

Almost immediately, the food was gone. Sans reluctantly took a few more lumps and plopped them onto the lid.

“That’s all ya get,” he grumbled. “I’ve gotta eat too.”

The cat responded with a plaintive meow, indicating its displeasure at being cut off.

“What? I don’t even know how you’re eating all that. You actually have a real stomach, doncha? Isn’t it full by now?”

Another meow.

“Shhh. If ya wake up Boss, we’re both out on our asses. You feel me?”

He finished up his portion of the chicken quickly, not really tasting it. His arm was starting to heal as his body converted the food into magic, but it was a slow process. He considered asking if Tori had some time to look at it; he hadn’t properly talked to her in months, since before he’d started watching Att...her. The last time he came close to visiting was when he dropped off Frisk’s Christmas gift, and he’d just left that on her front porch. Who knew what she thought of that.

On second thought, he could probably power through it.

“’Kay, then. I’m gonna head back to bed for a few hours. You good in the box?”

The cat blinked at him.

“...I’m gonna take that as a yes.”

He rolled over carefully, taking the pressure off his injured side, and tried to sleep.

“SANS”

“Whazzit?” Had he slept at all?

“WAKE UP THIS INSTANT AND TURN YOUR ALARM OFF! ALSO, DO NOT THINK I HAVE FORGOTTEN ABOUT LAST NIGHT! BE PREPARED FOR PUNISHMENT WHEN YOU RETURN THIS EVENING!”

Loud footsteps echoed down the hallway, and Sans’s soul sank. There went his plan of avoiding Boss.

He sat up carefully and turned his alarm off. He’d gotten so used to waking up at a certain time that he’d been getting up before his alarm even went off lately, which was useful but flat out annoying. Apparently the night before was enough to throw his sleep schedule off.

A soft cry from the corner of the room brought his attention back to the cat. Sure enough, it had made some kind of icky sticky mess on his shirts; just as well that they’d be tossed in the wash.

“Ya good in there, bud?”
The cries paused for a moment, then resumed.


The cat didn’t speak any language Sans knew, but it apparently recognized when his attention was on it. Its noises changed in pitch and frequency to the point where Sans half-expected Boss to come storming up the stairs to investigate the racket.

“Okay, okay. Shhh. Shhhhhhh.” He picked it up and ran his phalanges over the impossibly soft fur. This calmed the creature a little, enough that its noises weren’t quite so high-pitched and distressed.

“I tell ya what. If you can keep quiet ’til I get out the front door, we can raid the hot dog stand supplies for breakfast. How’s that sound?”

The cat made a few little *mruph* sounds that he took as agreement.

Boss had already headed out for the day by the time Sans made his way downstairs, which was helpful. He had to set the cat down to pull his shoes on, which prompted more crying, but it stopped when he settled it back into his jacket. He decided to leave the zipper alone; the little critter didn’t like being restrained. The way it was sitting didn’t exactly look comfy to him, but the cat was purring again. It felt strangely nice against his bones.

The walk to the hot dog stand was worse than usual. The cold rain had turned to snow sometime in the night, and his usual path along the side of the road was obscured by a light dusting of white. He could feel the ache in his bones from the fight the night before with every step, and halfway there the cat decided it liked the cold even less than it liked being confined and had retreated further into the jacket.

It was a relief when his stand was set up and he could finally settle his bones onto his stool. The cat, interested by the fun smells, popped its head out to explore.

*CLANK CLANG KA-CLANK CLANG CLANG*

...And immediately retreated as far back inside his jacket as it could manage. Sans peered in the direction of the noise, a genuine smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Heya, GD! Want some breakfast?”

Greater Dog bounded up, slobber flying everywhere as he panted excitedly. *YESYESYES,* he barked. *WANT WARM PUP TREAT FOR BREAKFAST PLEASE.*

“One hot dog for a cool dog, comin’ right up.” He dressed the ‘dog up the way he knew GD liked it: a few generous slices of cheese, some bacon crumbles, and a bit of steamed mustard greens. (He’d been testing new ‘healthy’ toppings a year or so back, and while most of them were total flops the dogs really liked the mustard greens. Since they couldn’t eat most of what he served, he kept it on the menu.) “There ya go, big guy. Bone appetite!”

Greater Dog barked a laugh and took the ‘dog with one large prosthetic hand. *THANKS, FAVORITE BONE BUDDY. LOOKS GOOD. GOOD FOOD. GOOD GOOD GOOD.*

“Glad it suits you. Hey, don’t forget to pay again, yeah? I’d give you all the ‘dogs you want for free, but I get in trouble when I don’t come home with cash.”

The dog whined an apology, then disappeared into his suit. A moment later, he re-emerged and
spat a few gold coins onto the counter.

“Thanks, buddy.”

*BONE BUDDY HAPPY? GREATER DOG HAS BEEN GOOD BOY??*

Sans sighed. “Yeah, you’ve been a good boy. C’mere, big guy.”

Greater dog leaned forward, his metallic suit half-splayed across the counter of the hot dog stand. The wood creaked under his weight, and he adjusted so he wasn’t in danger of collapsing the poor booth.

“Yer a good boy, GD. A real good boy.” Skeletal fingers scratched behind the dog’s ears, past the scruff of his neck, and around the sides to that spot up under his chin where he could never seem to reach properly.

Finally, after a small eternity of petting, Greater Dog sat up. *PATROL, NOW,* he barked, ears drooping. *NO TIME FOR MORE PETS. SAD.*

“Hey, you’re filling in for Dogamy on patrol tonight, right?”

*YES. DOGAMY HOME WITH PUPS. PUPS GOOD. PUPS NEED PROTECTION.*

“Cool. I’ll see you then, ‘kay? I’ll be at my usual station.”

Greater Dog whined. *WILL MISS BONE BUDDY.*

“I’ll miss you too, GD.”

The dog licked the hand that had been petting him, then tensed. *WHAT? CAT? BONE FRIEND HAVE CAT?*

“Uh...yeah?”

*CAT GOOD! CAT FRIENDS FUN! CAN CHASE!* He leaned in closer.

The cat tucked inside Sans’s jacked hissed and made another rather poor escape attempt, thwarted by the fact that it didn’t quite know its way around. Sans huffed at the unusual feeling of something furry clinging to his spine with tiny claws. “Not this one. I found it last night. It’s just a baby, and I’m trying to figure out what to do with it. It’s, uh...” he looked up at Greater Dog. The dog’s eyes were bright with excitement, every muscle in his fluffy body tensed with the thrill of the hunt. None of this was getting through. “It’s...shy?”

*SHY NOT FUN,* he huffed. *IS SECRET?*

“...Yeah. Please don’t tell B...uh, Papyrus.”

*WILL KEEP BONE FRIEND’S SECRET.* He whined. *WILL MISS BONE FRIEND. WILL SEE BONE FRIEND SOON.* He barked a quick *HELLO, GOOD BYE, PATROL NOW* at something behind him and bounded off, enthusiasm barely waned. Which was odd; GD didn’t like many people, but Sans couldn’t be bothered to care.

He was about to put his head back down for a much-needed nap when his eye sockets caught the person who’d been standing behind Greater Dog. Someone he didn’t think he’d see again in...well, ever. “...Uh...”
“Hi, Mr. Sans!” Attie called, waving enthusiastically. “I was going to come get a breakfast hot dog and tell you hello, but I didn’t want to interrupt Mr. Greater Dog’s petting. He really likes petting, right?”

“Y-yeah, he sure does.”

“I know. He sometimes lets me pet him outside his armor, but only when he’s security for me and Mommy. If he has other jobs, he doesn’t let me.” She pouted a little.

“Hey, uh, where’s yer mom? Isn’t someone supposed to be watching you now?” That was the rumor, anyways. If Frisk had gotten sick again...

“Mmm-hmm. She’s coming in a minute. She’s prob’ly talking to somebody.”

Some part of Sans was screaming that he was being creepy, but he couldn’t stop looking at her. He hadn’t seen her in...gosh, over a month. 44 days, to be exact. It had been two weeks and five days since Frisk followed him home, and it had been three weeks and five days between that incident and Boss slipping Attie out in the middle of the night.

There was a strange sensation in his throat, a tightness he wasn’t used to. It didn’t feel like strangulation - like when Boss lifted him by his collar - but more like there was something stuck there, in his vertebrae. It was uncomfortable. The sensation distracted him from the prickling in the corners of his eye sockets that he was far too familiar with; he blinked rapidly to avoid embarrassing himself.

“Are you okay, Mr. Sans?”

“Y-yeah. ‘M fine.”

She bounced on her toes, making her shoes light up. Those were the ones she’d told him about on one of the first days he’d watched her, he realized. They did indeed have pink flowers on them, with little lights that flashed from their centers. He wondered if that was a human invention or if she’d somehow charmed the mad Royal Scientist into making her customized shoes. He thought about anything he could to distract himself from the fact that he’d remembered something, something small from almost two months ago, and that meant his mind wasn’t falling to pieces just yet.

Attie was dressed in a puffy white jacket with faux fur lining the hood. On her hands were mittens, knitted in a pattern he recognized; Tori must have been busy since he last saw her. The edges of her sleeves were stained in browns, greens, and reds.

She looked just like any other little girl. Nothing about her appearance indicated that she was the daughter of the Ambassador of Monsters, that she had any security presence at all.

He felt it, though. The glow of Frisk’s protective wards - much stronger now that she was recovered - was apparent in every bounce of her daughter’s feet. There were few weapons wielded by humans or monsters that could touch someone with that much protection, and anyone stupid enough to try would be in for more than one nasty surprise.

“I don’t think you’re okay,” Attie said. “You just keep looking at me funny and you haven’t even said ‘hello’ or ‘how are you.’ Are you gonna be a asshole again?”

“Not tryin’ to be. So, uh, hello, Attie. How are you?”

“I’m doing real good! Um, really well, I mean. How are you, Mr. Sans?”
“I’m, uh, okay.”

“Undie said you were in a big fight last night. Is that true?”

“Yeah…? I didn’t know she’d talk to you about that…?”

“She didn’t. She told my mommy when she stopped in for a quick meeting while she thought I was getting dressed. Mommy said we could come have breakfast hot dogs and make sure you’re okay, just in case.”

“Uh…cool? Yeah, I’m in one piece.”

She looked expectantly up at him.

“…Oh, right, hot dogs. So, uh, what do ya want on yours?”

Attie wanted bacon, cheese, onion, ketchup, mustard, and relish. Sans handed the ‘dog to her with its toppings balanced precariously, then gave her a small stack of napkins. “Don’t wanna get your nice jacket all messy.”

“It’s okay. I can wash it.”

“I’m sure ya can, but you wanna look nice, right?”

“The lessons are finally kicking in, then?” Asked Frisk from RIGHT behind him.

“Holy shit.”

“Language.”

“Oh…” He glanced at Attie, who was giggling, then twisted on his stool to get a good look at Frisk.

...A good look was an apt way to put it. She had a long tan coat on, red buttons in two neat rows down the front. Her waist was accented by a simple brown belt that twisted into a casual knot on one hip. The hat and gloves tucked under her arm were dark brown, matching her knee-high boots, but he could see the lines of a familiar pattern on them. Tori hadn’t waited until Christmas to deliver gifts, apparently.

Slowly, hesitantly, he met her eyes. She looked a lot better than he remembered, even from the last time he saw her in person. Maybe it was the light - even the dull, filtered light of the winter sun through the clouds did her more justice than the harsh yellow bulb that lit the dining room in his apartment - but she looked more than ready to take on the world.

It was a far cry from the helpless mess she’d been when he found her, so many weeks before. And she was completely focused on him in a way that she - or, frankly, anyone else - had never been. He felt his face starting to turn pink.

Say something, his mind begged. Come up with something - anything - to keep her from thinking you’re a complete fool.

“What-” No! Not that! “-do you want on your hot dog?”

He could feel his voice squeaking a little and resisted the urge to clear a throat he didn’t have.

Frisk smiled at him anyways, and he felt his soul stutter in a way that couldn’t possibly be healthy.
“I haven’t had a hot dog in ages. Surprise me.”

The challenge in her voice was both clear and terrifying.

**ABORT MISSION, ABORT MISSION!**

He gulped and examined his options. With phalanges that were definitely not shaking, he dipped into the small stash of fresh bakery buns he kept for his best customers, then put a few slices of cheese on it. That went into the small, warm space behind the hot dog roller. While it was warming he grabbed a paper plate and a sharp knife and started chopping a pickle spear and some of the baby tomatoes he’d picked up on a whim. He pulled the bun out once the cheese was melted and put a ‘dog inside, then added bacon crumbles, onion, and his sliced pickles and tomatoes. A drizzle of yellow mustard completed the masterpiece, and he held it out to Frisk with a flourish that (probably) disguised the slight tremor of his hands.

Attie applauded uselessly through her mittens, her own hot dog mostly gone. “That looks really yummy! Mommy, can I have a bite?”

“May I have a bite,” Frisk corrected.

“Sure, but only if I can have a bite of yours!”

She rolled her eyes and took a tentative bite of her hot dog. Sans watched her chew and swallow, feeling as if quite a bit more than customer satisfaction rode on that simple action. Finally, she nodded. “It’s really good, Sans. Thanks!”

“Yer welcome.” Relief made him slouch against his counter.

“I never would’ve thought to put fresh tomatoes on a hot dog, but it’s not bad. What was the inspiration?”

He thought, for a moment, that she was mocking him, but her face showed only sincerity. It threw him for a loop, and he stuttered for a moment before he found his bearings. “I, uh, well, I was doin’ a bit of research. Gotta keep a femur upon the competition and all. See, ketchup is pretty salty, and a lot of what I have - cheese, bacon, even the hot dogs themselves - is pretty salty too. The tomatoes give you some flavor without the extra salt and give some texture, too. Can’t really take credit for the idea, but...well. Thought I’d give it a shot.”

“It’s brilliant. You should keep it up.”

His face was definitely turning colors. Thankfully, Frisk was distracted by Attie wanting a bit of the ‘super-special hot dog’ and he had a moment to compose himself.

Naturally, that was about when his little friend decided to make its presence known once again.

Attie squealed, nearly losing her grip on her hot dog. “KITTY!”

“No way!” Frisk said looked at Sans, then down at the cat that was clawing its way up his shirt, then back at him. “You have a kitten? Since when?”

He tried to pry it off, but the claws were deceptively strong and he didn't want to break anything. “Since, uh, last night? It was caught in the rainstorm. Found it when I was walkin’ home.”

“Can I hold it?” Attie asked, tugging Sans’s sleeve harshly. Her protective wards flared-
“Gah!” Sans pulled his arm away, clutching at his fractured bone, and accidentally banged his bad arm on the edge of the counter. He froze, cursing himself. He hadn’t meant to dodge away from her like that; it was just so unnerving that someone would try to touch him (and someone with that much magic on her besides) that he hadn’t tried to simply maneuver away from her. She hadn’t registered as a threat, so she’d gotten closer to him than most people normally did. He shrunk in on himself, taking his bearings, then remembered that she’d asked a question. “S-sure. Just, uh, give me a sec.”

Frisk crouched down so she was eye level with him. “Sans, are you okay? Undyne said you’d been injured last night in the confrontation with those humans on the mountain, but she didn’t know the details. She thought it wasn’t serious since you shrugged it off. Are you okay?”

Sans checked his HP before responding. He was down to a single point. When had he gotten so low? He felt his breathing pick up, fear of his own mortality overpowering his pride. “I...I...uh, I...” He couldn’t seem to force the words out.

He felt the familiar chill of someone else’s magic invading his own, just enough to get a good read on his stats, but despite his embarrassment he allowed it. More than that, he took a chance and showed his real stats; she’d been sympathetic before, hadn’t she? Across from him, Frisk took a sudden breath. “Sans. You need help immediately. What are you even doing out of the house like that?”

“W-wasn’t that bad e-earlier. Had somethin’ to eat...g-gosh, early this mornin’ and brought my HP up a f-few points. I-I’ll be fine. G-gimme a sec to grab a ‘d-dog.”

“Sans, I’m going to call my mother to take a look at you.”

“No...uh, n-need...”

“Yes, there is a need. You and her get along fine, right? She has some healing magic. Just...please, let me do this. I’m worried, and Attie’s worried too.”

They had a point. A ‘dog probably wouldn’t bring his HP up far enough for him to get through his shift, and sentry duty later that night, and whatever Boss had planned. He let out his breath in a solid woosh and nodded.

Frisk stepped away and started dialing. Sans deliberately didn’t listen in on her conversation, instead focusing on carefully extracting the cat from his person. Its nose was twitching but it allowed him to maneuver it into his lap without a whole lot of fuss.

It kept turning its head towards the counter, though. It definitely knew where the food was.

“Here,” he said, gesturing to Attie. “D-didn’t ya wanna hold it?”

“Can I?” she asked in a very small voice. “I’m really sorry, Mr. Sans. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t know your arm was hurt.”

He took a deep breath, willing his stutter away. He wasn’t a babybones anymore, he reminded himself. “Eh, ‘tsokay kid. No real harm done. If you’d meant to hurt me, well. I’d be dust right now. You didn’t, though, and ‘m fine, see? Now help me with this little cat.”

He used his good hand to cup the cat as she lifted it, making sure it wasn’t actively trying to claw her. It seemed a little upset at the movement, but its protests were more vocal than physical. After a moment of Attie’s tiny fingernails scratching behind its ears it settled down and started purring again.
“Huh. It likes you.”

The girl’s smile was smug. “Of course! Everybody likes me.”

For most kids, Sans thought, that would be a laughably arrogant statement, but...everyone did seem to like Attie. She’d survived Boss. She’d charmed the dogs. She’d even melted Undyne’s heart a little, and that was a feat worthy of some kind of medal.

Frisk stepped back into his field of vision. “Mom will be by within a few minutes. She’s finishing up some paperwork that needs to be done before lunchtime. Will you be okay until then?”

“That wasn’t like he hadn’t existed on one HP before. Much as he’d come to regret how he got his LV, he would’ve been dust years ago without it. He shuddered at the thought.

Frisk apparently mistook that gesture and hunched back down in front of him. She looked at him for a long moment before narrowing her eyes in determination. “Attie, you can go play. I’m going to keep an eye on Mr. Sans for a bit.”

The girl looked at her mother, then down at the cat in her arms. “But...I’m holding his baby kitty! I can’t go play!”

“But I’ve talked about this. It’s one thing when you do it to me or your grandma and grandpa or Undyne, but you have to be careful.”

“Okay. I said I was sorry.”

“I heard. Good girl. Now, Sans, where did you find this kitten?”

Sans explained how he’d found the cat in the alley the night before. He deliberately ignored the small smile on Frisk’s face, as if she knew something he didn’t.

(He was sure she knew a lot of things he didn’t.)

Thankfully, her only remark was, “Are you even allowed to have pets in your apartment?”

“Eh, yer mom lets some of the dogs stay downstairs. Why wouldn’t a cat be okay?”

“Uh-huh. And how did Greater Dog react to your little friend there when we were walking up?”

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“Uh-huh. And how did Greater Dog react to your little friend there when we were walking up?”

“Heh, point taken.”

They both watched Attie play with the cat for a few minutes. When it’s meows became too insistent, she handed it to her mother. “I don’t know what’s wrong,” she pouted. “I thought it liked me.”

Frisk turned the critter over with deft hands, poking it gently along its stomach. “He’s probably hungry. Sans, has he eaten anything since that chicken you gave him last night?”

“Nah. I was gonna give it - uh, him - something from the stand, but I didn’t get the chance. Think he’ll eat a ‘dog?”

“It’s worth a shot. Here - I’ll pay for it.”

“What? No-”
“Please. It’s the least I can do.” She handed him enough to cover three hot dogs with the fixings. He handed her back the change, but Attie scooped it up instead.

“Can I put the change in the tip jar?” she asked.

Frisk patted her on the cheek. “Go ahead. Don’t break anything.”

“Yay!”

Sans chopped up a ‘dog into tiny pieces and scooped it into a paper plate for Frisk, who tried to coax the starving cat to eat something. He made another for himself and choked it down against the rolling feeling of nausea.

“Did you set that up?” Frisk asked, gesturing to his tip jar.

“Uh, yeah. The old coin funnel on top is something I found years ago in the dump. Can’t remember why I bothered carting it home in the first place, but it’s come in handy now that we’re on the surface. I, uh, had to fix it up a little to get it to accept g as well as human coins, ’n it doesn’t work quite right all the time, but the kids like it.”

They watched Attie drop a pair pennies into a slot at the top of the funnel, the coins passing each other several times before dropping into the clear jar below.

“It’s hard to believe that monsters are able to enjoy things like this now,” Frisk said. “I remember back in the Underground how, um, tense everyone was. They’re a lot more...whimsical, I guess, now.”

“Yeah, well, fighting for space and food kinda takes the fun outta ya. We didn’t really have time for things like this - not in public, anyways. Heck, I didn’t dare leave a tip jar out back then; someone would’ve come by and stolen it. Now look at me. Some days I make more in tips than I do selling ‘dogs.”

She hummed in agreement. Attie sent a few more coins down the chute, watching them intently. After a moment, she turned to Sans. “Why to they go around and around and around like that instead of dropping straight into the jar?”

“It has to do with gravity, angles, and the shape of the funnel.”

She held out a coin. “Can you show me?”

Frisk frowned and raised a hand to stop her daughter. “Attie, don’t bother-”

“Eh, it’s fine,” he said. “Kid’s not hurting anything, and I’ll still be right here if someone wants to buy ‘dogs.” He pushed himself up. “Uh, feel free to take a seat if you want. There’s just the one stool and it might be...a bit short for ya, but...” he gestured awkwardly and turned away.

Attie was a brilliant audience, holding onto every word as he explained the ins and outs of accelerated gravitational motion and centrifugal force. He was pretty sure most of it flew straight over the seven-year-old’s head, but she didn’t interrupt.

“...Sans?”

He looked up to see someone approaching from the direction of the park. “Oh. Hi, Tori. Thanks for, uh...y’know.” He shrugged.
“It’s no trouble. I heard that you were in a fight last night, but not that there were complications. What seems to be the trouble?”

Frisk sent Attie off to play on the slides (one of the few areas of the playground without a coat of snow) while Sans reluctantly explained his situation. Tori stood quietly through it all, her eyes occasionally flicking to her adopted daughter.

“I do not approve of healing every small hurt, but I also do not want to send a sentry out injured after what happened last night. Hold out your arm, please.”

Sans did so, bracing himself. Healing was an agonizing process at the best of times, and Tori was at least a little bit irritated with him. He could feel the bone shards grating against each other as the fractures knit. He hadn’t registered it through the general haze of pain, but there were even cracks in the small bones that comprised his wrist. Tori’s firm grip on the damaged bones made his vision waver, and he grabbed the counter of the hot dog stand to keep from embarrassing himself.

After what seemed like hours, the pain ebbed and he came to his senses. He didn’t realize until he extracted his hand from Tori’s that he was shaking from pain and exhaustion; the accelerated healing process was draining his reserves faster than the ‘dog he’d eaten earlier could replenish them.

“Frisk, let him sit,” Tori said, shooing her daughter off the stool.

With great effort, Sans managed to maneuver himself around the back of the hot dog stand and collapsed onto his stool. He could feel the strain on his spine and hips from the position, but at least he was less likely to tip over in front of his...

...friends?

He decided not to think too much about it.

“If that is all, I shall be off,” Tori said to Frisk. “Do you need me to watch Atlas this weekend?”

“That would be great, Mom. We can talk it over this afternoon at the Embassy.”

“Very well. I shall see you then.”

Tori walked off without saying goodbye to Sans, and he winced. It was only half because of the little twinges of pain that kept shooting down his spine. Shifting didn’t help much, either.

“I thought you and Mom got along?” Frisk asked, looking concerned again.

“We do. It’s just - ugh! - I haven’t seen her in a few months.” In hindsight, he probably should have at least called.

“Well, I hope you get back on speaking terms.”

“No kidding. Don’t want her to bleat me up.”

Frisk snorted. “That was terrible.”

“I notice your lack of surprise.”

She just smiled. “Oh, hey, your kitten’s back asleep. Want him back?”

“Nah, I think he’s comfy.” Both Frisk and the cat looked comfy, actually. Realization dawned
slowly on him. (He blamed it on the lack of sleep.)

“Hey, uh, do you know anyone who wants a cat?”

“You’re not going to try to keep him?”

“Nah. You were right ‘bout the dogs. And, well, I don’t think Boss is gonna really go for ‘cute
and fuzzy.’ He might, but it’s 50/50.”

Frisk looked at him, then back to the cat, then back to him. “Attie...has been bugging me about
getting a pet for a while, actually. She wanted a dog but, well, I’m sure you can see how that
might get a tad awkward.”

“No kiddin’.”

“We also spend a lot of time at the Embassy, and when I travel Attie spends time with her
grandparents. A cat on the other hand...well, you don’t have to walk them, for one. If you’d be
willing to stop in every once in a while to feed him while I’m on trips, I don’t see why we couldn’t
keep him. If you’re sure…”

“Yeah, that’d be great!” Attie had turned out... mostly alright, after all, short bouts of chaos and
terror aside. A cat raised by Frisk would probably wind up ruling the world (or at least the
neighborhood), but Sans could think of worse things.

“Okay. Um, do you want to keep him with you for a bit, or…”

“I, uh, don’t even have food for ‘im. I made a little bed out of old shirts, but that’s it. If you don’t
mind takin’ ‘im now, go for it.”

She looked at the little cat, stroking gently behind his ears and smiling. His eyes were closed, and
Sans could hear the faint rumbling of that purring thing cats did when they were happy. He
grinned.

“I’d say he’s in good hands.”

“...Yes. Hopefully. We’ll see.” That smile got just a bit wider, though.

Attie stomped up a little while later, shivering. “It’s too cold to play much,” she said. “And one of
the big kids kept trying to get me to stick my tongue to the monkey bars.”

It took Sans a moment to register why this was even a thing humans would want to do. That’s
right; humans had drippy ‘saliva’ stuff inside their mouths. Putting her tongue on the unprotected
metal of the monkey bars would have probably caused it to freeze and stick. “You tell that kid
off?”

“Yeah. I told him that if he wanted to do science so bad then he should try it first, because a good
scientist doesn’t use other people as test subjects.”

“Ooookay. I mean, you’re not wrong, but did he do it?”

“No. I guess he didn’t believe in his hyp...hypo’s.”

“Hypothesis?”

“Yup!”
Frisk chuckled. “Fair enough. Now Attie, I have an important question for you.”

“Okay?”

“Mr. Sans lives in a building with some of the dogs.”

“I know. I heard them when I was having the long sleepover while you were sick.”

“...Right. Well, dogs and cats don’t always get along, so Mr. Sans said he’d let us take the kitty home with us. Would that be alright?”

Attie gasped and turned to Sans. “Do you really, really mean it? We can keep your kitty?”

“Sure, kid.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sans! Thank you a whole, whole, whole bunch!” She shuffled over and gave him a very soft, very careful hug.

He patted her on the back, feeling awkward under Frisk’s observation. “Uh, no problem. I’m sure he’s gonna be happy with you.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Nah. I guess you ‘n your mom get to name ‘im.”

At Frisk’s nod, Attie began petting the kitten, her brows furrowed. “You said you found him in water, right, Mr. Sans?”

“Yup.”

“And he’s got a bad eye, like Undie.”

“Sure does.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to name him...Terror Of the Seven Seas!!! Because he’s a pirate cat.”

Frisk snorted. “That’s a long name, honey. Want to come up with something shorter?”

“Nope! But he can have a nickname if you really want him to.”

“Terror Of the Seven Seas it is, then.”

“Guess you could call ‘im ‘TOSS,’” Sans piped up. “Short for Terror Of the Seven Seas. Pirate extraordinaire.”

The little girl hummed. “That sounds okay. He can be called TOSS for a nickname.”

Frisk was snickering behind her hand, he knew it.

Suddenly, a loud ringing noise interrupted the peaceful morning. Frisk dug through her pockets for a moment, then produced a familiar-looking phone. “Oh...Sans, I’m so sorry, but we’ve got to run.”

“Okay.” It was expected, he told himself. Frisk was an ambassador and a busy woman.

“Can we bring Terror of the Seven Seas with us to the embassy?” Attie asked.
Her mother glanced down nervously. “Well...just this once, I guess.”

She cheered. “See ya later, Mr. Sans!”

“See ya, kid,” he replied.

And then they were gone, and his morning seemed all too quiet.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: cat and dog food preferences were researched. Don't feed your pets hot dogs, hamburgers, or normal canned meat if you have other options, please; Sans really doesn't know what he's doing, and he's used to dealing with monsters. Still, TOSS surviving this treatment shouldn't be outside the realm of possibility; and while mustard is apparently really bad for dogs, lightly steamed mustard greens can be healthy in moderation.

Also, spiral coin wells really are a thing. Fresh tomatoes are a staple of the Chicago-style hot dog. And Attie's light-up shoes are from way back in chapter 7.

Well, I hope you're all happy! I got quite a few comments about the fate of Sans's kitten, and here you are: TOSS has a name and a good home. Oh, and Attie and Frisk are back...but really, we all know that TOSS is the real star of this story, right? He's a cat, after all: my cat has informed me that cats rule the universe and humanity is only allowed to exist to serve their interests. Then she sat on my keyboard because I was typing and she wanted pets.

Unfortunately, I do have a bit of sad news as well. Due to a bunch of things crashing on my head, we're going to have to go down to one chapter per week for the month of March. I will (hopefully) be able to return to normal scheduling in early April. It does mean we'll have a longer wait between some intense chapters but it's either this or put the story on hiatus suddenly, and I REALLY don't want to do that. So starting next week, we will have updates on Wednesdays and a long, cold void of silence on weekends. I am very sorry.

I had a bit of a technical issue with Tumblr, but I think I've got that resolved now; if I wind up having spare time, I'll post some more bonus content to make up for a lack of chapters.

As always, thanks so much to everyone who's supported this story!
The Trouble With Paperwork

Chapter Summary

A certain young woman puts on her big girl boots to confront the challenges and dangers of bureaucracy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk took a deep breath and opened the door to Grillby’s. The atmosphere of the bar felt both new and familiar at once, and she took a moment to soak it all in. On the one hand, there was a sense of safety in the midst of a terrifying reality, like being in the eye of a storm; on the other, there was a lot less up on the surface to worry about, and the effect was almost homey. It was certainly a lot more relaxed than the old bar in Snowdin had been, and though most of the patrons were monsters Grillby clearly didn’t discriminate when it came to accepting cash.

His business choices certainly paid off. Even three days after Christmas, there was a steady stream of clientele of both species. Dogamy had apparently escaped his den for a brief moment and was waiting impatiently at the bar. Next to him, Doggo was scratching luxuriously at his collar while nursing a dark drink that barely reflected the low light. A multicolored group of humans was gesturing and laughing softly at a table next to the antique jukebox that she suspected had come from the old bar Underground. It hadn't worked back then, but someone must have worked on it since; it occasionally let out erratic strains of music that didn't always coincide with what song patrons selected or when they selected it.

Behind the counter, her reason for coming to Grillby’s was sorting out plates of finger foods and mugs of beer with the ease of practice.

Pele, the little fire elemental girl Undyne had told her about, noticed her as she approached. “Welcome to...oh! Ambassador! I...it’s an honor to see you here!”

“It’s an honor to meet you. You’re Pele, right?”

The girl gulped. “Y-yes?”

“I heard about you. Undyne let me know you were here. She talked with you a few days ago, right?”

“The, um, tall loud captain? She saw...um...met? Met me. Yes.”

Great. Whose bright idea was it to let Undyne be the poor child’s first impression of monsters on the surface? It was a miracle she hadn’t bolted right back to the Underground. “She can be a little intense. Sorry. I’m just here to make sure you’re happy here.”

“Y-yes! I...I am very happy in this place. Bar? Very happy. Yes. Much work, but...hmm...good work.”

“I’m glad.”
“Not...trouble?”

“No, no one’s in trouble. I just need to do some paperwork. Actually, is Grillby here?”

“Yes. He...I...let me get Grillby…”

“Thank you,” Frisk said. Both the girl’s English and her Elemental were choppy, as Undyne had warned, but she was mostly intelligible. Time and practice would help that.

She took a seat at the bar and clasped her hands in her lap, willing herself not to fidget. Grillby was one monster everyone knew, but no one knew well. He was a good businessman, suspiciously clean with the law, and what illegal activity he was rumored to allow was... mostly harmless. He had been a force of nature in Snowdin - his bar had been a cross between a watering hole and neutral territory - and his reputation had served him well the surface.

“Ambassador Dreemurr?” the monster asked in Elemental as he stepped out of the back room, without waiting for a response. “I’ve been expecting you. Please, follow me; I have a private room in the back where we can talk. Pele, watch the bar. Come get me if there’s trouble.”

Pele’s flames flickered with uncertainty, but she nodded anyways and continued delivering orders. She didn’t seem to have too much trouble understanding what was being said, nodding and humming as a few patrons asked for refills on their drinks, but she didn’t speak much.

Frisk followed Grillby into a private room. She’d been back there a few times before when meeting with monsters who didn’t like going to more “uppity” establishments and didn’t want to be seen at the embassy, but it had been...stars, years. A table had already been set with two chairs and a pitcher of water - a surprising concession to her humanity - and the fire elemental held her chair out for her as she sat at one of them. It was a touch of chivalry that was even more unexpected than the water.

“I was taught manners, even if I don’t use them,” he crackled, clearly amused at her reaction. “Now. What do you need from me?”

She took a deep breath and opened the briefcase she’d brought. A large folder was extracted and placed on the table in front of her. “I heard from Undyne that you’re claiming guardianship of Pele. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“On what grounds?”

“She is...family.” When she remained silent, he gave a little sigh and continued. “She is my niece. I was emancipated by her father - my brother - when she was very young, and have been estranged from the family ever since. I only recently found out she was orphaned. Despite the...rift, I am claiming familial relationship.”

“How did you find out about her situation?”

“I’m afraid I cannot say.”

That was expected. Frisk pulled the bag of gold she'd prepared out of her inventory, but Grillby shook his head.

“I really cannot say. While I’m pleased you came prepared to bargain, this is one area where I will stick to my word.”
“I must admit, I’m surprised.” It wasn’t like he’d had any qualms about cutting a bargain for information before.

Grillby just grinned.

“Alright, then. If I may ask, why were you emancipated from your family? I’m just trying to paint a full picture; without anyone else to take care of her, it probably won’t have much effect on your claim.”

“Pele’s father - my brother - was involved in...less than palatable activities with a group out of Hotland. They call themselves the Sparks nowadays, but back then they were just a gang of ruffians out to make quick money. I thought the venture was too risky, especially with children involved; my brother disagreed. He gave me an ultimatum and I refused to comply. You understand the rest. It was not uncommon back in the Underground, I’m sure you know.”

She did, all too well, but it still made her heart ache. She schooled her expression; he wouldn’t appreciate her empathy. “You mentioned children. Are there other kids we should be looking out for?”

“No.” He didn’t elaborate, but his flames did tense.

She didn’t push, feeling the ache of secrets and old wounds in the air. “Is there a chance the Sparks may come after her?”

“No. They...disposed of her. They likely believe she is dead. Even if they did venture topside this time of year and found her, they would have no reason to believe she had not come to me by the same means through which she left their hands.”

It took a moment for her to process that, especially with the translation from Elemental to English. “They sold her? To who?”

“I’m afraid that’s something I will keep to myself. Suffice to say: the individual she was sold to may hold a grudge, and I’m not willing to have any paper trails lead my way if I can avoid it.”

“Grillby, if someone is coming after Pele I want to know. It’s part of my job as a Princess of Monsters to look out for the safety of children.”

The elemental eyed her searchingly, but did not respond.

Frisk sighed. There was little she could do if he didn’t want to talk. “Alright. Please keep my offer in mind, though. Let’s go over the boring stuff, then…”

Citizenship paperwork was something Frisk never wanted to touch again. It was the written equivalent of banging her head against a wall fifty times. Over the next hour or so - interrupted twice by Pele, who was looking more and more frazzled the longer Grillby was away - they gradually worked through it.

Finally, there was a stack of completed paperwork sitting in a pile between them, only lightly singed at the edges. They hadn’t even used all the spare copies she’d brought. “Alright,” she said, trying to hide her exhaustion, “I think that’s everything. The preliminary work, at least. Here’s a pamphlet for the Embassy of the Kingdom of Monsters; I’ve had it fireproofed for you. Please don’t hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about the procedure. Since you’re already a citizen this will be treated like a foreign adoption.”

“I’m not familiar with what that entails.”
“It’s not too bad, compared to some of the other processes we handle at the embassy. We’ve done most of it today. There will be a hearing in a few weeks with the family court judge, and someone from our child services team will need to meet with Pele to make sure she’s happy with the arrangement, but I don’t have any concerns about that. All our people are highly trained, so don’t worry too much about cultural differences. Because you’re family it expedites the process, since you would have legal guardianship of her either way. It’s time-consuming but not as long as applying for citizenship as an adult; that’s a benefit.”

“Indeed.”

“And here is my personal business card.” She held it out for him, noting the faint surprise as he took it. “With the holidays it might take some time to get everything filed, but I’ll keep you posted. If you need anything, or are concerned for Pele’s safety or your own, please don’t hesitate to give me or Undyne a call.”

Grillby stared at the card in his hands, his warmth making the fireproofing charm shimmer on the thick paper. Finally, he looked back up at her. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I care. I’ve always said that monsters’ greatest weakness is their lack of solidarity, and I’m trying to do my part to fix that. I also have a daughter of my own. Being a single parent isn’t easy, and while I won’t presume to know your situation, I know it’s hard to go it alone.”

“I...see. Thank you.”

“No problem. Actually, if it’s alright, I have a question.”

He gestured for her to continue. He was holding up well under the avalanche of bureaucracy he’d just been subjected to, but he was clearly a bit overwhelmed.

“Why doesn’t Pele wear stripes? She’s still young enough.”

Grillby thought it over for a moment, running his glowing fingers along the edge of table. “It is tradition in my family to work from a young age, to learn the family business. Among humans this causes questions I’d rather not face, especially considering the...type of establishment I run. If it becomes a legal issue we can work something out but I wish to pass along the knowledge I have.”

There was a lot implied in that statement. Pele’s immediate family had been gang members; that was the only life the girl had known. Helping her learn skills outside that line of work would be good for her and would keep her busy. Sure, there were child labor laws, but...“We’ve had similar cases in the past and the human government deals with it as a cultural issue, like doing chores around the house, as long as the child is healthy and cared for. I can help you and her apply for a formal work permit to make sure everything’s in order. There is the issue of school...”

“School environments here are generally not equipped to handle her special...requirements, and I do not feel comfortable sending her back to Hotland alone.”

“I understand. Actually, I brought over some materials if you’re willing to look them over.”

She’d only packed them on a whim. Without knowing what she was walking into, Frisk had wanted to be prepared for all possibilities.

“What...is this?” He was looking at the pamphlets and printouts she’d given him like they were some kind of strange, foreign science.

She tried to hide her amusement. She’d felt the same way, back when she was first researching
them for Attie. “Homeschooling options. Many monsters who have “special requirements” choose to educate their children at home. There are quite a few good programs set up for just that purpose, actually. Some of them even cater specifically to monsters, with courses on monster history and languages in addition to all the basic subjects. Personally, I use a human course and supplement with more hands-on activities for culture studies, but each situation is unique.” And she needed to shut up because she was rambling again and Grillby was looking at her funny.

After a very tense moment (during which Frisk was sure she’d offended him somehow), the elemental smiled. It was a little horrifying - a dark, jagged tear that split his face in half, far wider than any human smile - but she recognized it for the genuine good-will gesture it was. “I appreciate it,” he said.

She smiled back, relieved, and packed the completed paperwork back into her briefcase. “Well, you know how to get in touch with me if you need me, so I’ll let you get back to your bar. Thank you for your time.”

“It’s no trouble.”

He held the door for her and followed her out. To her surprise, he spoke up one last time.

“If you want to know more about Pele, I would ask your small babysitter. Your daughter has worked wonders on him.”

Then he ducked into the kitchen, neatly avoiding any further questions.

That didn’t stop the questions from coming, though. Sans had something to do with Pele?? He hadn’t said anything, but Frisk wasn’t surprised; he seemed to have his fingers in everything. From the way Grillby spoke it sounded like Sans had been the one to find her. Had Sans bought the girl from someone? The idea of the skeleton making shady deals for a child’s life and freedom was an odd one, but strangely heartwarming. He was in the business of rescuing kittens, after all.

He was a better person than even he believed.

She really ought to thank him in person, once he was feeling better.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: most monsters may speak the same verbal language as their human neighbors (called by the human name “English”), but they have a different written language (called "Monster"). Certain monsters - including elementals like Grillby and Pele, and the dog pack - have a different spoken language, but they write in Monster. Most understand English as well; it’s just easier that way.

Another short chapter, yes, but from Frisk's perspective! She doesn't usually make house calls, but this is a special case. Undyne is very worried about Pele, for some reason.

I'll be posting an updated timeline over on Tumblr, but this chapter takes place eight days after the previous one.

Again, thanks for all the kind comments! The next chapter won't be until next
Wednesday, so I hope everyone has a great week!
In Which a Debt is Repaid

Chapter Summary

...But really, I don’t think Sans was counting.

Chapter Notes

Please note: this chapter contains descriptions and aftermath of severe bodily harm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sans was in pain. More pain than he’d ever been in his life. There was probably a better word to describe it, but he wasn’t feeling lo…

Loc…

...good with words at the moment.

He was pretty sure both his legs had been shattered. His left hand felt...off. Boss had pulled a few fingers off, which was normal for a really bad punishment, but he didn’t remember if those fingers had ever been stuck back on. He tried wiggling his hand.

...Ouch.

Probably not, then.

He shifted, trying to take some of the pressure of his aching ribs, and only succeeded in digging bits of splintered plastic into his spine. Right, his phone. Boss had crushed it. That was...not good.

Why had he done that again?

Something, something, discipline…?

Oh! Sans felt the corners of his permanent grin tugging up. He remembered. That was good, remembering. Yeah.

Boss had found the food and water container he’d put out for the kitten (what had that kid named it, again? Throw? That didn’t make sense, right?). Sans had left the little space heater on and Boss had heard it, apparently. That was bad. Something about bills.

But...Sans paid all the bills for the apartment, so why was Boss so upset…?

Anyways. Heater. Boss had seen the container and the mess, and had realized that Sans had brought home a pet.

Dun dun duuuuuun…
And so, Sans had been in even more trouble than he’d expected. He’d expected to be in some trouble because...something. (He didn’t remember that part.) Anyways, more trouble. Boss hadn’t been happy. He’d taken Sans’s phone, and then he’d seen the picture of something, which wasn’t good. At all. What had it been again?

Sans slowly turned his head over to the wall. His own claws had scratched out a message:

```
i will not contact the ambassador
i will not contact the ambassador
i will not contact the ambassador
```

Ooooh. Right. Boss had -

- he gasped as his broken body reasserted itself, his vision blanking briefly before he regained control -

- had told him not to contact Frisk. Or Attie. And he had broken the rules. He’d kept a picture of Attie and Frisk in their Takersfaire costumes on his phone, and had been seen with them at the park.

Sans was bad. And bad skeletons need to be punished. He knew that. He’d always known that, right?

If it wasn’t Boss, it was…

...but that wasn’t important. What was important was that Sans was sick and tired of this cycle of pain, alleviated occasionally by the food Boss kept shoving down his throat to keep him stable. Despite Boss’s best efforts he could feel his last pathetic point of HP wavering, and he welcomed it.

He’d been hurting for so, so long this time. Usually it was over so fast Boss didn’t even have to feed him. This time it had gone on for...months, probably. Or years. It almost felt like years, but not quite.

...Weeks, maybe?

He was usually good with time, wasn’t he? He’d had to be, because…

...nope, gone again. He really needed to fix the hole in his skull that all his memories were leaking out of. He laughed a little. That was funny.

(He couldn’t remember why it was funny, but he did remember that laughing hurt.)

Anyways, what was he doing?

Oh, right. Dying.

He’d thought - hoped, even - that he’d dust in his sleep. Just doze off and not wake up. That sounded nice. Painless even, maybe.

Being awake for it was not what he’d expected. It was nice to know what was happening, in a way. But...being awake meant he was scared.

He was scared, no matter how much he wanted to pretend he wasn't. There wasn't even anyone to pretend for anymore. Sans shuddered, tears pooling awkwardly in his eye sockets and dripping
messily down his face. Once he started, he couldn’t stop; not even when the tears started dripping into his mouth and nasal cavity because his head was tilted so weirdly to the side, stinging the small cuts scratched there. He couldn’t remember if they were from Boss or from his own neurotic clawing at his face.

He was scared because he’d never see anyone again. No one would miss him. Boss wouldn’t even miss him. Boss didn’t care. He’d said that, Sans remembered. Many, many times.

Undyne wouldn’t care. He would be one less thing for her to worry about. She’d have to make her own coffee again, but…

...where was he going with that thought?

Never mind. Point was, no one would miss him. Not even…

A wide grin and a pair of bright green eyes. Frisk? No, he’d never known Frisk that young, not in a dozen (or was it a hundred?) timelines. What was…

Oh, right. He knew that kid; he’d just been thinking about her. About Attie.

Attie wouldn’t miss him.

But…

She’d dressed up as a skeleton. She’d hugged him. She’d asked for his advice. She’d looked so, so happy to see him.

So had Frisk for that matter. That’s right; Frisk was older now. A mother. A good mother, better than any human or monster Sans had ever known. So very, impossibly kind and caring, even when it came to filthy assholes like him. Was it any wonder he was...

His soul was doing a funny stuttering thing that couldn’t be healthy for him, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the two of them. And crying. Because he apparently couldn’t even die with dignity.

The haze that slowly consumed the world around him was getting worse. Even his collar, which he’d worn for years, felt like it was choking him.

This was the end, he figured. Time to give up. He always gave up, after all. Couldn’t raise Boss right. Couldn’t figure out how to break the barrier. Couldn’t hold down a decent job.

Couldn’t kill the human.

Frisk.

He gasped, shuddering. It felt like every bone in his body was trying to shake apart, disintegrate, fall to pieces.

To dust.

But…

“She CARES ’bout you! You impressed her!”

“Attie misses you. She’s sad that you won’t call her.”

...But something wouldn’t let him. He...he had something to live for. Someone who would miss
him. Someone who, maybe, needed him?

That was all he’d wanted from life, really. Abandoning something so precious, right when he was finally discovering it, seemed strangely impossible. More impossible than death.

And for the first time in his life,

Sans

*REFUSED*

To

Give

Up.

With one last, choking sob, his world went *white.*

He woke up an untold amount of time later. He was still in agony, still a mess from his earlier ugly crying fit, but he didn’t feel quite so...fragile. Emotionally or physically.

Still at one HP though, he reminded himself as one fractured hand twitched, so that was...a problem. But something was tickling the back of his mind, now that he was alert enough to use it. He was exhausted - far too exhausted to use a bone attack, much less a shortcut - but there was something else. Another possible escape. Boss had read much of Undyne's text chain aloud at some point, and it had reminded him of something...

Oh! Right! Undyne had told him to talk to Alphys before she sent any more pictures of Frisk and Attie. The only weird thing he’d gotten from Alphys was that box he’d never gotten a chance to open.

Well. No time like the present.

(Was that a pun? He decided, reluctantly, not to count it. It hurt still too much to laugh.)

Getting the box out of his inventory was a pain. Literally. He had to choke back a scream when it landed haphazardly on his ribs, at least four of which were definitely broken.

Opening the box one-handed was even worse. Sure, his right hand and arm were relatively untouched, but they were still stiff and sore and connected to parts of him that *were* injured. Plus, he was left-handed, so he was even more clumsy than normal.

Finally, the box was open. Inside - and he hadn’t dared to imagine what would be inside, but he’d half-expected a prank of some sort - was a phone. A real, honest-to-goodness, modern, magically-compatible phone.

He hit the power button, willing himself not to hope. This had come from Alphys; what were the odds it had a charge?

It blinked to life with a happy little chime.

*Shit,* he was gonna cry again.

Emotionally invested in this, now, he unlocked the screen and carefully tapped the contact list. Undyne wouldn’t have arranged for him to have this amazing magical device without giving him
contacts, right? Sure enough, there were three listed.

He tapped one at random. The caller ID said “Guess who? :-)” so hopefully it was someone friendly.

Stars, he hoped it was Undyne.

After two and a half rings, a gruff voice picked up. “-ello?”

It didn’t sound like Undyne. It didn’t sound like anyone he knew. Then again, the phone was at a funny angle, and most of what he could hear was breathing.

“H-hello,” he said. He sounded awful, and his voice was too quiet. “Please. I-it’s Sans.”

“Sans?” A choked sob cut off his name, and he could've sworn the voice sounded familiar.

There was a shuffle, then- “Sans?”

That sounded like Undyne. He grinned. “I-I’m…”

“Sans? Where are you? Stars, we’ve been worried sick! And how’d you get-”

“B-basement.”

“What?”

He could feel his voice fading out. His vision was darkening at the edges, too. The pain was finally getting to him, and it made him panic a little.

He didn’t want to die.

“I’m...in the b-basement,” he managed before he passed out to the sounds of worried shouts.

A moment later - or was it? - he was woken up by the door opening. On instinct, he dragged himself upright and against a wall; pain didn’t matter right then. Boss was back. Boss was-

“Sans?”

He glanced up over his knees. When had he curled himself up? How had he curled himself up? And how had Frisk gotten in?

Shit, Frisk. Boss was gonna…

He opened his mouth to warn her, but she stepped in before he could gather himself. “Sans, it’s me; it’s Frisk,” she said.

“Well, duh,” he wanted to say. What actually came out was an embarrassingly high-pitched whine.

“Sans, it’s Frisk,” she said again, hands outstretched. She was crouched down to his level, eyes not leaving his. “Do you know who I am?”

His voice still wasn’t working, but he managed a strange, jerky nod. He couldn’t stop rocking back and forth, back and forth; it hurt, but the motion was soothing on his frayed nerves.

“Okay, okay, good. Do you know where you are?”

The nod came easier the second time, but hurt worse.
“Okay. I’m here to get you out. Sans, I’m going to get you—oh, *snap*; Undyne, he’s—he’s got fractured vertebrae.”

There was a muffled noise that Sans couldn’t make sense of, but he was starting to realize that—that Boss wasn’t in the room.

Yet.

He relaxed a little as Frisk argued with the muffled voice.

“Okay,” she said, facing him again. “Sans, I’m gonna try to...oh, wait. Do you know where your fingers are?”

Uhhh...on his hand??

“No, no, don’t worry. Let me...uh…”

She disappeared from his line of sight for a moment, then reappeared holding…


She fiddled with them and his fractured palm for a moment, but Sans already knew it wouldn’t work. His magical reserves were too low to reestablish the connection between his fingers and the rest of his body. The thought made him feel a little resigned.

“Well,” she said, “I guess we’ll try later. Here, I have some Sea Tea. Can I...?”

It didn’t matter what Sans thought; Frisk was already tilting the travel mug of tea towards his mouth, and he could either choke or swallow. Choking was his first instinct (he couldn’t even remember a time when he’d needed help eating), but he really did need the HP. The impact was minimal - after being forced to eat whatever Boss brought him, his body was fighting what it saw as just another abuse - but he eked a few extra points of health out of it.

“You’re moving, so it can’t be that bad, right? Right. I’m gonna try to lift you now. Okay? Can you, uh, lean forward for me?”

He wanted to make a witty comment - *she* was the princess, after all, not *him* - but it wouldn’t come out. Especially once she picked him up and every single broken bone in his body screamed.

Oh, wait. That was just him.

Frisk was shushing him when he finally regained the ability to hear. “You’re gonna bring Papyrus down here,” she said. “Please, please, I’m sorry; we’ll get you healed up soon, just please be quiet...”

He managed to shut his big fat mouth, finally. That thing was gonna get him in trouble one day. That was supposed to be funny, right?

“Okay. This is gonna hurt, and I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta get you outta here.”

And she did.

And it hurt.

But Sans used every single ounce of magic and willpower left in his wrecked, mangled little body
to stay quiet. Because Frisk had asked him to, and that was important for some reason he couldn’t quite bring himself to remember.

It felt like he struggled against the rending, tearing claws of white-hot pain for an eternity. There was nothing but him, the agony that ate slowly through his bones, and the faint, distant impression of Frisk’s arms around him. Until...there wasn’t. There was something new.

Something...green?

Healing usually hurt. If healing didn’t hurt, he’d always been told, that was a Bad Sign. So when the inexplicable green magic actually felt good, felt like relief, he was caught between being glad it was over and trying desperately to hang on.

“Hey, lazybones,” Undyne said from somewhere above him, her hands still glowing green. “You gave us quite a scare, y’know.”

He tried to speak, coughed, then tried again. His voice felt weak, pathetic. “where...?”

“Alleyway behind your apartment building. We snuck you out the back exit. Stars, man, you’ve been missing for almost two weeks. You’ve missed so many shifts…”

“Undyne,” Frisk said, but it sounded more like a sob. Sans looked up. She was crying. Why was she crying over his sorry ass?

“Well, it’s true! Now, man, let me tell you something. You are not going back there. I just arranged with Dogamy to have Paps called away; his car’s pulling out now. We’ve got some time before he realizes you’re missing. You’re gonna tell me what you want from your messy room, and I’m gonna grab it for ya, then you’re gonna hang out on Frisk’s couch until further notice.”

She was looking at him like she expected an answer.

“ok,” he said.

“Wh-okay?”

“yeah.”

“You’re not gonna fight me on this?”

He shrugged a little, noting that his bones - though still sore - were actually holding together. He wasn’t dying; in fact, the world was becoming clearer by the second. And he remembered what had happened to him, far better than he wanted to. At the moment, he thought he’d be happy to never see Boss again, actually.

“Well...fine. Here. Sit up and tell me what ya need.”

There wasn’t much. A few binders, a box of photos he’d taken that one time he’d found a camera when he was young. Some socks. (Undyne looked at him funny when he said that, but...hey, sentimental value.)

Honestly, he’d moved most of the important stuff to his locker at the gym weeks ago. The possibility of having random humans come across it was a lot less terrifying than having Boss come across it. If only he’d had the same discretion regarding his phone and that stupid nest he’d made for the cat.
While Undyne went up to raid his apartment, Frisk half-dragged Sans around to a side street. It was surprisingly empty; even in the cold winter weather, it was sheltered enough to be a safe haven for drug deals or the occasional homeless monster. Instead, there was a grey car idling just out of sight of the building’s exit in a pool of flickering light from the cracked streetlamp. Sans noticed, as Frisk helped him inside, that the emblem of the Kingdom of Monsters was emblazoned on the rear doors in red.

“No one messes with me, even in rough areas like this,” Frisk said, following his gaze. “Especially when I have Undyne around. I don’t know whether it’s fear or respect, or if they just don’t want to draw attention to themselves, but I’ve never had trouble.”

Sans was willing to guess it was a bit of each. Most monsters were just trying to get by, and avoiding notice by law enforcement and public officials was customary. It didn’t matter if they were law-abiding; there had been enough corruption in the past that even Undyne’s reforms couldn’t completely rehabilitate the Guard’s poor reputation in many communities. That distrust extended to the human police force as well, even though they were far more organized and there was a small and growing number of monsters who had joined up.

Frisk, on the other hand, was a legend to every monster alive. Her name was whispered in awe in the depths of dark taverns where even the king’s crown was considered fair game. Her every move was scrutinized by a loyal cadre of monsters who spread and exaggerated her deeds until - according to some reports - the very sun rose and set at her pleasure.

No, she had little to fear from these people.

Undyne reappeared a few minutes later, an entire dresser drawer tucked under one arm. Sans grinned; it was his sock drawer. Stars bless the fish, she’d actually just up and brought the whole thing. The binders he’d asked for (and several he hadn’t) were haphazardly piled on top.

“Here,” she growled, making to shove it at him before carefully setting it on the seat beside him. She swung herself recklessly into the driver’s seat with extra enthusiasm to make up for it. “I grabbed you a few changes of clothes too, you bum. Couldn’t find that ratty coat you always wear. Now we’re out of here.”

Undyne was a far more careful driver than Sans would have expected. Either she was being careful because of his injuries (unlikely) or she didn’t want to crash with one of her besties in the front seat (definitely possible), but she seemed to be sticking more or less to the speed limit. If she hadn’t been blasting the radio at a volume that was probably uncomfortable for Frisk, Sans would’ve been worried that she’d been replaced by a doppelganger.

The drive to Frisk’s house was short, thankfully; after all, it was on his alternate route to the park, so it wasn’t that far away. Driving was better than walking but Sans could feel every little bump like a kick to the ribs. Undyne pulled up to the garage around back, pausing for Frisk to work the wards, and parked with careful precision.

“Let’s be quiet getting out,” Frisk said to no one in particular. “We left Attie asleep; I don’t want her to know I was gone.”

Undyne nodded solemnly. Sans tried to do the same, but winced when his neck decided to complain at him.

It was the captain who helped him out of the car and onto still-shaky legs, while Frisk tiptoed in front of them opening doors. He choked back another scream with every step; whatever healing Undyne had done, it hadn’t fixed him entirely. His HP was much better but he could feel the sharp,
stabbing pains in his legs where they had been broken.

He hadn’t seen much of the house the last time he was there, but it was a lot nicer than he remembered. There was a full kitchen with a breakfast bar, cupboards in dark wood and shiny stone countertops. The dining room held a surprisingly large table with six chairs, two of which were enormous and lavish enough to be thrones. Beyond that, there was a comfortable living room with a small TV, several bookshelves, and - of course - the couch Sans was apparently going to be crashing on for the foreseeable future.

Undyne helped him over to the couch and he collapsed gratefully. There were low murmurs in the dining room behind him, but he really couldn’t care less. He was getting ready to pass out again.

“Sans?”

He opened his eyes. It was quiet. Had he actually crashed, or had he just not noticed Undyne’s departure? “Heya.”

“Are you okay? Anything I can get you?” Frisk asked, hovering over the couch. The kitchen and dining room were dark behind her, but a light from the hallway danced across her face.

“Nah. ‘M good. Hey...uh…”

“It’s fine, Sans. We can talk tomorrow. Get some sleep now. And holler if you need anything; I’m just down the hallway.”

She turned to leave, apparently not expecting an answer, but for a guy who usually didn’t give a damn he found that he was unwilling to just let her walk away.

“Thanks,” he croaked.

“Anytime.”

Her smile was conspiratorial, and Sans couldn’t help but smile back. In fact, he was probably still grinning like an idiot when he fell asleep moments later.

He dreamed of torture that night. It was bad - memories, mostly, combined with things he’d only ever feared Boss would try - but he was aware that he was dreaming, so everything had a strangely blurry quality. It was like his rattled mind was trying to come to terms with the fact that he was safe, for the first time he could remember, and it was due to people and circumstances so unlikely it was difficult for him to believe.

Bizarrely, it was some of the best sleep he’d gotten in his life.

He opened his eye sockets slowly the next morning. He wasn’t sure right away what had woken him up, but it was a peaceful waking. No jarring alarms, no screaming, no dodging attacks-

A pair of bright green eyes was staring at him.

“Hey, Attie,” he whispered.

Attie frowned back at him for a long moment, glancing him over from head to toe. In her arms, something furry and grey and striped wriggled a little. “You missed Christmas,” she said.

“I...did?”

“Yeah.”
“Oh. Uh, sorry.”

There was an awkward pause as they looked at each other. For such a small child, Attie had the uncomfortable stare down to an art form. Desperate for something else to look at, Sans glanced down at the cat in her arms. It looked...larger than he remembered, and substantially so.

“Wait, what day is it?” he asked without really thinking.

“MOMMY, WHAT DAY IS IT?”

Frisk reappeared, wearing a brown apron with the words “Chickens tremble at the sound of my name” emblazoned across the front. For a moment, that distracted him from the fact that her hands were covered in a white, powdery substance.

On instinct he scrambled against the back of the couch, breathing hard. He felt exposed. Where was his jacket?

“...Sans?” she asked, looking a little lost for a moment. He watched, strangely detached, as she glanced down at her hands and realized the problem. “Oh-oh gosh, I’m so sorry. Here, let me...uh…”

She dashed out of his field of vision, and a moment later he heard water running. “I’m making cinnamon rolls for breakfast,” she called. “Sorry; I didn’t realize I was covered in flour.”

Oh, right. Flour. Haha.

Sans curled in on himself. Before...whatever Boss did, he would’ve laughed off something like that. His nerves were clearly shot. Hell, he couldn’t stop shaking.

He felt the couch beside him dip, and willed himself not to flinch away. “It’s okay, Mr. Sans,” Attie said softly. “Mommy won’t hurt you. She said that she and Undie rescued you. Like badass superheroes.”

“Y-yeah. I remember.”

Just having her on the couch next to him was bad enough. He thanked the stars that she hadn’t tried to touch him; he didn’t think he could handle-

Something soft brushed against his leg, and he jumped.

“No! Bad TOSS!” Attie yelled.

Sans looked down from his perch on the back of the couch to see the kitten, tail puffed up and back arched, where he’d been sitting. He cursed himself internally and slowly climbed back down. “Uh, sorry there, pal,” he said, running a careful hand over the kitten’s head. It was his left hand, the one that was...still missing fingers. He winced. He still had his pointer and middle fingers, but his thumb, ring finger, and pinky were all gone. The half-fused bones that formed his palm were still cracked, too.

TOSS, at least, was as soft as he remembered. The kitten froze for a moment, clearly untrusting, but gave in and started purring when he realized the big, scary skeleton wasn’t going to make any more sudden movements. His good eye slipped closed and he lifted his head to give Sans better access.

“I see you’ve become reacquainted with our newest family member,” Frisk said over the back of
the couch, now devoid of flour. “Thanks for bringing him to us. He’s a little grumpy sometimes, but he fits in pretty well around here. Anyways, you were asking about days?”

“Uh...yeah.”

“It’s Sunday. Sunday, January 8th.”

He felt her keen eyes on him, but he couldn’t keep his usual mask up. January 8th. That was...

“Wh...I mean, wow. That’s...I guess I was gone for a while.”

“Do you know how long you were down there?”

“Uh, Boss realized I had this little guy in my room, and he was already upset, so...things escalated from there. That was before Christmas, so...?”

“Wait, Papyrus has been keeping you in the basement for weeks?”

“Maybe...? I don’t remember...”

“You gave TOSS here to us on the 20th. Of December. That’s...18 or 19 days, depending on how you count; you did wake us up at 1:30 this morning with your call.”

“Uh, sorry?” He wasn’t sure what to think. It felt like he’d been down in that basement for years; had it only been two and a half weeks?

“Don’t be. Stars, I feel so stupid. If anyone should be sorry, it’s me. I didn’t even realize you were missing until this past Tuesday; and even though Undyne and I looked, well, we believed Papyrus’s story too much, I guess.”

“Wait, what did Boss say?”

Her eyes twitched a little at the title, but they never left his. “He called Undyne saying you were sick. That was...gosh, probably right around when this all happened. She says she felt a little bad; you’ve been working a lot lately, so she agreed to give you all the time off you needed. We started digging after I told her I was looking for you, but we didn’t find much. Undyne actually searched your apartment...Friday, I think? She freaked out when it looked like you hadn’t been there in a while, but Papyrus wouldn’t tell her anything.”

“Oh.” Sans wasn’t sure what to say to that.

“So...yeah. Long story short, I’m sorry for not looking for you sooner.”

“Not your fault.” It wasn’t like they’d been in contact regularly or anything. How would she have known he was in trouble? Especially with Boss covering for him?

There was a ding from the kitchen, and both of them jumped. “Oh, that’s the cinnamon rolls,” Frisk said. “I’d better get them in the oven.” She wandered off, leaving him with an unnervingly quiet child and her now-sleeping cat.

“You made Mommy cry,” Attie said. “She thought you were dead. She didn’t say so, but I could tell. Undie had to have sleepovers on our couch because she was really worried. She wouldn’t even let us have pillow forts.”

“Sorry, kid.”
She shrugged. “It’s okay. But if you ever make my mommy cry again, I’m going to take all your socks and give them to TOSS. He likes socks.”

“Uh...okay.”

With a firm nod, Attie leapt off the couch. She looked happier for having delivered her threat, at least. “I’m gonna go help in the kitchen!” she called. “I’m a really good baker, now!”

Sans dozed off like that, one broken hand curled around a sleeping kitten and the sounds of gentle bickering coming from the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans's confusion about time is not entirely due to Boss's treatment.

And the word he was looking for at the beginning of the chapter was "loquacious," which basically means "wordy."

I will once again remind everyone that abuse happens, sometimes to people you don't expect, and that help is available. If you or a loved one is the victim of abuse, get help. Report it to your local law enforcement. Tell a friend or a coworker or a teacher or a trusted authority figure. If you're in the US, here is a list of additional resources; international ones may be found here. Even a single phone call can be magical, but don't wait for someone to save you. Get yourself out of the situation and don't look back.

Thanks for sticking with this story! I still haven't had the time to get Tumblr up to date, but if you send me a message over there I will receive it. A huge debt of gratitude to everyone who has left comments and kudos on this story as well. I treasure every one!

Have a wonderful week!
Sans awoke with a jolt, scrambling up onto the back of the couch he was sleeping on. His skull was spinning. Where was he? He wasn’t in his old house in Snowdin and it was dark and he was clearly underground, so where-

“Sans?”

He shot a bone without thinking, only registering who had spoken a moment too late. A wave of his hand redirected the magical projectile and slowed its speed, but it still left a dent in the wall.

Woops.

He slowly raised his head to find Frisk standing in the dark hallway, dressed in some kind of loose matching pants and a shirt. Pyjamas, probably. Because it was nighttime. He wasn’t back in the Underground; he was supposed to be sleeping.

What a stupid mistake to make. Especially when he’d been on the surface for years…but it had never been so utterly dark in his apartment. Boss always left a light on, somewhere, except in the-

“Sans?”

Frisk hadn’t moved, still standing in the hallway with one hand in the pocket of her pyjama pants, still tense.

“Hey,” he said. He sounded hoarse, like his voice wasn’t working properly.

“Do you know where you are?”

“Uh…” That was a good question, actually. He glanced around, trying to remember where he was. Had he teleported drunk again? He reached up to rub between his eye sockets-

-and doubled over on the couch when he saw his missing fingers.

It all came rushing back. Boss, the awful punishment in the basement, the rescue by Frisk and Undyne. “I. Uh. I…”

“You’re in my living room. It’s about 4...4:32 AM on Monday, January 9th. Undyne and I brought you here just about 24 hours ago. You’ve been sleeping, mostly, since then; you woke up a few times, but you probably don’t remember that.”

He remembered a weird dream about Frisk covered in dust, but that was probably nothing.

“That was the cinnamon rolls,” she said. He hadn’t realized he’d actually spoken. “I’m sorry; I
didn’t even think...most of the monsters who hang out around here know when we’re baking, and - well - it isn’t an issue for Attie and I.”

Sans kept his mouth firmly shut and nodded. That’s right; humans bled instead of dusting. He really wasn’t doing well, was he.

“I, um, have your fingers still if you want them back.”

“Okay.”

She walked up to the couch carefully, not making any sudden moves. On the end table nearby was a pastel pink jar labeled “TOOTH FAIRY,” which she opened.

“Attie let you use her tooth jar,” Frisk explained when she saw him eyeing the container skeptically. She shook it gently, then tipped it over to reveal something wrapped in those white bits of soft paper that humans used to mop up their gross face leakages. “Here. Let me know if you need more magic to reattach them; I think I have more Sea Tea in the fridge.”

He unrolled the soft paper to reveal the thumb, ring finger, and pinky of his left hand. The bits of magic that held each set of bones together were intact, at least; reforming joints was always a pain, so the fewer he had to do the better. He just needed to connect them back to the partially-fused carpals that formed his palm.

The first finger reconnected with a snap! that sent a worrying jolt of agony through the cracked bones of his palm. Sure enough, trying to move it resulted in a grinding of bone against bone that had him ripping it right back off.

“Hey, are you sure you’re okay?”

He nodded, a little woozy from pain. “M’fine.”

Sans wished he could have taken her up on her offer of Sea Tea - he was even lower on magic than he originally thought - but...he couldn’t form the words. Something in the back of his mind was whispering how weak, how vulnerable you must look and he just couldn’t...couldn’t ask for more help than she’d already given. He wished he still had his jacket; hiding sounded great right about then.

She hummed a little, looking skeptical. “Well, I just wanted to make sure you were alright. You were screaming, after all.”

He froze. Screaming? He glanced Frisk over and realized that one hand was in her pants pocket, gripping something. A weapon? Had she come to try to save him? “Uh. S-sorry?”

“No problem. You didn’t wake up Attie - somehow - so everything’s fine.” She looked him over again. “Well, feel free to help yourself to food if you change your mind. There’s leftovers so you don’t have to cook.”

He had the urge to say something else, but no words came to mind. Instead he nodded and watched her walk back down the hallway.

Slowly, he let himself back down onto the couch cushions. Everything felt sore and hollow and he was desperately low on magic. His poor attempt at an attack earlier hadn’t helped things, certainly.

It was fine. Really, it was. He’d operated under worse conditions before. There was no reason to believe that this was going to take him down.
Standing *hurt*, though. He could feel the spots along his spine where his vertebrae had been broken, still sore despite Undyne’s healing magic. His legs and ribs felt fragile. His left carpals burned where his missing fingers should have been attached, and both palms ached from half-healed cracks, especially his left.

None of that mattered. He wouldn’t *let* it matter.

An agonizing ten minutes later, he was slowly - *slowly* - pouring himself a glass of Sea Tea. It had taken more blue magic than he liked to keep himself upright, scraping at his already-dry reserves, but the tea helped restore his magic. Better, he could *drink* it instead of eating; he didn’t think he could stomach anything solid.

(Heh.)

The boost of magic felt like euphoria, like a rush of power and energy and *life* that made everything he’d suffered fade away for one brief moment…

*Well. Better reconnect those fingers, then.*

He was more careful the second time, concentrating on forming the little pockets of magic that cushioned his bones from rubbing against each other. Actually doing things properly worked much better than just sticking them on and hoping for the best. He flexed his hand carefully and grinned: it was still painful, especially since his carpals were still cracked, but the fingers were functional.

Getting back to the couch was a little easier too, thanks to the magic boost. Still shaky, but he made it. He curled up with a soft sigh.

He was safe. He was *safe*. So, *so* tired, despite what Frisk had said about him sleeping a full day, but not in danger of being dusted. He wished he could drift back off. So…why was he still on high alert?

It was like he was expecting Boss to crash through the door at any moment, ready to dust him. Or worse, drag him back to the basement. It was unlikely - Frisk was in full control of her barrier, and her actions implied that she wasn’t happy with Boss at the moment - but the lingering worry remained. What if this was all a setup? What if Frisk and Boss were...were working together?

Sans could feel his breathing speed up. It wasn’t likely, not over his bony ass. They got along well, he knew from Boss’s monologues about work, but that didn’t mean they would conspire to torment him. They were both too busy to spend time on that. Plus, they would’ve had to drag Undyne into it, and Undyne notoriously didn’t answer to anyone but Asgore himself. And she couldn’t lie to save her own life.

Yeah, it didn’t make sense. So why was it so hard for him to *believe* that? Had Boss finally broken him?

His thoughts chased each other through his skull. Sleep, when it finally came, caught him unawares and dragged him down, down, down…

He awoke abruptly, jostling his bad hand in his haste to scramble upright. Someone was watching him again, he could *feel* it. He glanced around expecting to see Attie, but instead found…Tori?

It looked like she had just walked in the front door. Frisk was standing nearby, one hand on the doorknob, in the middle of saying something. Tori, though, was looking right at him.

Sans relaxed slowly, feeling the lingering aches and pains. His left hand was better, but the cracks
across his palms felt like little lines of fire. His feet...well, his legs were still recovering from being broken, but as that pain dulled he became more aware of the agonizing soreness in the soles of his feet.

Standing felt worse then he remembered, but he managed it. He wasn’t going to loaf on the couch in the presence of the queen, especially when she was angry with him. Of course, she hadn’t tried to blast him into dust yet, so hopefully that meant she wasn’t too upset.

Tori was looking at him thoughtfully, no judgement apparent. It was a little bit unnerving. Wasn’t she angry with him? He could feel himself shaking under the weight of uncertainty and hunched over a little, trying to hide it.

Thankfully, that was the moment when Attie appeared. She shuffled into the kitchen in her pyjamas, still groggy from sleep. “G’morning Mommy, g’morning Granny,” she mumbled. After a few blinking, she turned to Sans and smiled. “G’morning, Mr. Sans.”

Frisk and Tori managed a little “good morning” back, but Sans just gave a grimace and a nod. Speaking suddenly seemed like too much effort.

The girl seemed unusually subdued. Maybe being home wasn’t as exciting as being somewhere new, or maybe she was always shy around Toriel. That surprised him. She seemed like a friendly kid; friendly enough to latch onto a complete stranger within hours, at least. Why would she not be the same way around her family?

“Would you like to help me make breakfast, Attie?” Tori asked, hesitation coloring her voice. It was odd; she was usually so self-assured that it was difficult to compare her to the lonely monster from behind the door. Watching her try to charm her granddaughter, it was apparent that her issues with kids weren’t quite resolved.

“Toriel’s going to stay here for the day,” Frisk said in his general direction, focused on messing with her hair. It looked damp; she must have gotten out of the shower not long before. “Feel free to sleep in here, or you can drag some blankets into my office if it gets a bit loud. I’ve gotta run; meeting with the new ambassador from Japan...” She ran around for a few minutes, gathering shoes and hair pins and a packed lunch (she almost forgot the lunch until Tori reminded her) then abruptly stopped. Settling her bags around her feet she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and composed herself.

When she opened her eyes, Sans felt a chill go down his spine. This was the Frisk he was used to: the Frisk of meetings and bureaucracy and politics, the Frisk of little white lies and painted smiles. It was disconcerting seeing her transform in a matter of moments, from a real human being into something so...determined.

She gave him a painfully polite smile and headed out towards the garage.

Tori and Attie’s breakfast wound up being scrambled eggs and hash browns with some kind of bright yellow sauce. It smelled pretty good; better than oatmeal, at least.

Then he tried to take a bite.

He just...couldn’t do it. The idea of eating sounded fantastic, and he was certainly hungry, but once it came to actually chewing all he could think about was Boss shoving food into his mouth to keep him alive.

He stared at his plate, feeling nauseous.
“You are not hungry?” Tori asked, dishing up extra hash browns and sauce for herself. “You really ought to eat; healing takes a lot of magic out of you, and you simply do not have the reserves right now.”

Attie mumbled something.

“Do not speak with your mouth full, my child.”

She swallowed and tried again. “What does that mean? That he doesn’t have the reserves?”

“Well, you see, healing magic draws upon a monster’s energy - or a human’s, I suppose - to repair damage to the body and soul. For monsters, that energy exists primarily in the form of magic. Without food, Sans will take much longer to recover magic; without magic, Sans will not heal.”

“Oh.” She took another bite. “Mr. Sans, you should eat your eggs. They’re good.”

He gulped. “I…”

They were both watching him expectantly.

“I...okay.”

He took a bite, trying not to think about it too much. It sat like a lump of slime in his throat, taunting him. What if his magic didn’t cooperate? What if he couldn’t digest it? His hands shook, trying to fight off the imaginary foe that was his breakfast.

“Is it good?” Attie asked.

“Uh, yeah.” It tasted like dust in his mouth, but he couldn’t tell her that. Instead, he forced himself to take another bite.

And another.

And another.

And...he just couldn’t eat any more. “I, uh, don’t really have the stomach for eggs this morning. Sorry.”

“Ooooh. Granny Ree-”

“Finish your eggs, Atlas.” Tori stood up and gathered her plate and Sans’s, heading into the kitchen. She reappeared a few minutes later with a glass of that disgusting green juice Undyne favored and set it in front of him. “Drink this, at least, Sans. You need the energy.”

Gagging down the juice was much easier than choking himself on eggs. Suddenly, living on liquids for the rest of his life didn’t sound like such a bad idea.

“Attie, go get dressed. I laid out an outfit for you; please put it on this time. Then we shall begin your schoolwork.”

Attie did as she was asked with a tiny amount of grumbling and an equally tiny amount of enthusiasm. Sans considered appealing to Tori’s softer side on her behalf, but he was a little caught up in the idea of laying out an outfit in advance. Why hadn’t he thought of that? It would’ve made those early mornings, scrambling to get ready for Undyne, so much easier-

“Sans.”
He gulped. “Uh, yeah?”

“You and I have some...things to discuss.”

“Kay.” Without his jacket, she could probably see him sweating.

“First, why have you not contacted me in so long? No, let me finish. It has been eight months since we have seen each other, outside the times when either you or Frisk were in the process of dying. Even before Frisk’s illness it had been nearly a year since we spoke for more than a few moments. I believe I deserve an explanation, as your queen if not as your...hmm. Your ally.”

“Tori...I...I guess I just lost track of time. It all kinda started to run together, y’know?”

She hummed disapprovingly. “That has happened in the past, but never for so long. Do you mean to tell me that you lost track of months of time?”

“Well, yeah. I just had my hot dog stand and sentry duty. Boss was busy; I didn’t see much’ve him ‘cept in the evenings. I just...didn’t think about much b’sides that.”

“I tried to call you. And text you.”

“My phone wasn’t really charged on a regular basis.” He could read the faint betrayal that Tori was trying to hide, and it hurt almost as bad as the cracks in his vertebrae. “Tori, I never would’ve ignored you on purpose. You’ve always been a great, um, ally. Maybe even...a friend. I didn’t mean to let you down.”

Sighing deeply, she started to relax. “Well, it is in the past. You did me and my family a great service by watching Atlas while Frisk was ill, so it is only fair that I repay you. Especially since Frisk said that you declined payment from her.” Her frown said that she didn’t approve of his altruism. “I have taken the liberty of gathering information from the various properties I own. While we have no openings in our single-residency units, there are a few groups of monsters who are looking for a roommate. None of them are as far from your previous residence as I would like, but you would still be convenient to public transportation and Mount Ebott.”

“Okay.”

“Since you do not have your hot dog stand - and I am working to get you compensated for the sale; your brother had no right to dispose of it - you have some free mornings. You will arrive at my home promptly at 10:00 on Tuesdays, beginning tomorrow. I expect you to arrive on time and properly dressed for a morning meeting with a member of your kingdom’s royalty. I believe that the formal outfit Undyne retrieved for you will suffice. I intend this to be a private event, but you may see others as you come and go.”

“Okay.”

“Our first order of business is the-”

“I’m ready!” Attie said, dashing into the room and skidding to a stop at her chair. She was wearing a pink skirt and pale cream and pink striped top, with long sleeves and tights to protect her against the chill.

Apparently, the getup met Tori’s approval. “Did you brush your teeth, my child?”

“Yyyup!”
“Then come here and let me do your hair.”

She eyed the brush Tori held. “Can...Mr. Sans do it?”

Sans held his breath. He didn’t want to get on anyone’s bad side…

“Very well.” The brush was passed to Sans. “It is difficult with my large paws, anyways. The small hairs always pull.”

“Can we do the princess hairdo?”

He thought back. “The what?”

“The one that looks like a crown.”

Ah, that one. That had been one of the last hairstyles she’d requested while he’d been watching her, and he thought he actually remembered how it worked. “Uh, okay.”

It was a little unnerving with Tori watching his every move, but he managed to work the girl’s hair into a braid that went around her head. He tucked the last little end of hair in with the help of some neat bits of metal Tori called “bobby pins” and turned Attie around to examine his work.

“Okay, yer done. Go take a look.”

“That is quite impressive,” the queen said, sidestepping her granddaughter and pocketing her bobby pins. “I had no idea you were so skilled in the art of hair styling.”

“I’m not; we’ve done that one before.”

“Oh?”

“It was...a thing, I guess, back when I watched her. She found fancy hairstyles and I tried ‘em out. Could never get a french braid to sit properly, but…” He shrugged.

Attie returned in much better spirits and began on her homework. Tori apparently didn’t take questions; the little girl worked in silence, biting her bottom lip every so often.

“Well then,” Tori said, once she and Sans had retreated to the relative privacy of the living room, “As I was saying, our first order of business ought to be the upcoming trial. No, do not respond; I am aware of your role, and we can discuss it when...small ears are not around. Frisk completed the interrogation - with my help, of course - and I have the report here.” She handed over a thick folder with a rusty smudge along one edge.

Sans opened it with shaking fingers to find about fifty pages of carefully typed notes on the interrogation of one Graciela Lira. He nodded, dropping it into his inventory. “So...when’s the trial?”

“Early next month. The 4th, I believe; a Saturday, so it does not interfere with business as usual. That does put us on a bit of a time crunch.”

“It does?” It was rare that he had so much time to prepare, actually.

“We - or, rather, you - must come up with a justification for whatever your verdict is. The humans will be curious about how we dispense justice; they must believe that this is not a witch-hunt, but rather, a fair and unbiased decision. We also must get your emancipation finalized before the trial, ideally, so Papyrus does not interfere. I have that paperwork with me as well; we can fill it out here
Sans limped back over to the table and sat across from Attie, who was watching him with keen eyes. She glanced between him and his paperwork, then quickly went back to her own work when Toriel walked up behind him.

“Now. We shall begin with Form 3848A: Formal Statement of Independence…”

By the time Tori had walked him through all the stupid little pieces of paper that needed to be filled out to officially declare him independent of the only family he really remembered, it was well past lunchtime. Attie’s stomach had growled once or twice, but she’d been too interested in what the grown-ups were doing to complain. Or to do her own homework, much to Toriel’s displeasure.

Sans was more tired than anything. He’d been starved before, and he knew he wasn’t at that point yet, probably thanks to the nasty energy juice. It took a bit of wheedling and several yawns, but he managed to get himself dismissed to the office to sleep instead of eating lunch.

Frisk’s office was an interesting room. It had probably been intended as a bedroom, but instead of a bed there was a chair, desk, and several bookshelves. He was captivated; she had old and new books in English and Monster alike, mostly nonfiction with a few novels tucked away between political biographies. She probably had more books in this one room than the library in Snowdin had before it was burned down in that turf war.

Sans secretly loved libraries. When he first left Mount Ebott, he’d spent a few hours every day in the local human library. The strange looks he’d gotten had faded over time; the barely-suppressed wonder at having so much information in one place had not.

Why had he stopped visiting? He thought back. Right; the hot dog stand. It took up more time than he’d expected to make it profitable, even with the regular morning visits from the dogs. Between that and his sentry job and his own malaise, he just hadn’t gone much of anywhere in a while.

Grinning like a madman, he put his blanket and pillow down next to a particularly well-stocked shelf and curled up against it. It wasn’t the most comfortable place in the world, and his bones protested, but-

He was standing in the living room in front of the couch, watching Frisk compose herself. It took her a moment longer than he remembered.

Wait. He...remembered.

Anomalies in the timeline had been rare since coming to the Surface, but that didn’t mean they didn’t happen. Watching fear trace across Frisk’s face, he wondered for the first time why that was.

“Attie?”

“Yeah, Mommy?”

The tension in Frisk’s shoulders relaxed, and her mask fell into place. “Come say good-bye to Mommy; I’ve got to head to work.”

“But I just said good-bye to you?” Attie shuffled over, still in her pajamas, and gave her mother a hug and a kiss regardless.
“Be good, okay?”

If Frisk noticed Sans watching her, she didn’t react to his stare. She ducked down to pick her bags back up and hustled out the door.

...What was *that* about?

He knew she had turned time back each time he killed her, so had she *died*? If so, how?? She’d said she was headed to a meeting. Was there an ambush? An assassination? An accident?

It had happened around lunchtime; hopefully, if she remembered, she could figure out what was going on.

“Sans? Please come and eat your breakfast. Or if you are unable to eat, at least drink a glass of juice. You will not heal otherwise.”

In a daze, Sans sat down and sipped his juice. Just like last time, Attie asked about healing and Tori explained. Attie was sent to go get dressed while Tori satisfied her hurt feelings about their friendship. He tried to respond the same way he had before - he could *feel* the echo of his previous actions, guiding him - but he wasn’t sure he’d succeeded.

At least the paperwork went a bit faster the second time around. Not as fast as he’d like, but faster. He finished up a little before lunchtime.

“Oh dear,” Tori said, glancing around. “Frisk forgot her lunch. And after I reminded her, too. She must have put it down when she hugged Atlas good-bye. Sans, do you have enough magic to take it to her?”

He didn’t. He really, really didn’t. His skull pounded, every bone in his body ached, and he was in no place mentally to transport himself safely.

“Sure thing, Tori. Let me grab another glass of that juice...stuff...and I’ll be on my way.”

The energy drink gave him a temporary boost, but it wasn’t enough. He drank the last of the Sea Tea as well. He had a feeling he’d need every drop of magic just to make it to the embassy.

Tori made him change clothes, too, before he left. His legs felt like they’d barely hold him when he finished shoving them into his pants, and he was sure he could feel every crack in his vertebrae that hadn’t yet fully healed. He pushed the pain away' he could deal with it after he figured out what was going on with Frisk.

Attie escorted him out of the house and through the barrier so he could teleport. He winced; he hadn’t noticed it the night Undyne and Frisk rescued him, but this barrier was full of worry and hope and quite a bit more fondness than he’d expected. Under all of that was a powerful feeling, one that would have been frightening if it hadn’t felt so incredibly *safe*. Protectiveness, perhaps? Or something similar?

But it was hardly the time to examine such things.

With a shaky grin at Attie, who was watching him through narrowed eyes, he let himself disappear.

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact of the chapter: Frisk reminds you to SAVE early and often.

Other details: The food Toriel serves for breakfast is hashbrowns, scrambled eggs, and hollandaise sauce. Dear, sweet Attie is right at prime tooth-losing age, though by this time she has her adult front teeth. Sans doesn't understand what a "Tooth Jar" is supposed to be. There's something important missing from Sans and Toriel's reconciliation. Sans is extra careful with hair because he doesn't want to scratch or pull; Toriel is used to her own short hairs, and thus has no patience with tangles. Frisk was a strange child, especially when she became Ambassador for Monsters, so most of the books in her office were given to her by people who didn't know what else to get her as a gift.

Thank you all so much for your support! This was a much less dramatic chapter, but

This was a much less dramatic chapter, but do you ever get the feeling that something's not quite right? Something might be...repeating just a little? Eh, I'm sure it's fine.
In Which Traumas Are Addressed

Chapter Summary

...And Sans is in A Mood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The shortcut to the Monster Embassy was everything he’d feared it would be and worse. The spot he’d picked to teleport to - a small supply closet he’d hid out in a few times when tagging along with Boss - was more crowded than he remembered, and he knocked over several brooms and a bucket as he tried to find his footing. He was lucky he hadn’t broken something.

He was also lucky that the embassy was too well-trafficked to make a barrier a possibility. Trying to teleport into a barrier wasn’t something he’d ever tried, but...

...Wait.

He patted his pockets. His empty pockets, devoid of a phone. Oh, stars. He’d just gotten himself stuck outside, hadn’t he. He buried the thought deep and carefully opened the supply closet door. The hallway beyond was busier than he remembered, but no one questioned him when he slouched over to where he vaguely remembered the offices being.

It was uncomfortable being in the embassy, and not just because every bone in his body was screaming at him. It was so bright. The walls were light shades of green and blue and orange, and the ceilings were white. There was plenty of lighting, but it was already an uncommonly sunny winter day; why did they need the lights on?? The simple benches in the hallway and a common area beyond gave the area a sleek and minimalistic feel.

It was the antithesis of what the Underground had been, with its darkness and grime and entire cities built from trash. He didn’t know how to feel about that.

The office space in the embassy was a large room decorated in soft browns and greens and more potted plants than he’d ever seen in his life. Doors along the walls had names and silly decorations, leading - he guessed - to offices for the senior staff. Several rows of cubicles on the edges of the room served as desk space for humans and monsters running to and from conference rooms and copy machines. The open area in the center was like the eye of a storm: small groups had settled on the couches or were hovering near the tall bar tables, chatting in low voices or eating an early lunch.

He almost walked straight past Frisk’s office. The room he’d thought was her office - a large and ostentatious space - turned out to be a conference room; hopefully, no one noticed him poking his head in. In his embarrassment, he nearly didn’t notice a small, humble name plaque on a nearby door that read:

Frisk Dreemurr
Ambassador for Monsters
That was it. No fanfare, no mention of any of the other roles and titles she held. Someone had stuck a stylized little paper angel near the doorknob, and there was a Delta Rune etched into the frosted glass, but it was surprisingly simple.

He hesitated, one hand raised to knock on the door. What if she was mad at him? Boss was always angry when Sans showed up somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be. Frisk wasn’t Boss, and had gone well out of her way to help him, but he couldn’t shake the comparison.

The door opened before he made up his mind.

“Sans? Is...are you okay? How did you get up here?” She stepped aside and gestured him in, closing the door quickly behind him.

“You left your lunch.” He held out the offending package. “Your mom asked if I’d bring it to ya.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She set it on her desk, then moved it to the side so she could fiddle with some papers. Her free hand was drumming a frantic beat on the desktop. “Do you have - no, you won’t be able to teleport back to the house with the barrier up. Shoot. Shoot.”

“Everythin’ okay?”

“Yes, fine, I just have a very important meeting in a few minutes.”

The half-lie was so smooth he barely caught it.

He opened his mouth, about to say he could just go home, then realized his error. He didn’t have a home anymore. “If I can borrow your phone, I can call someone at the house-”

“You're sure you can’t teleport home?”

“Too low on magic.” Just the idea of teleporting again made him feel tired.

A ding! made her flinch and pull out her cell phone. Whatever message she’d received made the crease between her eyebrows deepen. “Sans, come with me.”

“Uh…”

“You’re dressed...fine. Okay; this’ll work. Stay with me and do exactly what I say, please. Oh; here.” She handed him a notepad and pencil. “Take notes or something; it’ll keep people from looking at you strangely.”

He wanted to protest, he really did. Being ordered around had always grated on him, even after living so long under Boss’s rule. But this was Frisk, who had saved his life and offered him sanctuary, and he couldn’t say no to her when she looked so shaken. If taking control of the situation in this little way helped her regain her equilibrium, well, he’d survive. He’d been through worse.

The pair left the office area and went down a long hallway lined with windows. Below them in the courtyard snow fell softly on the garden and the statues of a young boss monster and seven human children. The walkways and flowerbeds were barely visible, little more than lumps and dips in the thick blanket of white.

Around a corner and down another hallway was a large conference room. Frisk settled herself at the table with a motley group of other humans and monsters, gesturing Sans into one of the seats along the wall behind her. He let himself be guided, a bit confused. Sure, some of the people...
looked pretty strange and were wearing funny clothes, but he saw nothing that could have caused Frisk to use her powers over time itself.

On the far wall, a logo of some kind was slowly appearing on a large projector screen. A short human woman perched on a stepladder was tinkering with the setup, adjusting wires and pushing buttons on a remote she held. After a few minutes the image suddenly changed and a second conference room, this one full of human men and women in dark business suits, appeared on the screen. The remote was handed over to Frisk with a smile and a “call me if it starts making that sound again” as she was led out by one of the guards stationed at the door.

The guards were a combination of human security, easily identifiable by their uniforms, and the Royal Guards. Sans was a little disturbed to realize that he didn’t recognize any of them. Either they’d been Hotland guards or they were new recruits. Where was Undyne? Sure, she had other duties, but she tended to stick close to Frisk.

Maybe he was being paranoid.

The meeting itself was incredibly boring, at least from Sans’s perspective. The most interesting part was when Frisk started speaking a rather musical foreign language, which was pretty neat, but it also meant he couldn’t understand what was going on. Ten minutes in, and he was writing down macabre jokes in an attempt to stay awake and not embarrass her after she’d been so nice to him. The chair was supremely uncomfortable; he regretted ever worrying about the kiddo and agreeing to take her lunch to her. Time ticked on slowly like he was sinking into swamp water. There was no reason for him to be there. There was nothing-

Actually, that human across from Frisk looked suspicious. Sans tried to place him and failed completely, but something about him seemed strangely familiar. He was wearing a picture ID badge - all the visiting dignitaries were - but it was too far away for Sans to read. What he could see was the way the man was looking at Frisk. It seemed...well. There was something there he couldn’t quite trace, something a little guilty and a little possessive and a little of something else that put him on edge.

The really strange thing was that Frisk never appeared to even glance the man’s way. It was hard to tell from looking at the back of her head, but she certainly never spoke directly to him. It was a large enough group that it was excusable, and he never spoke directly to her either, but the way she tensed every time he shifted made Sans wary.

A scuffle at the door made the guards tense, but a moment later Undyne shoved her way into the room. Sans watched as she canvassed the room, did a double-take at seeing him, and softly stepped over to Frisk. She whispered something in Frisk’s ear before joining Sans in the seats along the wall.

Sitting next to a live, sparking wire would have been less stressful. She didn’t glance at him, didn’t ask why he was there or what he was doing, but he knew with absolute certainty that she was aware and curious. Undyne didn’t seem like the type to be professional about such things, but she never did conform to what was expected of her. She just sat there, arms crossed, watching Frisk with a very intense expression.

Sans wondered if she remembered the anomaly as well. Maybe she had a better idea of what was going on.

A sudden shuffling of papers marked either the end of the meeting or a break; he knew how long those things could get but hadn’t been paying attention. Frisk stood abruptly and strode towards the door, followed by a rush of aides and politicians. Undyne turned to glare at him.
“...What?” he muttered.

The glare intensified.

More from a desire to get away from the crazy fish lady than anything, he followed Frisk out the door.

If she noticed him jogging along behind her, she didn’t react. She just walked as quickly as she could towards her office without actually running. Her office door smacked him in the face but she caught it at the last moment, letting him through before closing it quietly.

For all her composure and apparent easy confidence, Sans could clearly see her hands shaking.

“You...uh, you okay?”

“Yes. Fine.”

“C’mon, give me some credit. ‘M not that out of it.”

“Everything is alright. I didn’t take you for a worrier, Sans.”

For the first time, he could see that she was deliberately baiting him. How many times had she done that, used his fickle temper against him to avoid talking about something uncomfortable? He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

He swallowed his temper and gave her a lazy grin. “Wonders never cease. Was it that guy?”

“What guy?” The way she stiffened said that she knew exactly what he meant, and she was too distraught to cover her reactions properly. “There were plenty of-”

“Cut the crap. The one who sat down almost right across from you. Tall, brown hair, dark blue suit and grey tie? Ringing any bells, kiddo?”

“I...I don’t…”

There was a strange feeling of guilt as he watched her composure fail. She didn’t wail or shriek or curse, just...sat there quietly, behind her desk, her face in her hands and her shoulders slumped. Tears leaked out from between her fingers.

“Look, seriously, what’s up? Are y’in trouble? I dunno how much good it’ll do, but ‘m sure Undyne ‘n I can take ‘im out if it’s important to ya…”

Her hiccupping laugh had an edge of hysteria to it. “You don’t know how much that means to me, but...it’s a bit late now. Stars, I wish I hadn’t been so stupid.”

“Psh. ‘Ts never too late for a good bit of revenge.”

“No, no, I’d just feel guilty if I unleashed you and Undyne on him now. No matter what he...what happened. Can you hand me a Kleenex? That box right there on the edge of my desk.”

Sans found the bright cardboard box full of soft pieces of paper - Kleenexes? - and handed it over.

“Thanks.” She blew her nose and cleaned up her eyes a bit. They still looked red and puffy.

“So’s the meeting done?”
“Hmm? Oh, yes. I have a bit of paperwork and some phone calls, but Undyne offered to take you back to the house. There’s no need to wait with me.”

He didn’t budge. Not only did he not know where Undyne was, he also didn’t want to relive the day yet again. He couldn’t see a clock, and he didn’t have his phone, so he couldn’t tell if this attempt had lasted longer than the previous one. Had he made a difference after all?

“Sans…”

“Dunno where Undyne is.”

“You’re being...really difficult right now.”

“I’m a difficult guy.”

“Aren’t you also a recovering guy? Didn’t your brother just try to dust you?”

He didn’t flinch. He didn’t.

“I see the way you’re holding yourself. Your legs and your ribs be killing you right now. Just go home with Undyne, get some food and take a nap.”

“There’s something weird going on here.”

“I can take care of myself!”

“You were crying.” He winced internally; it sounded like an accusation.

Instead of the anger he expected, Frisk just stared at her hands. “Why do you care?”

“I owe you. No, let me finish. You ‘n Undyne saved my life. You think I’m just gonna forget that? And...well, we haven’t always gotten along, but I’d like to think that changed a little. That we have some common ground somewhere.”

“You mean...Attie.”

“Well. Uh. Sure. I mean, you’re not half bad either when you’re not sending big boxes of peanuts to my house.”

She snorted, actually snorted, and he felt a reluctant grin tug at his mouth. Okay, in hindsight, the peanut incident had been kinda funny.

“Whatever happened to them?”

“Gave most of ’em to Grillbz. He put them out at the bar. ‘Course Boss m-m-’ He felt himself choke on his words for a moment and cursed himself. “Boss had me eat them breakfast, lunch ’n dinner ’till I proved they were ‘gone;’ he didn’t want good food to go to waste.” His grin felt strained.

“Oh. I’m sorry-”

“Pft. Don’t apologize; that ruins it. I did send you that box of live spiders first, remember? It was good ‘n proper revenge.”

She smiled a little, but it looked reluctant. “I guess it was. Those poor spiders were very unhappy after going through the postal system, I’ll have you know. We got most of them back to Muffet, but I suspect we still have one or two who decided to hang out here in the Embassy instead. Hah.
Hard to believe...we didn’t get along for so long, and here we are. Funny how that works, hmm?”

“Y-yeah.”

Of course they hadn’t gotten along, he reminded himself yet again.

He’d killed her in cold blood. Many times.

He kept forgetting that with this new camaraderie.

That was the reason he couldn’t flat-out ask Frisk what had happened before she moved time back. If she didn’t remember doing it, he’d look crazy. If she did remember doing it, then that meant that she remembered how he’d tossed her around until her skull and ribs cracked, blasted her to ash, stabbed at her soft belly and delicate hands and sensitive eyes-

“Sans? Everything okay?”

Everything was not okay. He nodded anyways.

“You looked a little lost there for a minute. What happened?”

“Just...remembering. Something bad. Sorry.”

“Oh, don’t apologize. I’m...well, you saw. I’m hardly one to judge.” She took a deep breath, folding and unfolding the Kleenex in her hands with steady movements. “I knew that man. The one who sat across from me. He...he hurt me, very badly, and due to the circumstances he was never brought to justice. I didn’t realize he’d been invited to a meeting with the Japanese ambassador, of all people. I usually have warnings about these things, but today…” She shrugged.

Sans didn’t know what to say. Why was she telling him this? Was this supposed to make him feel better?

“But...yeah, that’s why I rushed out of there. I told them that I had a conference call. I may have lied a little. In Japanese. So you didn’t find out.”

He stared at her for a moment, then burst into helpless laughter. “Y’didn’t want me to find out? Who the hell would I tell? I don’t know those big-ass politician types!”

“I didn’t want you to call me out on it, okay? Tact hasn’t...always been something you’re great at. I mean-”

“Heh. You’re right.” It was weird, watching her try to justify her criticisms. He knew very well that he wasn’t tactful. He had no reason to be. He could dance around subjects that made him uncomfortable, but he didn’t care much about how it affected others. It was something he’d probably have to work on, now. “So. You gonna tell me who that guy was?”

She eyed him warily. “Why? What are you going to do?”

“Invite him out for tea and cookies.”

“Hah. Nope. There’s no way in hell I’m going to sic you on him.”

“Alright, then, just tell me who he is.”

“Nome.”
“Why?”

“Because you’d go after him on your own, and probably rope Undyne into it. And it would be a huge international incident and I’d have weeks of paperwork just to keep you from being tried in the human court system.”

“And Undyne wouldn’t be?”

Frisk shrugged. “She’s Captain of the Royal Guard. Leaders of the Guard still have immunity from prosecution when executing their duties, just like they did Underground. Of course, it would still look bad, so don’t get any ideas.”

“Drat.” The immunity thing was one reason why the Guard had been so distrusted Underground: they were a law unto themselves, as long as they didn’t cross Asgore. Of course, when Undyne had killed the former captain and assumed command of the Guard, she’d put that loophole to good use cleaning up both their ranks and the Underground in general. It helped that she had trained under Asgore himself for a time; vindictive as the king was, he had enough of a soft spot for her that he didn’t give into the cries for vengeance from his people. He didn’t protect her from assassination attempts, but he didn’t hand her over to the crowds, either. “This guy is important, then? If it would cause a big incident?”

“Yes.”

“And...he’s Japanese? He didn’t look like the other Japanese people. Actually, he looked familiar...”

“No. Fine. He’s a lobbyist.”

Sans vaguely remembered the term from when he was sitting in on meetings early on in their negotiations, when they were trying to find an arrangement that would let them out of the Underground, but the definition escaped him. “That’s...too bad?”

She smiled. “It means he works for a group of people who all want the same thing...at least in theory. Workers’ unions have powerful lobbies, for example: teachers, policemen, firefighters, actors, railroad workers, airline pilots: they all have large memberships and can carry some serious political weight. There are also lobbyists for companies, like pharmaceutical companies and banks and telecommunications providers, and special interest groups like members of a certain race or religion or people who want something in particular. Part of what makes these groups so powerful is that they’re hired, not elected; politicians change, but lobbyists stick around.

“That man was working for a civil rights lobby when I...met him. You probably saw him, too, in the meetings you sat in on when we were first trying to gain citizenship. He wasn’t terribly outspoken, but he wielded a lot of power. He was here on behalf of a group of energy companies today. I’m not sure who invited him, but he speaks enough Japanese that I couldn’t reasonably call his presence into question.”

“That’s...wait. “Civil rights;” that’s what humans call the whole issue of treating certain people in certain ways, right?”

“Well...that’s not quite how they’d put it, but I guess that's a fair enough assessment.”

“Then he was fighting against monsters having rights?”

Frisk sunk down in her chair a little. “No, Sans. He was fighting for monster rights. He was on our side.”
“Oh.” Even on the surface, things were so awfully messy. “I guess that’s what you meant by “circumstances,” then.”

“Partly. If I’d said something, he could have turned it on us and made us look bad. There were civil rights groups on both sides, you know; some saw us as an infringement on their “turf,” as it were. Everything in the civil rights world is comparative: the biggest victims win. A lot of them helped make changes for the better when they started out - and many still do - but the political side is a competition for eyes and ears and money. And how do you beat being buried under a mountain and left to rot for millennia? There were many powerful people who didn’t want us up here. It was partly thanks to this man’s intervention that we won, despite...well.”

“Despite what?”

“Please...don’t ask.” She looked like she was almost about to cry again. “I just...I can’t do this today. There’s a reason I haven’t told people. Please, just let it go.”

Naturally, this made every bone in Sans’s body want to dig deeper, but he nodded instead. He could find out in other ways.

Once he was feeling better, maybe. He shifted and winced; he'd been able to ignore it in the heat of the moment, but he was still very, very sore.

“Alright, that’s enough. Let’s go find Undyne and get you home.”

“Yyyyup, okay.”

Undyne’s grin was sharp when she was told that Sans would be taking her up on her offer. She looked vindictive. The driving wasn’t nearly as smooth as it had been the last time he rode with her; he was pretty sure he had some new bruises on his ribs in the shape of the car door handle.

“What’s eating you?” he asked when they were stopped at a red light. “Didn’t get your coffee?”

“No,” she growled. “I mean...that’s not it. You saw that asshole, right?”

“I’m pretty sure I saw no butts-”

“YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!!”

A soccer mom in the van next to them glanced over, worried.

“Heh, fine. Which asshole?”

“The one sitting across from Frisk at the meeting, in the blue suit.”

“Yeah.”

“Whaddaya know about him?”

Well that was a pickle. Had Frisk meant her explanation to be private? Undyne was, famously, her bestie; did Undyne know? “Frisk...said he was a lobbyist. Something to do with energy.”

“Hmph. Just like her to leave out the important bits so she doesn’t worry anyone.” The light turned and she looked back at the road, nimbly navigating around the soccer mom. “Listen up, punk. The only reason I’m telling you this is because Frisk likes you now, and you haven’t gone after her. If that changes I’m gonna have to dust you, but I’m not gonna spit in an ally’s face.
“So if you’re gonna be part of this friendship group thing, this is what you need to know. That guy hurt her. Bad. Don’t know why or how, but I have my guesses.” Another red light allowed her to look over at him with an intense eye. “Don’t you ever allow her to be alone with him, do you hear me?”

“Kay.”

“Stars-damnit, Sans, this is serious-”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Don’t let her be alone with the asshole.”

“Good. Do you remember what he looks like?”

“Uuuuhh…”

“Tch. Here.” She unlocked her phone one-handed, pulled up a picture, and tossed it to him. “Memorize that face. When your weak ass is healed up I’ll get you back in close quarters with him so you can get a good feel for him, too.”

It amused him that she was treating his ability to detect differences in magic like the dogs’ ability to pick up a scent trail. He didn’t say so - she’d probably get mad and crash the car - but it was still funny.

“What’re you grinning for?”

“I’m a skeleton. I can’t not grin.”

“You know what I mean!!”

“Car.”

“What-oh. Don’t tell me how to drive, asshole!” She swerved around the slow car all the same, barely missing its rear bumper. “You’re in a mood today, aren’t you. Bastard.”

He hummed in agreement. “I’ll keep an eye out for this guy, though.”

“Good. You followed Frisk to her office, right?”

“…Yeah?”

Undyne took a deep breath. “Don’t be a fishstick about this, but...did she cry?”

He considered giving her a hard time for a brief moment, then relented. “Yeah. Yeah, she did.”

“Hah. No wonder you’re so on-board; you never could put up with tears for long.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true. So many little shits from Snowdin owe you their lives. Any proper sentry would’ve dusted them for breaking the law, but no, not you; they bawled their eyes out about how much their home life sucks, and you just growled something nasty and patted them on the head and sent them to Grillby’s. And he would make them wash dishes and give them food.”

“They were kids, Undyne.”

“They were teenagers and plenty old enough to know not to paint obscene messages on the town
bulletin board. At the very least, a night cooling their heels in lockup would’ve done a few of them some good.”

“Hey, I stopped them when I saw them.”

“Yeah, and how often was that? Once a month? I swear, you spent more time sleeping on that job than you did actually working. At least you’re better at keeping an eye on things now, right?”

“Uh, right.”

“Sans…”

“I caught those kids going up the mountain a few weeks back, didn’t I?”

She sighed. “Yeah, I guess you did. But that doesn’t give you an excuse to start slacking off again! When you're back in business, of course.”

He relaxed against the back of the seat as they pulled in the driveway. Undyne reached over and put two fingers on his skull to bring him through the wards, then cackled when he brushed her hand away. “How long’ll it be ‘till I’m back in business, then, doc? It’s not like injuries stopped us from working before. It’s all sitting, mostly.”

“Yeah, but we don’t want your dear baby brother finding you at work; anything he’d do would be “on duty” technically, and he is your - ugh! - ”boss.” Nope, you’re staying here with Frisk until your emancipation goes through, then we’re finding you another place.”

There were worse things, he decided. Even if the couch was a bit lumpy.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Frisk is a jaded and cynical little pumpkin when it comes to politics, but she has a point. I've worked in a couple different civil rights groups, and the competition for funding can be pretty cutthroat. Certain groups - and I don't want to name names, because there are a lot of good people in some of these places, too - will happily throw their competition under the bus. I have no problem imagining some of them opposing monsters using all kinds of pretty language.

Also, the peanut incident mentioned here first made an appearance all the way back in Chapter 1. If anyone remembers back that far, Sans recognized Attie and tried to get her to say naughty words to her mom in retaliation for this very incident. Aaah, what simpler times those were.

So no one tried to kill Frisk. Anyone have any idea what made her LOAD? (You're a bunch of smart cookies, I'm sure you have an idea. I'm sometimes very bad at foreshadowing and implication, thought, so I ought to ask.)

As always, thank you all so much for all the comments and kudos and support!!
In Which Tea is Served

Chapter Summary

...And Sans makes great progress towards being a functional person.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sans got out of the car...and promptly collapsed, to Undyne’s immense frustration. He’d pushed himself way too hard. The magic boost from the juice had finally worn off and he was left with very little to work with. He was surprised he hadn’t just keeled over in the middle of Frisk’s office, actually. The anomaly was throwing everything off...

Tori just sighed and poured a bit more healing magic into him. “You must rest now, Sans. Actually rest.”

He groaned a little. “Okay.”

She ushered him into Frisk’s study and shut the door. He stood there for a moment waiting for the sound of a lock, before he remembered that Toriel - of all people - wouldn’t trap him in a room just to enforce her wishes. He really was pretty messed up in the head, wasn’t he?

The books were less of a surprise the second time around, but he did take a moment to run a finger along the spines of some particularly fascinating science titles before he settled himself in. Maybe if he stayed in Frisk’s good graces, she’d let him borrow one…?

He slept through to the next morning, only waking up when Frisk tiptoed in to grab a folder she needed for work. She whispered an apology when she caught him staring at her and ducked back out. The smell of something delicious - sausage, maybe? - wafted through the doorway in her wake, reminding him that he hadn’t had anything substantial to eat since-

He gagged, curling in on himself. Right; the last thing he’d eaten was whatever Boss had forced into his mouth. The eggs and the juice didn’t count, probably; the eggs were in another timeline, and drinking juice wasn’t eating. He breathed deeply, trying to push the feeling down. He was fine. He was going to get out of there and eat a normal breakfast. He was…

He wasn’t strong enough to beat this.

That sat heavy in his soul. What if he could never eat again? What if he starved himself to death just because he was too weak to eat?

“Sans?” Frisk called. “Sorry, but I think you’ve gotta come with us.”

Getting to his feet was easier than he remembered it being the day before. Despite his low magic levels, the cracks and bruises along his bones were slowly healing over. He was almost a functional monster again...physically, at least.

Attie nearly bowled him over when he stepped out of the office, running at a full sprint down the hallway. She yelled something he didn’t catch - possibly an apology, or a greeting? - but didn’t
stop. A streak of dark, striped fur bounded after her.

Frisk poked her head out of the kitchen. “Sans! Oh, you’re up! Sorry; we were going to have Mom or Undyne stay here with you, but they’re both busy. Mom said that you can go home with her. She has a meeting this morning, but it won’t interfere with your appointment.”

It took Sans a moment to remember that Tori had demanded his presence for tea and conversation.

“I’ll pick you up later and bring you back here, but that might run a bit late. Attie might go with you, if she’s behaving, or she’ll stay in the embassy child center. Attie! Are you ready?”

There was an incoherent yell from down the hallway.

“I can’t hear you!”

“Almooooost!”

“Hurry up, I don’t want to be late!”

“Okayaaaay!”

She took a moment, centering herself. Now that he thought about it, Sans realized that she’d done the same thing the previous morning...then returned to that precise moment after the time shift. Did that have something to do with her powers? Was that how she picked a spot to come back to?

She looked a little nervous when she opened her eyes and caught him staring. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, you just looked a little…” he waved his hand, not sure how to describe that expression. “Determined?”

“Hah! That’s a good way to put it. Just getting ready for the day. There’s a lot of annoying people I’ll be talking to, and it helps to mentally prepare.”

He nodded, reading between the words she didn’t say, but fidgeted with the sleeves of his shirt. What an awful thing that must be, to get up every morning and select a moment to return to after death or serious injury or failure or whatever it was that triggered her abilities.

They all bundled into the car - Frisk in the front seat, Attie in back with Sans - and headed off towards the embassy. It was still dark out, but the bright lights of the stores and the lingering Christmas trees reflected off the blanket of snow. Sans had to turn away from the window; it felt like the lights and bright colors were stabbing needles into his eye sockets.

Attie, of course, was humming and kicking her little feet, her hand in his. She’d complained about having to use her booster seat, but once she was settled she didn’t seem to mind it too much.

The hallways of the embassy were quiet when they arrived. Some of the staff had started early, but the bulk of them obviously didn’t get to work at - Sans checked his phone - 6:30 AM. He felt tired just thinking about it.

Frisk led them down a hallway he wasn’t familiar with, towards another open work area. “This is going to be the consulate someday, once we separate out the diplomatic and administrative functions,” she said, eyes gleaming. “For now, it’s mostly open office space. Here, you two can hang out in this room; it has a nice table for you to use. Sans, the embassy’s childcare room is that door right over there, the one with the wreath and the lights. If Attie gets too rambunctious for
“I’ll be good!” Attie insisted, though her mother looked skeptical.

Sans just nodded.

“Since you’ll be leaving early, I just packed breakfast. Potato pancakes and sausage, this morning.” She pulled three plates out of her inventory and sat down at the little table. “Here are some forks, and - Sans? You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“Mfine,” he muttered. Even he knew he wasn’t being very convincing. The smell was so good, almost as good as Grillby’s at dinnertime, but the idea of putting something into his mouth just made every bone in his body rebel. “I’ll...wait for tea at yer mom’s place.”

“You’re low on magic, and you didn’t eat much yesterday. Is there something I can grab for you? The cafeteria isn’t open yet, but I can grab you something from a vending machine…”

“Uh, juice?”

Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded.

“Attie, would you like to grab the juice for Mr. Sans?”

She very much did want to, it appeared; she grabbed the money and ran.

Sans didn’t like the way Frisk was eyeing him. “What? Gonna interrogate me?”

“I’d like to. I can tell that something’s wrong. I strongly suspect it isn’t just my cooking, too, but I will respect your privacy. If you don’t want to tell me, I won’t force you to.”

“...Huh? Really?”

“Really really.” She took a sip from her travel mug. “Actually, do you drink coffee?”

“When Undyne isn’t around.”

“Hah. I know what you mean; she’s crazy when caffeine is involved. Trypto, one of my aides, is a miracle-worker with the office coffee machine; I’ll send someone down once she gets in. Would that be alright?”

He mulled this over in his head. The caffeine wouldn’t help too much, just give him a temporary energy boost and burn through his reserves faster, but if it was infused with magic he’d pretty much end up breaking even. “Sure. Uh. Thanks.”

“No problem. And if there’s something that sounds good, please let me know.”

“Okay.”

What could he say? That his brother had forced so much food into his fat mouth that he couldn’t bring himself to voluntarily eat? That sounded pathetic, even in his own head. Boss had saved him by feeding him instead of letting him die a slow death through HP loss or starvation.

The juice Attie had retrieved was apple, at least in theory. Sans had his doubts; it tasted more like chemicals and sadness than anything that grew on a tree. Still, it had good magic and tasted significantly better than the green health juice, so that helped. It made him feel less like a stiff breeze would knock him over, at least.
Strangely, it also made him tired. He wasn’t sure why - whether his magic was trying to knock him out to focus on healing, or if there was something inherent to possibly-fake juice that just reacted poorly with skeletons - but he found it hard to keep his eye sockets open. Even the coffee delivered mid-morning by one of Frisk’s aides didn’t help much.

“Mr. Sans?”

He lifted his skull a few inches off the desk and peeked at Attie.

“I’m stuck with my Math homework. Can you help? Please?”

He sighed, then slowly dragged himself upright. It felt like gravity had increased tenfold. “Alright. What’re we doin’?”

“Coordinates.” She passed her workbook over.

“Plotting ordered pairs, hmm?”

“Yeeeeeah.”

“Pft, this’s easy. Oh, stop scowlin’. There’s this game - Battleship - that fell into the Underground this one time. That’ll help.”

“What? How?”

He grabbed two pieces of paper from the folder she had with her. “Lemme show you…”

Frisk found them in the middle of their third game of Battleship. She raised an eyebrow at the crudely drawn boards - Sans couldn’t draw a straight line to save his life, not freehand - but at least the Math homework was done and Attie was getting better at figuring out how to plot coordinates.

“I think Mr. Sans cheated,” she complained as Frisk bundled her back into her coat and hat and scarf.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I only won one time.”

Frisk laughed.

Tori picked the pair of them up in the covered garage behind the embassy. Once again, Attie didn’t want to sit in her booster seat, but Tori refused to start the car until she was buckled properly.

“What’s the ‘booster seat’ for, anyways?” Sans asked, mystified.

The queen sighed. “It is a safety measure. Atlas is a bit small for her age, so until the seat belt fits her properly she will use the booster seat.”

“Mr. Sans didn’t make me use a booster seat,” the kid grumbled.

“Mr. Sans can teleport. A different set of rules applies.”

“Can we teleport to your house, then?”

“No. My home is too protected for that kind of magic to work.”
“But-”

“Atlas, enough questions now.”

She pouted all the way to Toriel’s house. It wasn’t a particularly long drive, but it seemed unusually short that morning. Not because Sans dozed off or anything; definitely not.

“You were snoring,” Attie said as she wiggled herself free from the seat belt.

“Shh...I was not!”

She laughed at him.

Attie was settled at the kitchen table with her homework under the watchful eye of one of the Queen’s Guards while Tori and Sans took tea in a side parlor. It was a fancy room, with pale walls and dark furniture. The big bay window looked out over a well-kept garden, if he remembered correctly. Hard to tell under all that snow.

“So,” she began once she had dismissed her guards, “I have been following the case of Graciela Lira very closely. It was a relief when my husband informed me that he was referring the case directly to his Judge.

“Now imagine my surprise when he revealed who, exactly, that Judge was.”

Sans felt sweat begin to bead on his skull. “Yeah, I’ll bet that was, uh, pretty...surprising.”

“Indeed. I can forgive you for not telling me - especially since you had made an attempt to resign, and have not officially acted in that role since the barrier broke - but that ends today. Asgore and I discussed the matter, and I have been given the authority to act on behalf of the both of us when it comes to making decisions about the Judge.”

Well. That sounded ominous. Either she was going to dust him right then and there, or she was going to try to supervise him. Neither would work well. “Uh, Tori…”

“Oh hush. I know how the magic surrounding the position works; well, as much as anyone does, I suppose. I am not going to try to influence your decisions. However, if you are going to take cases with a large impact on how monsters are perceived by the world at large - like this one - then we will need to coordinate. It would help if you could keep me informed regarding what information you find so that I can draft something to give the human piranhas they call the media. Does that make sense?”

He sagged in relief. “Yeah.”

“Excellent. Let’s begin with a bit of historical information. How do you operate as Judge?”

“Well, my job description-”

“I know the job description; I am queen, and I have been for a very long time, my exile notwithstanding. Every Judge performs his - or her - duties a bit differently. I want to know how you work.”

He took a sloppy gulp of tea and put the cup down carefully on its saucer. “I...try to be fair, I guess. I’ve gotten pretty good at reading people, but even when folks’re hard to read or I’m missing information I do the best I can with what I’ve got.”
“Interesting. Why not use the position for your own gain? Others have in the past.”

He laughed. “Really? My own gain? What could I have to gain from that? The only thing I cared about back then was Boss; it sure wouldn’t have been obvious at all if the Royal Judge had started protecting a little nobody babybones, right? It was tempting t’go after some of the brats who gave ‘im a bad time, but they never did anything bad enough to be referred up to me.”

“Oh? You were not permitted to take your own cases?”

“Uh...no? They were referred t’me when the king or the Guard didn’t wanna deal with’m.”

“Your accent is getting thicker. Nervous?”

“A little.” He took another sip and centered himself. “Uh, well. Let’s see...I was told that I could request cases, but that for the most part I’d be summoned when needed. And finding information on cases so I could request them if I wanted wasn’t exactly easy. It was just a job for me; it paid well, at least.”

“Interesting. That’s not at all how things were done with the last Judge I worked with.”

“Oh?”

“Hmm...yes. He was a rascal, that one. Overstepped his bounds all the time, but he was effective. Ruthless. A force to be feared. His presence was much like Undyne’s is today: a warning against the particular kinds of crime he wished to eliminate. There were certainly fewer child-killers when it was known that all child-killers were sent straight to the Judge.

“The one before him was much more...sedentary. She rarely accepted cases unless ordered to. She was also much gentler, preferring serious injury to killing. She had low LV as a result, and that was part of her downfall in the end. She served for quite some time, though, as I recall. Actually...she is related to Undyne some generations back, I believe.”

“Huh. That’s...interesting.”

“Indeed. I won’t say who, of course; I am sworn to secrecy. Still, the Judge has traditionally had significantly more autonomy than it seems you did. Whether because you were so young when you took the position or because Asgore preferred to have more control, I cannot say. Regardless, since I am the one dealing with you now, I shall be pushing for you to have a more active role in choosing which cases you take, at the very least…”

They talked for hours, trying to hash out the details of what Sans’s duties would be. Being the first Judge to actually interact with human society in hundreds of years meant that he could pretty much come up with his own starting point for negotiations with the royal family. It was a heady realization. He wouldn’t get to do whatever he wanted, Tori assured him, but he would have a powerful part in shaping not only what was expected of him, but what was expected of Judges in the future.

It wasn’t until Attie interrupted them complaining that she was hungry that they realized just how long they’d been talking.

Lunch was a three-course affair, served on delicate china by a stoic plant elemental with broad, exotic leaves for hair. It began with small bowls of a fragrant tomato soup, thick and spicy. Attie’s presence was both anticipated and accommodated: instead of the spicy lentil sauce over rice that comprised his and Tori’s main course, she had batter-fried chicken nuggets and ketchup. Dessert was fresh strawberries and whipped cream.
Tori, much more relaxed after their earlier conversation, chatted away nonstop. “And we have been experimenting with growing produce in the Underground,” she explained, delicately dipping a strawberry. “If successful on a large enough scale, we may finally have something to export to the humans besides our magical abilities. Fresh produce that does not need to be imported from the other side of the world would be in high demand, especially during the cold winter months.”

“That makes sense. Haven’t we helped out with the importing business, though? What with inventory technology?”

“Well, yes, that is true. Giving humans the ability to use artificial inventories that mimic the natural ones monsters have is useful to them, despite the limited capacity of such systems. Being based on the dimensional box system, it’s not terribly scalable. Still, the fact that food does not spoil when stored in that way has certainly helped demand; there is far more interest than we can currently supply. Of course, it is only a matter of time before the humans reverse-engineer their own solution. They are so terribly clever. That is why we must diversify our exports.” She sounded more fond than resentful.

Sans grinned, getting ready to take a bite of his own strawberry, and...stopped. Occupied as he’d been with the conversation, he hadn’t had the presence of mind to care about eating soup or rice. They were softer, anyways. But strawberries? He couldn’t bring himself to bite down.

“Oh, are you not hungry, Sans?”

“I’m, uh, full. I’ve eaten more today than I have in a while.” That was certainly true.

“Well, think nothing of it. I am glad I had the opportunity to put some meat on your bones!”

He laughed, passing his dessert to Attie when she begged him for it. Tori pretended not to notice.

For the rest of the afternoon he slept, curled up on one of Tori’s fancy couches and basking in the dim winter sun.

The emancipation process, it turned out, was far easier than Sans expected. Tori submitted his paperwork on Monday, and on Friday he had an interview with a caseworker - a nervous-looking human woman - about why he wanted to leave his family. Sometime during his rescue either Frisk and Undyne had taken pictures of his injuries; he could barely look at them without getting a cold feeling in his soul, but they - along with written testimonies Frisk gathered for him - had gone a long way to sway the caseworker to his side.

That was important, because Boss was fighting the emancipation process. Sans tried to dismiss the part of him that wanted to cry at the thought of his brother actually caring enough to fight for him. It was easier to suppress those feelings when he set up the replacement phone he’d been sent for his old number and started listening to the angry messages Boss had left.

Frisk found him huddled under the coffee table the next morning, figured out the problem, and forwarded those messages on to the caseworker. Neither woman had been pleased.

“I still think we should try to prosecute,” she growled once she’d extracted him from under the table. He was sitting next to her on the loveseat, embarrassed but grateful for the blanket she’d bundled him up in; it was even better than a jacket.

Undyne had stopped over for some kind of Bestie Hangout and was starting to look equally pissed off. “Frisk-”

“He clearly-”
“Frisk. Not around the kid.”

Attie, still sitting at the dining room table, was eating breakfast and watching the adults with wide eyes.

“Sweetie, when you’re done can you go get cleaned up and put your fresh clothes on? The grown-ups need to talk.” As soon as Attie was out of earshot, Frisk leaned back in. “Now why can’t we bring that bastard to justice?”

“Because. He’s second in command of the Royal Guard.”

“Immunity only applies when he’s exercising his duties! This is a domestic abuse case!”

“And Sans is a sentry.”

Frisk’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “He’s arguing that this was a disciplinary issue. That he was acting as Sans’s supervisor.”

“Yep.”

“That complete and utter bastard. There’s not an infraction on record to discipline him for; I checked! He was officially on sick leave! And we can’t call him on his bullshit because…”

Undyne looked down at her hands, uncharacteristically thoughtful. “I’ve used the immunity loophole before, especially when I first took command of the Royal Guard, and Paps knows it. There were a few times when the only thing I had on someone was a personal squabble and a long line of inconclusive evidence. I had eyewitness accounts, but none of that would hold up in a corrupt system. I had to dust a few Guards who were sick and twisted and should never have been in a position of authority, and the only thing I could argue was that it was an ambiguous disciplinary issue.

“That is why Paps is using this argument argument: because he knows that if we disagree, I can be tried retroactively for murder and abuse of power. And everything I’ve accomplished up until this point will be called into question.”

“And what,” Frisk growled, “Is keeping us from coming up with a disciplinary issue of our own?”

“The fact that he’s my second in command, a damn good strategist, and Sans’s brother.”

She turned to look at him, expression torn. Sans could easily read the anger and frustration, but he could also see her reluctance. Whatever she said in the heat of the moment, she wasn’t going to haul off and dust Boss. “I still don’t like it. Things are supposed to be better now that we’re on the surface. I mean...stars, I knew we had some archaic laws on the books - or lack thereof; record-keeping in the Underground was atrocious - but I thought we were at least making progress.”

“You are, Frisk. You’ve improved a lot for all of us. Sure, this bonehead got roughed up, but he’s gonna be okay. Right?”

Sans nodded. He knew better than to argue with Undyne when she was being aggressively friendly.

She didn’t even pause. “Right. Under the old laws, Paps could’ve dusted him and no one would’ve batted an eye. Now? There’s a limit to what counts as discipline these days. If Sans had dusted, there would’ve been a full investigation. You were the one who put that in place. Paps would never risk his reputation like that, so he would never risk dusting his brother. You probably saved
his life. Whatever that’s worth.”

“I’m sitting right here,” he grumbled. He didn’t feel the need to correct them on exactly how close he’d come to death; they had put in a lot of effort to rescue him, after all.

“Shut up, this is emotional catharsis for my bestie.”

Fair enough. The rest of it was all true, probably.

Either because of the constant threats or because of some influence on Frisk’s part, Sans was granted a temporary separation just one week after his rescue. He still didn’t know how to feel about it. On the one hand it still seemed like he was abandoning his baby brother, despite all the evidence he had that it wasn’t a good situation for either of them to be in. On the other, he was officially in Frisk’s custody and she was taking her job very seriously.

He all but moved into her office, and she gave him his privacy except for those rare moments when she needed a book or a folder. He had full run of all the bookshelves, and took full advantage of it. For a bed, Attie helped him gather blankets and pillows; it was surprisingly comfortable, especially compared to the old mattress he’d slept on for as long as he cared to remember. His sleep was still troubled by nightmares and memories and the ever-growing horror of what he was doing, but at least the bed was cozy.

It wasn’t just that he was leaving Boss, though he was happy to let Frisk and Tori and the caseworker think that. He was starting to like Frisk more than he had thought possible. She was just so...so genuinely good, despite her roughness and flaws, that it felt like he was being irrevocably drawn in like a moth to a flame. And he was becoming more and more aware of just how he’d treated her in the past and how little she deserved it, despite her own retaliations.

She cared, in a very observant and active way that was a little disconcerting to someone as laid-back as Sans. Without him saying anything, she figured out his eating problem. Chewing was an issue, especially chunky and crunchy foods, but he could manage soft things. When she discovered this, she immediately headed to the store (leaving him and Attie at home, very confused and a little worried) and stocked up on milk, yogurt, soft cheeses, potatoes, fruit, and a myriad of soups.

Through trial and error they figured out that he was more tolerant of food textures when he was distracted, as well. He suspected that there was a conspiracy in that regard; Attie had been asking him a question whenever he took a bite for days. It was maddening, and yet, it worked. It was hard to have a self-depreciating mini panic attack when he was scrambling to figure out how to explain the concept of outer space to a seven-year-old.

With his increased food intake came healing. His legs no longer burned where they’d been broken, and the pain in his hands where they had been cracked and picked apart was almost unnoticeable. He had scars, and lots of them, but he was mostly functional and intact. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d gone for so long without fresh injuries; it was wonderful.

It was also incredibly, mind-numbingly boring. He was no longer confined to Frisk’s house, thanks to the legal protection he’d been given, but there was nowhere in particular to go. He didn’t have his hot dog stand, couldn’t work out at the gym, and Grillby’s was out of the question until he eased himself back into eating solids.

There was only one person he could go to for help.

“Y’know, I don’t often get requests for more shifts, especially from you.” Even over the phone,
Undyne sounded tired.

“I’m gonna go crazy here. I don’t have anything to do, and I’m almost healed up.”

“Ugh...fine. BUT ONLY A FEW SHIFTS! And only because your temporary legal thing went through! And if Frisk gets ticked off at me, I’m gonna send her your way!” She hung up before he could protest.

Frisk, as it turned out, was actually in favor of having him take a few shifts. A few, she emphasized, backed up by a stern Attie. Not the crazy double-shifts he’d been working before, just two or three each week. She was strangely hesitant, like she wasn’t sure how far she had a right to push, but she had a look in her eyes that said she’d abuse her power if she thought it was necessary.

That was fine. He didn’t really need the money, especially since Frisk wouldn't let him contribute to his living expenses. Anything he’d earned from his hot dog stand had been cash, which had been turned over to Boss (aside from a secret stash he used for bribes and Grillby’s), but his sentry pay had been put directly into a bank account somewhere that he rarely even thought about. He’d set up automatic bill payments on the apartment and utilities years ago; what more did he need? So when he poked around a bit and looked up how much he’d passively saved, he nearly fell over in shock. He wasn’t a wealthy monster, but he didn’t need to go back to work just yet.

Undyne - bless her fishy heart - had also managed to get him back pay for the time he’d been off of work. After all, she’d snarled, Papyrus had made Sans’s imprisonment and torture a Guard issue; therefore, Sans was entitled to payment for the time he’d been “working.” He was pretty sure that she’d overpaid him, even with a generous overtime rate - especially since it was supposed to be discipline - but he was too much of an opportunist to argue.

All in all, he was cautiously optimistic for the first time he could ever remember. It was almost a good feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans's condition exhibits similar characteristics to a real condition called Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID). While most eating disorders are related on body image, ARFID involves the texture, color, shape, or even presentation of the food itself. It can come about because of a past negative experience with food, which is what's causing Sans's issues here. You can read more about ARFID over on Wikipedia.

Speaking of food, Toriel's chef is experimenting with Indian food for lunch! The soup is Che Saar and the “lentil sauce” is Moong Dahl gravy. Sans doesn't know any of this, and thus doesn't call the tasty human food by its proper names.

Also, Attie is doing third-grade coursework.

Also also, please remember that this is Underfell: the justice system is pretty broken. Things are getting better, but it will be a gradual process. There's a lot of trust that needs to be rebuilt. Undyne did a lot of terrible things, but she was genuinely trying to make things better in the only way she knew how. It took an outside force - in the form of Frisk - to show her that there were other ways to achieve her goals.
Thank you all so much for your support! Happy Holy Week to folks who celebrate Easter, and Happy Passover to anyone who celebrates that. And congratulations to everyone on Spring Break! Stay safe, don't drive drunk, brush your teeth before crossing the street, etc. etc. etc...
The Trouble With Secrets

Chapter Summary

A certain young woman engages in battle training and goes hunting for information.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk ducked under one bright spear before blocking a second, which hit with such force that it almost knocked the spear she held out of her hands. She was still caught, unable to move, but she was too busy to panic over how close it felt to blue magic. The spears just kept coming.

Finally, a break. An opening allowed her a swing towards her opponent, making sure her intent to harm was suppressed; she didn’t want to dust her favorite sparring partner just because she was frustrated.

“FUFUFU! IS THAT ALL YOU’VE GOT??”

*Smells like a challenge.

Another wave of spears flew at her, this time much faster. She deliberately allowed one to impact, wincing at the dent to her HP, in favor of blocking three more in quick succession. A moment later the green magic finally wore off and she poked at Undyne once more before rolling away, willing herself not to be caught again.

“ARGH! GET BACK HERE, YOU PUNK!!”

*Undyne sees right through all your tricks.

She didn’t waste breath a reply, just kept dodging.

“YOU’RE AS ANNOYING AS THAT BONEBAG!”

*Undyne has a plan.

That wasn’t the first time Frisk had been compared to Sans, especially during a sparring match, but it made her wonder. He clearly could hold his own in combat - he’d survived the Underground, and had a hefty amount of LV if his official record was to be believed - but she’d never seen it. Could he really-

“FOCUS!!”

*Undyne springs the trap!

That was a fair criticism, she thought wryly as the green magic caught her again. She’d been distracted all morning, especially when her mind turned towards her new housemate. Maybe that was why Undyne had brought him up; she had a knack for finding and exploiting weaknesses. Frisk blocked three more waves of spears as a penalty before the magic wore off and she was once more free to dodge as she liked.
Focus. Breathe. Don’t think about anything outside the fight.

Finally, Undyne - exasperated that her attacks weren’t working - brought the fight to a close. “You’re still doing alright. I don’t know what this “slowing down” nonsense is; you’re fine.”

“Nice of you to say so.”

“Pah, I’m not nice, Frisk; you know that. You’re better than a lot of my recruits. If you weren’t our ambassador, I’d induct you into the Guard. It’s been too long since we’ve had a badass warrior princess.”

“Hah! Maybe Attie will play warrior princess with you when she’s older.”

“PLAY?!? This is serious business! Warrior princesses are a longstanding tradition, I’ll have you know!”

“Uh-huh. And who was the last warrior princess?”

“Well...there was...um...ARGH! IT DOESN’T MATTER! THERE WILL BE ONE SOMEDAY!” She’d probably gotten it out of a manga somewhere.

“AND DON’T THINK I DIDN’T NOTICE YOU GETTING ALL DISTRACTED OVER THAT SAD SACK OF BONES WHO’S BEEN LIVING IN YOUR OFFICE! Seriously, what’s that about?”

Frisk sighed, tossing her spear back to Undyne. “I just...I don’t know? I mean, it’s not like I’ve forgotten how awful he can be sometimes, but he’s not acting like that now. It probably sounds naive of me, but it seems like he’s changed. Or maybe he’s just showing us his...less abrasive side.” She acknowledged, privately, that she’d done the cliched single mother thing and developed Romantic Feelings for a guy who was nice to her kid. There were worse things, but still.

“Isn’t he sleeping something like sixteen hours a day?”

“Pretty much. It’s been a few weeks, and I’m getting worried. He gets up for his sentry shifts thanks to his phone alarm - well, his alarm and Attie and TOSS - but other than that, he’s usually sleeping. Or watching Attie. She loves him and he’s surprisingly good with her. He’s been going to see Toriel on Tuesdays, too; I’m not sure what they’re scheming, but it’s something big.”

Undyne clearly tried - and failed - to hide the look of realization that crossed her face.

“...Anything I should know about?”

“If you’re thinking of jumping his bones? Definitely. Can I tell you? Nope.”

“Jumping his bones?”

“YOU’RE MISSING THE IMPORTANT POINT HERE!! He’s a dangerous person with secrets that you need to know before you get into a relationship with him!!”

Undyne thought Sans was dangerous?? “And you can’t give me all his blackmail material because...?”

“I’m...kinda sorta friends with him now?” Undyne was good at many things, but lying to her besties wasn’t one of them. “Ugh, fine. It’s classified.”
“I’m the Ambassador of Monsters and a princess.”

“It’s really classified.”

Now that was ominous. “Who knows?”

“Me. Your parents. Him, obviously.”

“Wait, that’s it?”

“Yyyup. Heck, I don’t think he has the clearance to tell you. I know I don’t. Your mom ‘n dad could, but they won’t.”

“Why…?”

“That’s…that would be telling. Really, Frisk, when you find out what’s going on you’ll be pissed.”

“I thought you were in favor of us hooking up?”

“I was! I AM! He actually likes your kid; do you know how rare that is, for a single mom to find a man who genuinely likes her and her kid? And across species no less??! And you’ll be adorable together once he pulls his head out of his ass and gets some therapy so he can think like a normal monster! But…something changed recently. Something I wasn’t expecting. Before, he could’ve told you what was going on and dealt with the aftermath - well, probably - but now…he can’t. You should totally ask him out and see if he’ll spill the beans, though.”

She’d have to figure it out herself, then. “Fine. Speaking of things you can’t tell me, how’s the search for the Judge going?”

“Pretty well. He’ll be there for the trial of the bitch that tried to assassinate you, at least.”

“Good. I was worried for a bit there.” A sudden thought struck her. “Hey…you said you had to track this guy down. It’s not someone up on the surface, is it?”

“I can’t tell you who the Judge is. I’m not sure I would if I could, given your history. It would be better if you figured it out on your own.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Well, c’mon; let’s get cleaned up and presentable for that lunch meeting.”

“HAH! Yeah. And thanks for sparring with me.”

“Papyrus still won’t give you the time of day?”

“Nope. Asshole isn’t doing anything against the rules or illegal, but as soon as I try to corner him to beat the shit out of him he disappears.” Undyne’s smile was all teeth. “Probably knows he can’t beat me, especially when I have a score to settle. Bastard.”

“Has he tried his annual assassination attempt yet?”

“Nah, not yet. Hopefully he’ll hold off until after the trial; all this bullshit is running me ragged. Nothing like how things used to go.”

Frisk grimaced at the reminder. She had told Undyne about her encounter with the Judge, modifying things only slightly to cover up the whole time-travel thing. As a result, Undyne knew that she had been hurt in that encounter, but not that she’d died 57 times. 57 agonizing deaths that gave her more nightmares than the rest of her deaths combined.
And since the barrier had broken less than an hour later - in a very public fashion - it was only fair to assume that nothing big had happened. She wasn’t sure how to correct that assumption, to express her fear of this highly-respected person, without giving away too much information.

It didn’t help that the Judge had all but disappeared after that encounter, with very little she could use to track him down. Monsters had kept information on file for everyone ever employed by the king, and a lot of information had been handed over during the citizenship process as well, but there was no mention of someone with the Judge’s specific abilities. Undyne had implied that there was magic protecting his identity as well. It was possible that what Frisk had seen wasn’t even his usual bullet pattern, or anything similar to how he usually fought.

Well, the Judge was a humanoid monster, wasn’t he? And taller than her, from what she remembered, though that wasn’t saying much. Her biggest clue was that horrible blue magic that still gave her nightmares, the same kind Sans and Papyrus used, but they weren’t the only ones. It was a rare magic, but not exclusive.

She’d always assumed that the Judge was someone who’d remained in the Underground, scraping out a living in the remnants of monster society alongside the others who hated humanity. The idea that he was on the surface - someone whose file she’d overlooked, possibly someone she knew - gave her the chills.

It shouldn’t matter. The Judge hadn’t even fought her in the current timeline, though she couldn’t figure out what had prompted him to stand aside instead of murdering her (again). It hadn’t mattered at the time; she’d simply Saved and moved on quickly, hoping he wouldn’t change his mind. He wasn’t going to come after her after all this time to finish what he’d started eight years ago. She was being paranoid.

...Wasn’t she?

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: when Frisk first found out that Sans had been employed by Asgore for a good portion of his life, she briefly considered the possibility that he was the Judge. But he's so lazy and so short and he rarely even uses magic...she pretty much laughed it off.

I apologize that this week's chapter was so late! I've had some internet problems, and a few personal issues have left me emotionally drained. Not an excuse for putting things off, really, but thank you all for your patience.

It will be a week or two before I'm able to ramp back up into two chapters per week. I know I said that would be a March thing. Writer's block sucks. I do still have several chapters in my queue, but I don't want to run out. I also add story elements, and I want to be able to have smooth continuity as I write. Even this chapter went through significant edits right before posting, despite the fact that I wrote the first draft of it a while ago. I've been working on this story for so long; I want to make it good.

Thanks to everyone who has left kudos and comments on this story! You all bring so much light to my life. Have a great week!
Chapter Summary

...And Eric Carle is a dark, sadistic god of childhood storytelling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Sans.”

He laid as still as possible: not moving, not breathing. Maybe if he gave off the illusion of being asleep - or dead, maybe, but he wasn’t that dedicated to his art - Frisk would leave him alone.

“Sans, I know you’re awake.”

Crap, she knew him too well. He opened his eye sockets slowly. Frisk stood in the doorway to her office, the glow from the kitchen and the early morning sun casting her in shadow. The halo of light gave her hair a reddish-brown glow to it, almost like magic.

She took a step further into the room and knelt down next to his makeshift bed. A smirk was twisting her mouth and her eyes had a mischievous slant, and Sans felt...something strange in his soul. He pushed it aside.

“Mmmmkay, m’up.”

“Good thing too, lazybones. Breakfast is ready. Do you have work today?”

“Nah.” Undyne had been scheduling him regularly, especially since he’d started staying awake for his shifts, but she’d been uncharacteristically concerned about his recovery as well. And despite the temporary emancipation, no one was really sure how Boss would react to finding him at work.

“Undyne still thinks you need more time before you go back to your regular schedule?”

“Yyyyeah.”

“That sucks.” Frisk reached out a finger and rubbed it along...oh, his hand was there. The sleeve of his sweatshirt - an old one she’d donated to the cause when they found out that his jacket had been destroyed, baggy and black with a red logo from some sci-fi TV show and absolutely perfect - must have rolled up a little in his sleep, because her fingers were touching bare bone. He held perfectly still, eye sockets still focused on her face, afraid that any little twitch would make her shift away.

“I like the time off, but it gets a little boring just bein’ around here. Uh, no offense.”

“None taken! Attie loves having you around, but I think I’d go crazy if I was stuck in the house all day. Hey, how about this: I’ll take Attie to work with me today, and you can spend your day off however you want. Go do something fun. Okay?”
“Okay…”

She gave him a proper smile, tapped the back of his hand once more, and left. The room seemed empty without her presence. He curled his fist into the sleeve of his sweatshirt as if that would preserve the sensation of her fingers. It was too early to deal with things like... feelings.

The temptation to go back to sleep was strong. He rolled back over and felt his eye sockets closing sloooowly…

“Mr. Sans!!!!” Attie yelled. Frisk hadn’t shut the door. Probably on purpose. Double crap.

“Hey, kid. What’s up?”

She dashed into the room holding TOSS, who was curled up like a baby in her arms. What a ferocious guardian. “Are you awake yet? I helped Mommy make pancakes!”

“Yeah. ‘M up.” He reluctantly dragged himself out of bed and shuffled down the hallway following the bouncing child.

The pancakes were fluffy and delicious, and soft enough that he could eat them without gagging as long as he focused on Attie’s chatter. TOSS didn’t share his opinion, but that was okay; the cat never did know what was good for ‘im. Attie beamed when he complimented her on her expert cooking. Her joy almost made it worth the effort to get out of bed.

She wasn’t quite as happy when her mother explained the plan for the day, but she agreed regardless. The fact that he helped her pack lunch eased things a bit, though she was still pouting as he helped her into her outerwear.

“Anythin’ you want me to do for ya?” Sans asked, still half-asleep, as Frisk pulled her shoes on. If he had a day off, he might as well pull his own weight a little.

“I think we’re good. There’s nothing really...oh, wait. Actually, do you think you’ll be anywhere near a library?”

“Uh, I can be, sure.”

“We have a few books that I don’t think are overdue, but it’s probably close. Can you swing by and drop them off? I’ll pay you back if there’s a fine.”

“Sure.”

There were only three books - two biographies (Frisk’s) and an adventure novel with a bright cover (possibly also Frisk’s, but under the guise of being read to Attie) - so Sans didn’t bother sticking them in his inventory. He simply tucked them under one arm and made his way out the front door, rolling his eyes at the requests of his housemates that he be careful and call someone if he got into trouble.

It was secretly one of his favorite places, besides Grillby’s. He’d spent hours in there reading up on all the crazy new things that the humans were up to, way back when he and Boss had first been assigned their apartment on the surface. Sure, he hadn’t been back in a while - work and Boss had taken over his life for the past few years, and he hadn’t had the motivation for more - but it still brought back fond memories.

The smell of the place was the same: a combination of old and new books, something tart that was probably from cleaning chemicals, and the faint hint of woodsmoke. (He’d long suspected that
either the librarians engaged in covert book-burning rituals, or someone just liked the smell and found a way to import it. He’d been unable to prove it either way, but the smell was distinct enough to identify.)

The librarian at the front desk recognized him, to his surprise. “Why hello! Sans, wasn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes! You haven’t been by in...gosh, it’s been a few *years*, hasn’t it?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“Well! Don’t mind little ol’ me. What brings you in today?”

“Just runnin’ errands.” He slid the books across the counter to the librarian. “Can you see if they’re overdue?”

“Oh! Well, here, take this.” She reached into a drawer full of bright paper, grabbed something seemingly at random, and slid it across the counter to him. It was an advertisement (typed in Comic Sans; he approved) for the same daily book club. Days and times were listed, as well as how to get in touch with the library to volunteer. “Basically, you pick a kid’s book and read it to whoever shows up. It’s a lot of fun, especially for kids whose parents are kinda busy.”

“Well…” he looked at the time. He didn’t have anything to do, without work and Frisk and Attie taking up his time, and he couldn’t get back into the house without one of them or Undyne. Gosh,
he hadn’t read to a kid since Papyrus was little, but, he’d kinda enjoyed it at the time. “I...guess I can?”

“Oh, thanks so much! We start at 3:30. If you check back in around, say, 3:15, I can walk you through picking a book. I’ll still be up here, probably. If not, ask someone for Gwen; that’s me.”

“Sure. Okay. Uh, see you later...Gwen.”

Gwen waved to him as he retreated into the reference section.

What had he gotten himself into?? He was going to read to kids?? Not his little brother back in the Underground, but unknown kids. Human kids. Kids in general were usually scared of him regardless of species, but human kids especially. Well, Attie aside, but she was...Attie. And he had tried to scare her off. Was he really going to…?

Apparently so, unless he wanted to give Gwen some other place to shove her request for help. What was it with humans and hitting his weakness for responsibility??

The day seemed to fly by. He didn’t remember how long he scanned the books, or any of the details from the mechanical engineering manual he’d tried to read. He didn’t even taste the milkshake from Grillby’s he’d gotten.

“Are you alright, Mr. Sans?” Pele asked him as he paid his bill. “You look...hmm. What is the word. Not present?”

“Oh. Uh, sorry. Just...lot on my plate today, heh.”

She chuckled obligingly at his shitty joke and flickered off to help a group of humans who had stopped in for a late lunch.

Around 3:00, he decided he couldn’t stall any longer and teleported back to the library.

“Oh, hello, Sans!” Gwen chirped at him when he sheepishly shuffled up to the front desk. “You’re early!”

“Yeah.”

“More errands, or do you want to see our book selection?”

“Let’s just...get this over with.”

She laughed like he’d been joking. “Oh, don’t worry so much! Everyone gets nervous the first time they read, but the kids don’t bite. Well. They won’t bite you. I’m sure they’ll love you! You’ve got a good reading voice, I can tell.”

He nodded, not sure if that was supposed to be a compliment.

The bookshelf she showed him was full of a dizzying array of colorful children’s books. Most of them, thank the stars, looked pretty short. He flipped a few open, barely paying attention to Gwen’s soft chatter.

“...And really, there’s not much to it. Read the page, show the picture. Make sure all the kids can see; that can be a problem in larger groups, but if it gets too bad we’ll hook up the projector and document camera for you. Rinse and repeat! Shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes, tops…”

He was starting to feel a little sick.
“Oh! I’d better get back to my post. Come see me when you’ve got a book picked out.”

He nodded again.

It was 3:25 before he finally just grabbed a book at random and made his way back to the front desk.

“There you are! I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to pick. There are a lot of good choices, hmm? Well, our reading room is right this way. I’ll introduce you to the kids and leave you to it.”

When she said “kids,” she apparently meant “kids and their parents.” It looked like there were almost as many adults as there were kids. (In hindsight, that explained why he - a random monster off the street - was allowed to read without any kind of evaluation or background check or whatever it was humans did to make sure their volunteers weren’t psychopaths.) Most of the kids were human, but nearly a third were monsters.

And they were all looking at him.

Gwen clapped her hands twice and the low buzz of chatter died off. “Thank you all for coming to our daily book club! This is Mr. Sans, who is filling in for Ms. Gloria today. Ms. Gloria is a little under the weather and she didn’t want to get anyone else sick.”

The kids took this news rather well. Only a few mimed puking, which is what Sans probably would’ve done had he been in the audience. It once again struck him that people were right to label him an asshole.

“Let’s all be good for Mr. Sans, and listen very well! He’ll be reading...oh, Mr. Sans, what book did you pick?”

He looked down at the bright hardcover book in his hands. “The Very Hungry Caterpillar.”

“Wonderful! That’s a classic; I’m sure you’ll all enjoy it. Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

And she did.

The room was quiet for a moment. An army of small children sitting on neat rows of pillows stared up at Sans, expectantly. The parents lined up along the back wall did the same. A few - human and monster alike - looked curious or a little worried, but he was used to that with his reputation. He was not used to being the center of attention.

Pretend Attie’s here, he told himself. With that in mind, he took a deep breath and opened the book.

Mistakes, he quickly realized, had been made. Most children’s books he’d read were pretty straightforward: read a page, flip the page, read the next page.

This particular book had apparently been designed by some dark sadistic god of childhood storytelling. There were full pages, sure; but then there pages within pages, and pages that had cutouts, and everything had to be held just so to make sure it all lined up properly because the damn caterpillar was chewing holes through everything.

“Hang on,” he said, halfway through, as he struggled to turn one of the little page flaps. His sharpened bone claws were not made for handling paper. “I’m not sure I’m cut out to read this story.”
There was a pause, then someone snorted. That set off most of the kids in a riot of laughter that had Gwen peeking her head back in.

He felt a little less stressed after that. He finally finished the book with the picture of the beautiful butterfly and closed it, relieved.

He wasn’t sure what to do after that, though. Maybe Gwen would-

The kids started clapping. Then the *parents* started clapping. Then the kids stood up, still clapping, and some of them started bouncing in place a little.

This was apparently a cue for Gwen to step back in, looking as frazzled as he felt. “What do we say to Mr. Sans?”

“Thank you Mr. Sans,” the kids all screamed in unison. It was...deafening.

“Alright! Well, remember that we do this every day at 3:30, which should be right after school for most of you. Don’t forget that you can take a piece of candy on your way out, but please throw the wrappers away in the trash can if you eat them now. Thanks for coming, and we’ll see you tomorrow!”

The kids swarmed the aforementioned candy while the parents shambled up to the front of the room where Gwen and Sans were still standing.

“Thanks for coming, Sans! You have a great voice!” said one young human mom.

“Thanks…”

“Yeah!” A bunny monster - Sans could never keep them straight - hopped over, sporting a grin that put her sharpened teeth on full display. “I’ve never heard you read before, Sans, but you’re great at it.”

“Thanks…??”

An older man smiled benevolently. “Are you going to be a regular volunteer?”

“Um…”

“Sans agreed to help us out today on short notice,” Gwen piped up. “We haven’t talked about anything long-term. He is very good at it, though.”

“S-sure?”

The room emptied slowly as the kids and their newfound sugar highs were released into the library proper. Their parents trailed behind, chatting and messing with their smartphones.

“You really are good at this,” Gwen said, collecting the pillows into a pile. “I know it can be a little overwhelming, but if you want to volunteer again I’d be happy to help you get on the schedule.”

Sans looked down at the book in his hands. He felt...drained, like all the magic and noise had been sucked out of him. It almost seemed too quiet, too empty.

“What the heck. Sure.”

“Oh, thank you! Come with me, we’ll fill out your volunteer paperwork…”
It was either the best thing he could’ve done with his day, or the absolute worst. Either way, it sure hadn’t been boring.

“Long day?” Frisk asked that evening over supper, grinning.

Sans eyed his plate to avoid looking at her. They were having some kind of pot roast, but she’d made mashed potatoes on the side to accommodate his lingering difficulties. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Hah. Try me.”

“I read to a bunch of kids at the library.”

Both humans stared at him. “Close your mouth, Attie,” Frisk said, without even a glance in her daughter’s direction. “I...you really read to kids?”

“Yeah.”

“Well. That sounds like fun. What did you read them?”

“Uh...The Very Hungry Caterpillar.”

Attie grinned. “That’s my favorite!”

“I thought your favorite book was Where the Wild Things Are, kid?”

“That’s also my favorite!”

She really did remind him of Boss sometimes; a little Boss, before everything had gone to Hell in a handbasket. It worried him, sometimes.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Frisk said, “But I didn’t take you for the type. How’d you get roped into that?”

“They, uh, needed someone to read. I guess they’ve been having bad luck with volunteers. I’m a substitute for now, but they’re gonna put me on the schedule if a spot clears up. Maybe read once a month or somethin’. That, uh, requires paperwork ’n stuff, though.”

“I’m glad you found something you enjoy.”

Attie was vibrating in place like a Temmie. “Mr. Sans, can I hear you read books too??”

“Well...sure. If it’s alright with your mom.”

“Yay!”

She didn’t settle down all evening. Sans felt a curl of embarrassment; he had never had anyone so excited to spend time with him.

It wouldn’t last much longer. Tori had finally convinced a group of monsters in one of her apartments to let him rent a bed, so he’d be moving out in...gosh, four days already? It was Friday, and she’d said he could move in on January 31st. That was the upcoming Tuesday. The Saturday after - February 4th - was the trial.

In his last meeting with Tori, she’d revealed that at least part of the trial would be televised. She was still working out the details with the human media, but they were notoriously nosy and rarely
respected personal space. What if someone or something gave away his identity? What would Frisk say? What would Boss say?

Well, he’d fall off that bridge when he came to it. He had enough to worry about between all his various neuroses.

“Worried about your emancipation hearing?” Frisk asked, gathering dishes.

Right, there was that, too. “Uh…kind of. B…uh, Papyrus is gonna be there, right?”

“Yes. And Charelle will be there representing you.” She looked unimpressed by his blank stare. “Charelle Johnson, your caseworker?”

“Oh, right.”

“Just…try not to snark too much, okay? Appearances count for a lot when going in front of a judge.”

“Judge?”

“…Yes? Oh, don’t worry; we aren’t hauling out the Royal Judge for this or anything, it’s just the family court judge. He’s remarkably fair, actually. I’ve met with him before as part of the Royal Family. Now, that means that my recommendation and Undyne’s won’t count as much as they would to someone trying to curry favor, but it also means that he won’t deny your request just to suck up to Papyrus. I’m certain Charelle explained all this to you…”

So that was why Tori had been cackling each time she said the word “judgement.”

“Well, my memory isn’t the greatest.”

Frisk looked at him intently, as if she was trying to Judge him. He bristled a little but allowed it.

“You know, that might be true…but you remember quite a bit these days.”

“N-not really?”

“You’ve started getting up on your own in the mornings, even if you take a nap halfway through the afternoon. You know all - well, most - of Attie’s favorite hairdos. You know exactly where she is in her homework. You remembered her favorite bedtime story.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s important.”

They stared at each other, eyes wide. Sans closed his mouth with a sharp click, afraid to look away. Him and his big, stupid mouth; why had he said that? Frisk was gonna think-

“Important, hmm?”

-that he was cool or something, which was not how he expected her to react. The eyebrow wagging was really over the top.

“What? Did you think I’d be angry that you’re taking an interest in my daughter’s life? Sans, I’m happy that you care about her.”

“I’m happy too,” Attie said, leaning against his arm. The sudden contact made him jump; he’d forgotten she was there. Not wanting her to think she’d hurt him again, he rested his free hand on her hair and started absentmindedly working through the knots she’d acquired during the day.
Frisk’s grin grew wider.

“Shut up,” he grumbled.

He really was going soft. It was getting more and more difficult to fight the blush that wanted to crawl over his cheekbones.

Still, he felt stupid that he didn’t know what was going to happen at his own hearing. Stupid...and a little lost. It was his own fault, too; he’d been avoiding thinking about it, but that wasn’t going to work much longer.

Living out of Frisk’s office had encouraged him to keep his mess more or less contained, so finding the documents his caseworker had given him wasn’t too hard. A brief bilingual brochure explained that the family court judge - a snake-like monster called Ensul - presided over cases of domestic abuse, child abandonment or neglect, and emancipation. He had been appointed about three years prior, when the role of “family court judge” was created; prior to that, all family issues were handled by the Guard.

Sans could guess how well that went.

The caseworker had also given him a document explaining the emancipation process. He’d been granted emergency temporary emancipation pending his hearing due to the severity of his injuries, during which time Boss was supposed to stay away from him, but that had an expiration date. The purpose of the hearing itself was twofold: to determine whether Sans met the requirements for permanent emancipation, and to make sure he could function outside a family unit.

Most of the document was legalese, full of form names and numbers, but he was pretty sure he understood the basic process by the end of it. The hearing wouldn’t take terribly long, actually. Judge Ensul would accept evidence from both sides and either accept or reject Sans’s petition, and he would either issue a Declaration of Emancipation certificate or tell Sans to move back in with Boss. With Papyrus.

The skeleton looked down at the list of items to bring to his hearing. People who could vouch for him was a big one, along with documentation proving he could take care of himself. Maybe Grillbz would be willing to take a Monday afternoon off? The Dogi might support him as well, especially if he offered to buy a few rounds of booze in exchange for their time. Their puppies were still young, just about two months old, but old enough for a babysitter. Greater Dog and Lesser Dog would require translators, and were probably on duty, and he and Doggo didn’t always get along. Actually, that was true of most of the folks from Snowdin.

Would Tori help? She was the queen, so it might be seen as favoritism, but Frisk was the princess and the ambassador and she was allowed to speak for him. He could ask, anyways.

As for documentation...if he could find a computer and a printer, he could get copies of the utility bills he’d paid. It was all online, anyways. Tori would have access to his rent payment information; he could get that from her, hopefully.

He notated the list in his messy scrawl and stuck it in his inventory. To his amusement, it labeled itself “Important List” instead of “Piece of trash” like almost everything else he had in there.

So. It was Friday. The library was open on Saturday, and he knew that they had a computer center with a printer, assuming he could actually find his library card. Thankfully, that was in the bottom of the sock drawer Undyne had retrieved for him, tucked in between the emergency cash he’d forgotten about and an old picture of himself and Boss. He briefly considered ditching the picture,
but...well, he was always way too sentimental. The picture went back in the bottom of the drawer.

Tori should be free either Saturday or Sunday afternoon; Frisk would know. Grillbz would be easier to find, but harder to convince; maybe the emergency cash would help him there. At least one of the Dogi would probably be there, too, if he timed it right.

Okay. Okay. He had a plan.

No need to be nervous. None at all.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Frisk's guilty pleasure is young adult fiction. Not the bawdy stuff full of sparkly vampires and werewolves, but mysteries and fantasies written for a late teen audience. They tend to be lighter in tone than many adult books.

This chapter had a ton of influences! It was largely inspired by this comic strip by ameb-stuff over on Tumblr. It's an addendum to ameb's comic "Unspkn," which in turn was inspired by Flowey Is Not A Good Life Coach here on AO3.

The childrens' books mentioned in this chapter are The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle and Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak. I think the latter, in particular, would be a favorite of Attie's. Terrible roars and teeth and eyes and claws? Monstrous beasts tamed by a small child? I wonder what the appeal could possibly be.

Thank you all for the comments and kudos! Thank you to the regulars and the newcomers, the people who leave effusive praise every week and the lurkers. You all make me so happy that I can't put it into words, and you inspire me to keep writing this story.

What inspires you?
Gathering paperwork was easier than Sans expected. His little book of passwords and other important notes had a permanent spot in his inventory, so getting into all his utility accounts and printing off bills at the library was easy.

He even had enough time to stop by Tori’s before his Saturday afternoon sentry shift.

She was surprised to see him, but invited him in anyways before interrogating him.

“Why are you here? What is wrong? Is it Frisk-”

“Tori, Tori, relax; it’s nothing serious. I’m just finishing up putting together some stuff for my hearing on Monday; just wanted to know if you had info on the old apartment. Proof that I’ve paid and whatever.”

“Well.” She looked a little put out that he’d shown up on her doorstep without any kind of crisis. “I keep a file; I am sure I can come up with copies.”

An hour and a dubious cup of tea later,Sans had a folder of rent receipts going back nearly seven years. The records showed that the money had come from his personal bank account, the one he’d been too lazy to ever add Boss to, so it was all under his name. At Tori’s recommendation he also printed off a few bank statements to prove that he was the only one who contributed to that account.

Even though she couldn’t make it to his hearing herself, she’d been incredibly helpful.

The next day, Sunday, he stopped by Grillby’s. As he’d suspected, Grillby and Dogaressa were both at the bar. Sans ordered a cheap beer and settled himself onto the barstool next to Dogaressa.

(“What?”) she growled. (“I just finished caring for the pups; I don’t have the patience for you.”)

“Heh. You want a beer? I have a question for ya.”

She huffed, but he could read her expression plainly. He gestured for Pele to bring over another beer and waited until it was safely in her paws before continuing.

“So...who’s your favorite skeleton?”

(“That is a word-trap. You are annoying.”)

“Aww c’mon.”

(“Your feud with the Beta is not unnoticed. We have been tracking it. Trouble within the pack is
Sans considered this. Would Boss really go after the Dogi or their new babybones if they took the wrong side? It was...possible.

“Well, I guess I’ll-”

(“What was it you wanted?”)

“Oh, nevermind.”

She snorted a little into her beer. (“You have never been afraid to speak your mind. You bark and bark until a bigger dog throws you down; it is your nature. What do you want?”)

“So...I was wondering if you ‘r Dogamy would be willing to testify at my hearing. You both’ve known us for a while and would have a pretty good idea of what me ‘n Boss are like.”

(“We do know, but...if we took your side, the Beta would find ways to retaliate. Our pups are too young; we cannot risk them for you.”)

“Heh. Fair enough.” It was disappointing, but he had other options. Speaking of which, he noticed Grillbz eyeing him from the other end of the bar. He quirked the ridge of his eye socket to mimic a raised eyebrow. He’d been careful; he knew who would be listening.

Grillbz motioned to the back of the bar. Sans nodded, chugged the rest of his beer and scooted off the stool. He scared Pele into nearly dropping a tray of something fried and greasy when he stepped out of his shortcut and into the kitchen.

“Sorry, kid,” he said, letting her compose herself and hurry out. Grillby let himself in as she was leaving.

“So,” the elemental crackled. “You are moving forward with your emancipation, and are looking for witnesses for your hearing.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I am not...unsympathetic to your cause. I recall the process, or at least, the process as it was in the Underground; I would be willing to assist. For a price, naturally.”

“A thousand g.”

“Really, Sans? I thought you wanted to be free of your brother.”

A bit of haggling later, they decided on 1,500 gold and four nights of dishes at the bar. It was a far higher price than Sans had been expecting to pay - especially with the dishes - but that was always a possibility when dealing with Grillbz. It was worrying; of all the people he knew, Grillby was the only one who openly admitted that he’d been emancipated. For him to demand such a high price...

“A word of advice,” the barkeeper said as Sans turned to leave. “Your brother is making it known that he...disapproves of your legal action. He has been subtly implying that anyone who stands against him will earn his displeasure. You have powerful allies of your own, but be careful.”

He nodded, wary.

To his surprise, Dogaressa caught him outside the bar as he was leaving. (“Here,”) she said, pressing an envelope and a heavy bag into his hand. (“Tell no one of this, runt.”)
“Uh, sure?”

He could feel her uneasy glare as he stepped around the corner and through a shortcut to the park near Frisk’s place, but he was too nervous to look at what she’d given him until he was safely back inside his makeshift bedroom.

The envelope held a letter, probably written by Dogamy. He had the neatest handwriting of all the dogs. It read:

*The dogs of Snowdin recognize Sans the Skeleton as a Good Dog.*

*We won’t speak against Papyrus because he is the Pack Beta, but we want to help Sans.*

A few lines had been scribbled out - something about dog treats - but it concluded:

*Here’s some money.*

The sack made a loud jangling noise when he opened it, and he couldn't help but gape at the contents. That was a *lot* of money. Actually, when he counted it out with shaking hands, it was exactly 1,500 gold.

He laughed aloud.

Grillby, that old conman, had gotten him good. He must’ve known how much the dogs had collected, but instead of merely taking the money he’d also managed to get Sans to agree to wash dishes. What a guy.

Sans made a note to prank the bar at the first available opportunity (after the hearing, of course) and let Attie pull him away for supper.

Monday morning came all too soon. Sans curled up on the nest of blankets and pillows, trying to ignore the world, until Frisk practically dragged him upright. Attie - normally a bright spot in his life - was suddenly an annoyance; even her laugh grating on his nerves. He choked back his urge to snap at her when he knew full well it wasn’t her fault he was nervous.

Plus, Frisk was his ride to the courthouse, and he wanted to remain in her good graces.

A late winter storm had put down a layer of snow, one last hurrah before spring took hold. They left early enough that they weren’t late, but Sans found himself ushered immediately into a waiting room with his caseworker with no time to spare.

“Did you gather anything?” she asked, defeat and sleep deprivation coloring her voice. “Anything that’ll help?”

He pulled out the folder he’d shoved all his paperwork into and passed it over. “A friend - Grillby - is coming by as well to testify.”

“Well, that’s something. Let me see...hmm...hmm...yes, this certainly establishes what we already knew, that you pay all the bills. There’s no water bill here; is that covered by your landlord?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Good, good. Everything else appears to be in order. How are you feeling?”

“...Okay?”
She smiled, looking a lot more enthusiastic now that she had something tangible to make her case with. The nervousness that characterized their early interactions had, perversely, faded the closer they got to the actual court date. It was like Sans had stolen all her anxiety about how things were going to go. She could have it all back if she wanted.

They were let into the courtroom a few short minutes later. It was mostly empty, just a few guards and bored-looking observers, with Frisk, Undyne and Grillby sitting on the near side of the room near the front. Boss was on the other, eyes closed and a frustrated look on his skull.

Sans nearly choked on the conflicting emotions at seeing his brother for the first time in weeks. His body was acting on autopilot, it seemed; he didn't remember who led him up to the front of the room, but the next thing he knew his caseworker was tugging him into a seat beside her.

“All rise for the venerable Judge Ensul,” one of the guards called, opening a side door. Ensul slithered in, a black sash and badge marking his station standing out against his bright green scale pattern. Clothing didn’t work well on snake monsters, who used their whole bodies for locomotion, so that was probably a compromise.

“Be sssseated,” the judge said. Sans pretty much fell into his seat with a low thud and a rattle. “We are here today to hear the cassse of Sssans the Ssskeleton versusss Papyrusss the Ssskeleton, both formerly of Sssnowdin.  Sssans, you are here to declare your emancccipation from your brother, iss that correct?”

“Yes.” At his caseworker’s nudge, he stood up and mumbled, “Your honor.”

“Hmmm.  And Viccce Captain Papyrusss, you are contesssting thisss, correct?”

“INDEED.  MY BROTHER IS LAZY, WORTHLESS, GOOD FOR NOTHING-”

“Yesss, yesss, that will do.  Be ssseated, Viccce Captain.”

There was a short shuffle as a guard approached Ensul with a strange metallic device, which he fitted around his neck. After a moment it glowed.

“Much better,” came a mechanical-sounding voice. It lacked the lisp altogether. “Let us proceed. We held an emergency, in-absentia hearing granting temporary emancipation for Sans based on the evidence provided. Papyrus, you were sent the packet to forward on to your legal counsel. Do you have legal representation?”

“THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE PAPYRUS NEEDS NO REPRESENTATION ASIDE FROM HIMSELF!”

“The Great and Terrible Papyrus will keep his voice at a level befitting the circumstances, or he will be asked to step outside while this hearing proceeds in his absence.”

Boss huffed.

“Sans the Skeleton, you are being represented by the office of the Ambassador of Monsters, correct?”

Sans glanced at his caseworker.

“Yes, your honor,” she said.

“Let the record show that the court recognizes Charelle Johnson, speaking on behalf of Sans the
Skeleton.” He paused, flicking his tongue out at a small mouse monster mostly hidden behind a laptop in the corner. “Let the record show.”

“Oh!” squeaked the mouse, tapping the laptop’s keyboard.

“Hmm, yes. Now, Miss Johnson, convince me that your client ought to be emancipated from his family.”

Boss growled. “NO EVIDENCE IS NECESSARY-”

“This is your final warning, Vice Captain. You will respect my court or you will be removed.”

Charelle stood and began laying out the evidence they’d collected: documentation, pictures, testimonies. Sans couldn’t keep his eyes off his brother the whole time. Boss was glaring, mostly at the table in front of him with a few glances at the judge, and from his expression would much rather have been pacing.

He never once looked Sans’s way.

The papers were explained and catalogued in a very orderly fashion, especially considering the limited time Charelle had to look them over. Starting with the brothers moving into their apartment on the surface, she went through each bill and explained how Sans had paid for everything. She had calculations of his pay (Undyne must have given her a call at some point with that information) and how much of it went towards household expenses. Papyrus, she noted, had paid for nothing.

That was when things got...awkward, at least from Sans’s perspective.

Instead of being grateful for his brother’s help, Charelle said, Papyrus had turned abusive. He had failed in his duties as self-declared head of their family: not only did he not provide for Sans in any way, but he also inflicted deliberate harm on his brother. That was when she brought out the pictures Frisk and Undyne had taken the night of the rescue. The injuries were worse than Sans had realized, and the panorama of the basement made him want to be violently sick, but it wasn’t as bad as the first time he’d seen them. It was those pictures and the transcripts of Boss’s text and voice messages that Charelle read out - slowly and with excruciating emphasis on every threat and insult - that brought a shade of anger to Ensul’s face.

“Very well,” the judge said once the mouse had entered everything. “Now, Vice Captain Papyrus, what is your case that your brother should remain in your home, despite everything we have heard?”

“CLEARLY-AHEM! Clearly this is a massive cover-up. Sans has always been irresponsible. Yes, he has a job, and contributed to the household funds, but who got him up for his job? Who practically dragged him to work most days? He would not have been able to remain employed if not for me, despite what he says.

“He is also prone to getting in fights. Yes, his record is good now, but whose responsibility is that? His LV alone is proof of how dangerous he is. If you remove him from my care, he will go right back to his old habits: drinking and smoking and dusting monsters left and right.

“Yes, there have been some...disciplinary concerns in the past, but that is under the authority of the Royal Guard. Nothing was done to Sans that would not have been done to any rebellious or lazy sentry. If anything, I’ve gone soft on him; a mistake that, I assure you, will be corrected immediately.”

Ensul looked at Papyrus for a long moment. “Interesting. Well. Sans’s stats have been noted in the
court records, and will be taken into consideration. I will now hear from witnesses. Sans and Charelle, who are you calling up first?"

“We have...Grillby the Fire Elemental, formerly from Snowdin.”

“The Court recognizes Grillby of Snowdin.”

The bartender was dressed in a fine suit and tie, subtly different from his usual attire. He sat in the witness stand next to the judge when asked and made the traditional promise to tell the truth and not withhold important information.

When prompted, he told a very pretty story about his relationship with Sans. It was all true, technically speaking, and never went beyond a professional relationship between bartender and patron, but Sans got the distinct sense that the old elemental was using some thick rose-colored glasses. Sure, when questioned by Boss he willingly admitted that Sans would occasionally drink and get into scuffles, but he made sure to emphasize that it was nothing unusual. They were monsters, after all; such behavior was expected.

Undyne was no different. She hyped up Sans’s accomplishments, listed the times he’d stopped intruders both before and after the barrier broke, and hinted at secret services to the Kingdom of Monsters. Ensul didn’t push, and it was subtle enough that Boss didn’t pick up on it, but Sans could feel Frisk’s curious eyes on the back of his skull. Like Grillby, Undyne didn’t hide Sans’s flaws, but she pointed out that if he wasn’t worth the effort she would’ve fired him ages ago, no matter who his brother was.

Frisk herself went last. Despite his claims of impartiality, it was clear that Ensul held her in deep respect: his tone was no less firm than it was with the other advocates, but his body language was almost deferential.

She, too, told a much nicer story than Sans would have told about himself. He was instrumental, she said, in helping the ambassadorial team determine who was trustworthy in the early days of negotiations for rights and privileges after the barrier broke. She admitted to knowing very little about his life for most of the intervening years, outside of what she called “a harmless exchange of friendly pranks,” but she spared no praise when it came to his treatment of her daughter. She also described his role in saving her life not once, but twice.

Boss declined to question her altogether. He was looking more and more like he’d swallowed a slice of lemon, face tight and eyes narrow. He never did have a tremendous grasp of big-picture politics, but he knew when he was beaten.

When Frisk was dismissed from her seat, Ensul took a moment to think. His eyes were closed and the metallic device that translated his voice was silent. Boss and the laptop mouse both fidgeted a little, but they were summarily ignored.

“Sans the Skeleton, please rise.”

Sans did so, one hand on the table in front of him in case his legs gave out. He barely noticed his caseworker standing next to him.

“It is the opinion of this court that you be granted permanent and full emancipation, effective immediately. You will receive official documentation of this within the next few days; as such things are still being processed through the ambassador’s office, you can expect to hear from Charelle when that is ready.
“As for you, Vice Captain Papyrus, no charges are being brought against you due to the fact that your treatment of your brother happened at a time when you had disciplinary authority over him. I am officially recommending that such authority be removed as soon as possible to avoid partiality and retaliation. Captain Undyne, expect to see a formal letter from my office on your desk by tomorrow morning.

“You do have the ability to appeal both decisions, but due to your position your only recourse is with the king himself. Should you appeal, keep in mind that the evidence presented today will be on file for the king to examine...and there are several examples here of behavior I am convinced he will not approve of. Do you both understand?”

“Yeah,” Sans said at the same time Boss said, “NO!”

Ensul explained again, slower this time.

“Do you understand, Vice Captain Papyrus?” Condescension was dripping from his metallic voice.

“...Yes.”

“Very well. This court is adjourned.” He slithered away back through the same door he’d entered from.

Boss was gone before the door swung closed.

“That’s that,” Charrell said, turning to Sans with a very satisfied grin. “Sans, let me be the first to congratulate you on your new life as a free monster.”

“Uh, thanks.” He shook her outstretched hand without much thought, belatedly flinching at the contact. He didn’t think she noticed.

Frisk, Undyne and Grillby offered their congratulations as well. Grillby looked a little deflated - his expression said that he’d been taken aback by some of the evidence - but otherwise his behavior was the same as ever. He had to run back to the bar and Frisk was needed at the embassy, so it was left to Undyne to drag Sans back to Frisk’s house.

“That was something,” she said, gripping the steering wheel with a manic grin. “I can’t believe we BEAT that LOSER, HAH! WE SHOWED HIM, RIGHT?”

“Left here, actually.”

“SHUT UP!!!” Undyne made a dangerous maneuver across multiple lanes of traffic, cutting off a small car, but ended up in the correct turn lane. “THE POINT IS, we WON!”

“Yeah.”

“OH, COME ON! You could at least PRETEND to be excited!!!”

“I...kinda am?”

“UGH!”

“It’s just that Boss was-”

She slammed on the brakes, and only the seatbelt kept him from smashing his skull into the dashboard. “YOU DON’T GET TO CALL HIM THAT ANYMORE!!”
“Uh, what?”

“**BOSS.**” You don’t get to call that sad sack of bones “Boss” anymore.”

“But he’s still-”

“-Not in direct supervision over you, effective immediately. He’s literally not your boss anymore. He can’t assign you shifts or discipline you or even ask you nicely to do something. You answer directly to me for now. Got it?”

He wasn’t going to argue with her when she looked that angry. “Got it…”

“So you can remove that stupid collar whenever you want. And if *Papyrus* decides to ignore the chain of command, you tell me. Immediately.”

“He’s gonna challenge you for this, y’know. He’s gonna try to kill you and take your job.”

“HAH! He’s STILL overdue for an assassination attempt, anyways. Let him try.”

Her grin was all teeth and menace.

Papyrus didn’t have the opportunity to try anything, not for the next few days, because Undyne spent most of her time hovering over Sans. She and Frisk bullied him into packing what little he had (and the clothes that *mysteriously* kept appearing in Frisk’s office, like the sweatshirt he’d adopted to replace his jacket) in such a way that everything fit into his inventory and a dimensional box Undyne lent him. He was sure they both would have helped him unpack as well if his new place wasn’t in such a rough neighborhood.

The apartment he was moving into had two bedrooms sleeping four monsters each. With eight monsters it was cramped - closet space was at a premium, and his new roommates had already staked their claims - but rent was much, much cheaper than the place he’d shared with his...with Papyrus.

It was also significantly closer to Mount Ebott. The monster-to-human ratio was higher in that area, and the “old ways” were dying out much more slowly. Sans was pretty sure he saw some dust in the corners of his new room, but whether it was magical or mundane was impossible to tell. At least transportation was easier; he wouldn’t need to burn as much magic with when teleporting to work, and as Tori had promised there was a bus stop right down the street if he needed to go anywhere using ordinary means.

Undyne didn’t dare show her face in that area, not without a definite purpose in mind. There were too many monsters there with grudges - against her specifically, or against the Royal Guard in general - to make shadowing Sans a viable option for her. It was for the best, really. His own reputation was bad enough; he didn’t need to be openly associated with the Captain of the Guard. It wouldn’t take a whole lot of digging for anyone to figure out that he was, but as he quickly learned his new roommates weren’t the...academic type.

“What’chu doin’ in here, asshole?” asked one of them, a giant musclebound mole-like monster, the morning after he moved in.

“I live here, now,” Sans grumbled.

“Oh. Yer th’new pansy the queen brought in.” His laugh was like nails on a chalkboard and his breath smelled like rot. “Better get used to the peckin’ order, runt. I’m Dusty from Hotland, and I’m the boss ‘round here.”
“Hah. Yer momma give you that name?”

‘Dusty’ growled. “You’re gonna be trouble, aren’t cha. Lemme tell ya somethin’. Ain’t no business of yours who gave me that name. All you gotta know is that I earned it. Got it?”

“Heh. Whatever.” Sans dodged the swipe aimed at his skull and retreated back to his own room, sidestepping a badger monster that had been trying to sneak up behind him. Schreger, probably.

Three monsters shared a room with him: Blaze, Ripper, and Travis. He’d met them briefly the night before...in a sense. They’d been getting back from whatever bar they frequented (not Grillby’s; he’d seen all three before, and they weren’t the sort Grillby tolerated) and had been very, very drunk. He doubted they remembered him as anything other than a booze-soaked nightmare. He didn’t know anything about them except that they were a fire elemental, a praying mantis monster, and a fish monster, respectively.

All three had been hauled out of bed before dawn by Little Tim, a bear monster who stood taller than even Dusty. Little Tim was someone Sans knew by reputation: he was in charge of the day shift at a cannery on the monster side of town. He was known to be fair but tolerated no nonsense. Sans didn’t envy his roommates if they had a boss like that: it sounded like way too much work.

With the room to himself, he decided to take a nap until his shift. He flicked the deadbolt on the door, set his phone alarm, and curled up on the half-made bed he’d been assigned-

“WHA’S THAT RACKET!”

He jolted awake to the sound of someone yelling and banging on the door. It sounded like Dusty. Sans absent-mindedly dismissed the alarm on his phone and stretched, grinning at the satisfying pop his bones made as they settled properly into place.

“GET OUT ‘ERE RIGHT NOW, YOU ASSHOLE!”

Ignoring Dusty - it was just adorable that he thought he was some kind of bigshot - Sans quickly changed into clothes Undyne wouldn’t scream at him for and teleported to work. It wasn’t until he was settled at his sentry station that he remembered that the door to his room was still locked. It was an instinct after living with Papyrus his entire life, and he hadn’t even registered that his roommates might want to get in while he was gone.

Oops.

Well. Hopefully someone had a key. And maybe the fat mole would think twice about messing with him.

Deciding to put that dilemma aside for the moment, Sans brought out a notebook he’d found in the bottom of his sock drawer while packing. It didn’t have much in it - some notes on a few anomalies he’d felt, a half-hearted attempt at tracking the profits of his hot dog stand, and so on - so he turned to a new page and jotted down a header:

notes on graciela lira

What did he even know about her? Her old man was a mage, so she could have magic. He jotted that down, then erased it when he realized that was a poor place to start.

Graciela looked like Frisk a bit, but he had no idea how to figure out family relationships between humans. She had been in the foster care system, had a history of being a disturbed little shit, and had used violence to try to settle disagreements before. For all he knew, she could have been
ticked off at something Frisk said and decided that poisoning the ambassador was a good idea.

She hadn’t revealed anything about her motives, even under Toriel’s interrogation. That showed an uncanny resilience for a human. It didn’t matter in the end - except that if she’d been coerced into attacking Frisk, she probably would have said so - but it made Sans uneasy. Trial aside, knowing why Graciela had attacked Frisk would make it so much easier to anticipate such...incidents in the future.

There was also concern about her mental state. He grabbed his notes from his inventory and glanced them over, wincing at his poor handwriting. That’s right; the humans had declared her fit for trial, which is why she’d been handed over to the monsters in the first place. If she was actually insane, they would have put her in some kind of hospital, right? There was that issue with a terrorist a few years back, and he’d been found insane or something. Or his lawyer had been trying to get him declared insane? Sans couldn't remember. Either way, he knew that crazy people were considered “sick” instead of “evil” and were put into some kind of medical facility.

So...like prison but with better uniforms, really.

That was unfortunate for Graciela. Unlike humans, monsters had few jails and fewer healers; no one was going to waste time or magic on dead weight. And an assassin was the very worst kind of dead weight. No; Sans could afford to give little mercy to someone who had tried to kill such an important person in the Kingdom of Monsters.

Then again, what was it Tori had said? That the humans didn’t consider Alphys’s security footage “evidence?” If he was gonna have to prove to them that Graciela deserved what was coming to her, he needed to get something substantial. Preferably before Saturday, so Tori would have some kind of advance notice to do whatever she needed to with the humans.

So, what would the humans consider proof? They knew that Graciela had put some kind of poison in Frisk’s medicine bag, but that was brushed off as an accident by the hospital. A simple switch of medicines. No dice there-

Actually, hadn’t Alphys had a hard time figuring out what, exactly, was in that mess? And the hospital sure hadn’t known. Sans opened his phone and did a quick search. The human side of things was completely unhelpful; their media was reporting on the upcoming trial, but the general consensus was that it was unfair for monsters to try a human for attacking another human, and they were especially uneasy about the idea of a singular judge with no appeals process. A few dissenters pointed out that Frisk was a citizen of the Kingdom of Monsters, and a member of their royal family, but those were mostly on independent sites. To his surprise, only one or two outlets took the monsters’ claims of an assassination attempt seriously, and they were far too small to have any real resources available for an investigation.

So. He would have to do his own legwork, then. Going to Alphys directly was dangerous, especially since he’d absconded with her test subject last time he’d visited her, but it was an option. Asking Tori was another option.

He closed his web browser and carefully selected a number from his contacts. This new phone was a bit wonky still, at least in his hands. It made him feel like Old Man Gerson, always complaining about how technology was too confusing and would probably bring the ceiling down.

“Hello? Sans?”

“Hey, Tori. Say, any idea what was in that mix of medicines they dosed your kid with?”
There was a pause. “M-my...Frisk...oh, my child...I couldn’t...I can’t...”

Shoot, he’d caught her on a bad day. He vividly remembered when she’d had bad days in the Underground, being caught on his side of the door while the closest thing he’d had to a friend broke down sobbing as she desperately tried to hold herself together.

“Tori? Tori, you with me?”

There was a clatter as the phone was dropped, but the call didn’t disconnect. Sans cursed under his breath.

*You 11:12 AM
Can I have the day off*

*Capn Undie 11:12 AM
No*

He sighed.

*You 11:14 AM
Its actually kinda important*

*Capn Undie 11:15 AM
Is it Frisk?*

*You 11:16 AM
No
Tori*

There was a long pause. The call with Tori hadn’t disconnected, but the noises were getting softer and softer. That was bad. She hadn’t regained herself enough to remember the phone call, so she hadn’t snapped herself out of whatever state of mind she was in, and if she was wandering off it would be difficult for him to find her.

And...well, her guards had done a fantastic job of keeping her contained, as far as he knew, but a lot of reporters had no respect for personal space. Whenever one of them got wind of Tori’s problems, it was a huge mess-

...Except it wasn’t, was it? He winced, bringing one hand to his skull. There...there hadn’t actually been any big instances where anyone had found out about Tori...

...Right?

Because...

Because...the anomaly - no, Frisk - always kept things from getting too bad. Every time something like that happened, he would wake up in bed, aching and sick from time magic, and...and everything would be fine.

So. Logically, Tori would be okay. She wouldn’t need him. She-

“You okay, there? I thought this was one of your pranks, but the queen won’t pick up her phone.”

He looked up to see Undyne coming down the path from the top of the mountain, looking only slightly winded, her helmet tucked under one arm. “Did you just...run down a mountain? In full
plate armor?"

“IT’S GREAT TRAINING! I GOTTA KEEP IN SHAPE!”

“Uh-huh. And yeah, Tori was on the phone with me when she...uh...”

“She’s having an attack? Well, shoot-”

“No, nothing attacked her. I think.”

She eyed him oddly. “No...an attack. It’s...a phrase the humans use when your mind decides to gnaw on itself for a bit. Like Queen Toriel’s does sometimes.”

That was an awful and graphic description, but it sounded fitting. “Then probably, yeah.”

“Figures. Okay, I’ll watch your station. We can’t spare anyone else except...well...”

Except Papyrus, who was out on patrol if his schedule was still the same. Monsters at the head of the guard - like Papyrus and Undyne - had flexibility and could fill any number of roles, but the grunts had rigid schedules and set patrols. Besides the newbies who weren’t fully trained yet, no one else was available. “I’ll let ya know what’s up.”

“You’d better.” She huffed. “If someone sees her, especially with things as tense as they are with the trial...”

“I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Whatever. Off you go, bonebag.” She waved him off with one gauntleted hand and settled herself onto the bench in the sentry station. She looked twitchy; Sans gave her five minutes tops before she started doing push ups or suplexing rocks out of sheer boredom.

He just hoped his station was still standing when he got back.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: I came up with the name "Ensul" off the top of my head, but when I was checking it out to make sure it wasn’t a swearword in a foreign language I found two interesting references. "Ensul" is the name of a rock band out in Alabama that was founded in 2012 and looks to still be operational. There's also a D&D spell called "Ensul's Soultheft" which apparently lets you slap your fine hands all over the people around you, permanently draining their intelligence to heal yourself.

One of these things is definitely more sinister than the other.

But yes! I hope this was an acceptable pacing for the emancipation hearing; I didn't want to drag things out. Especially since we have a Judgement coming up soon.

For reference, the three monsters who share Sans's room are:
- Blaze the fire elemental
- Ripper the praying mantis
- Travis the fish monster (more of an Undyne-type fish monster; he's not in a constant state of suffocation)
We have met three of the four residents of the other bedroom in the apartment:
- Dusty the mole
- Schreger the badger
- Little Tim the giant bleepin' bear monster

Don't worry too much about them, that's all I'm saying.

Thanks so much for reading! I really appreciate all the hits and kudos and comments; I appreciate each and every one! Have a great week!
In Which Food is Better Than Therapy

Chapter Summary

...But therapy would still be a great thing to have.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans stumbled into Tori’s house, exhausted. He had teleported as close as he dared then ran the rest of the way, not willing to wait for a bus. In hindsight it would probably have been faster to wait.

Thankfully, the Queen’s Guard hadn’t questioned him upon his arrival. Or, uh, reacted at all. Creepy bastards.

“Tori?”

There was a muffled sob from somewhere further in the house. He caught his breath, leaning against the entry way wall, and followed the sound. Tori was still in the house, thank the stars, but...she sounded as bad as she ever had back in the Underground, worse than she had the whole time he’d ever heard her on the surface.

(Except for...no, that hadn’t happened. Not really.)

His steps led him down several hallways and to a locked door. He picked the lock instead of shortcutting past; he didn’t know if Tori could sense magic like this, but he didn’t want her to think she was being attacked.

“Hey? Tori?”

“No...no...”

Ah. There she was.

He settled himself against the door, grinning a little at the memories of doing just this so many times before. The floor was harder than the packed snow outside the door in Snowdin, but at least it wasn’t so cold.

Lifting one hand, he rapped his knuckles against it. “Knock knock.”

There was a pause - shorter than he expected; sometimes it took a few tries, even - before she sighed. “Who-who’s there?”

“Goat.”

“Goat who?”

“Goat to open the door do find out.”

There was a wet chuckle, then a soft click. Sans, unprepared for such a quick response, fell over
backwards as the door opened to reveal his friend. “Hey, Tori.”

“Sans. *Tibia* honest, I did not expect you here.”

“*Tibia* honest, I didn’t expect you to actually open the door.”

She huffed. “If you will move out of the way, I would be happy to speak with you in the living room.”

He scrambled upright and followed her down another hallway, ending up in an overly posh living room that looked out over the private courtyard. He’d only been back this far into the house a few times. Tori was a pretty private person; even her friends were usually confined to the outer areas of her home, her kitchen and tea room and formal meeting rooms.

“Now, Sans. What brought you over to my home?”

“I called you earlier. Do you remember that?”

She took a deep breath, hands clenched over her knees. “I...I remember…”

“I asked you a question that...brought back some bad memories, I guess. Just wanted t’check up on you to make sure everythin’s okay.”

“...”

“Stay with me, Tori. We’re right here, ‘n your kid’s fine.”

“How do you know? There’s a million things that could’ve happened to her. She could be hurt again, in the hospital again. She could have-”

Sans let her ramble on, slowly pulling out his phone. He couldn’t help her. He couldn’t even help himself. Heck, he was probably a bigger mess than she was, deep down.

But he knew one person who knew what to do in a situation like this. Hopefully Frisk wasn’t in one of her meetings.

You 11:41 AM
Can u call ur mom

A moment later, there was a distant ringing sound.

“I...one, moment please, Sans.”

He waited as Tori composed herself, then shuffled away to look for her phone.

*Frisky Dreamer* 11:43 AM
This had better not be a prank.
She’s not picking up.

You 11:44 AM
Try again
Shes lookin for it

The ringing sound came again, this time interrupted by Tori’s low, comforting voice. He texted Undyne to let her know that all was well, and scowled when she proclaimed herself surprised that he’d followed through. It wasn’t like he had anything *better* to do while his friend talked with her
kid. Besides, he owed Undyne and Frisk...and Tori, to an extent. And...maybe he was tryin’ to
work on the whole “being nicer” thing.

...A little. He was still an asshole.

“Sans? I am back.”

She sure was, standing in the doorway like she’d never had a breakdown, composed as ever.
“Glad you’re lookin’ better.”

“I am...sorry you had to see that.”

He snorted, scooting over on the couch as she sat beside him. “Don’t apologize; nothin’ t’be sorry
about. Haven’t seen you that bad in a while, though. What happened? You’ve been doin’ real
well, all things considered…”

“I suppose it merely hit me all at once. I was already doing poorly when you called, and that
simply brought it all back. I do not wish to burden you with the details…”

“Burden me all you like. Undyne’s watching my station; I’m in no hurry to get back.”

She laughed at that, short but genuine. “Very well. It was...around this time of year that my
children - my first children - found their way to the surface. I am certain you have heard how
Asriel and Chara met their end. We were all different back then. Oh, we’ve always had our
problems - tight living quarters and a lack of food would turn anyone desperate, and we had plenty
of aggressive monsters to begin with - but it was more manageable. Asgore and I kept a tight rein
on violence, and anyone with high LV was monitored closely. The Judge took care of any who got
out of hand.”

Sans shifted uncomfortably. He’d found some allusions to that when looking over the few
document scraps that remained from previous Judges, but never enough to confirm.

“Chara’s arrival gave us hope. Yes, there were some who wished to kill her right away, to use her
soul to pass through the barrier, but we put her under our protection. We made it known that
anyone who laid a hand on her would be subject to royal discipline.

“The original plan was...well, I suppose most humans would have called it morbid. We planned to
raise her, to let her live out her days peacefully, and when she had lived a full life and passed of
natural causes...then - and only then - would we take her soul. She agreed to this, once we
explained it to her. She wanted to help us escape our prison. She told us everything she could about
the world she had come from; it was thanks to her that we found the courage to venture further into
the caverns and discover areas like the Dump in Waterfall, and the knowledge to understand what
we found there.

“But we overestimated Chara’s...patience, I suppose. And m-mental stability.” Tori took a
moment to painstakingly straighten the edge of one of her sleeves. “She did not simply become ill,
as the official story goes; no, she deliberately ingested poison. What sort of poison and where she
found it, I am unsure. There was a bag she always carried with her that contained several
substances we did not recognize, but since we believed all of them to be harmless to monsters she
was allowed to keep them. Perhaps something in there was deadly; perhaps she found something
among the plants of the Underground. I never discovered which.

“I simply know that she took her own life, and Asriel...Asriel broke when she told him this. She
said she wanted him to take her soul, to carry her back to her village. She wanted to be buried under
the flowers that grew there. And she wanted us all to be free.”

Sans glanced out the window at the private courtyard, covered in snow. “Not really great weather for flowers.”

“No, goodness no. I suppose Chara simply lost track of time, or perhaps she thought warm weather in New Home meant there was also warm weather on the surface. I did not interfere with their plans, I am sorry to say; I did not expect them to succeed, but I wanted my child to have some hope in her last moments. The rest of the story you know. They did reach the surface and found not flowers, but hostile humans. I never knew who attacked first, but in the end the humans proved too strong for Asriel, even with the power of Chara’s soul. He returned to the Underground covered in blood and dust and…

“Asgore planted a garden at the spot where they fell. Growing things have always soothed the more...volatile side of him. It took centuries to get anything more than weeds and the occasional golden flower to grow on that spot, though.”

Sans thought back. “I dunno; it’s always looked nice when I stopped by. Lots of yellow.”

Tori laughed. “Yes. Well. That was Chara’s and Asriel’s favorite color, and buttercup seeds aren’t terribly hard to come by. Asgore used to plant roses as well, before my rebellion saw me banished to the Ruins. Red roses. They were beautiful. I am not sure why, but I have not seen them in any of the gardens he has planted since the barrier broke.”

They sat in silence for a while. Tori didn’t seem inclined to speak more than she had, and Sans didn’t know what to say. It was always a bit disconcerting, remembering how old his friend was. She had been alive for so, so terribly long that it was difficult to even imagine. Sans had a hard time remembering things that had happened a few short weeks or months back, but Tori? She could tell stories from centuries ago.

What a terrible thing, to be alive for so long and see how far monsters had fallen. She’d lost more than most monsters would ever have in their lives. No wonder she was a little messed up in the head sometimes.

Hesitantly, he shifted a little closer. “I’m...sorry to hear about your kids. And sorry for bringing back bad memories.”

“Hah! I never dreamed I would hear you apologize, Sans. Please, do not dwell on it; it was not your fault, or at least, not entirely. You had no way of knowing that your words would aggravate my condition...and if I am honest, I overestimated myself. I did not have to pick up the phone, after all.”

“Still. Lemme know if you need anything else.”

“Oh, do not worry about this old woman; my worries and fears are something I must deal with. Besides-”

Sans tensed as he heard a door open and close, then the patter of little feet.

“Granny Ree?” Attie peeked her head around the corner, fidgeting with a familiar stuffed turtle in her arms. “Hi. The special door was unlocked.”

“Yes...I suppose Sans must have unlocked it when he came in.”

The girl’s face lit up when she shuffled into the room far enough to see him. “Hi, Mr. Sans!”
He waved back at her. “Hey, kid. What’s up?”

“The ceiling.”

“Hah! True. What’re you doin’ here?”

“Mommy and I are here to make Granny Ree happy!” She faced her grandmother with a very determined expression. “Granny Ree, you aren’t going to be sad anymore today. Mommy and I are gonna make you the happiest granny in the whole wide world!”

Tori laughed. “That is a tall order, but I appreciate the sentiment. Here; give me a hug. Now where is your mother?”

“In the kitchen, prolly. She’s unpacking groceries.”

“Groceries? Goodness, you really must have a full day planned.”

“We were grocery shopping when Mr. Sans texted Mommy, so we just picked up some extra things.”

Sans huddled into his sweater under the weight of Tori’s stare. “I...see. Attie, go ahead and head out to help your mother; Sans and I shall be there shortly.”

He watched the kid skip away. “Tori…”

“Sans, ordinarily I would be terribly angry that you told someone else of my condition, but...in this case, I must thank you. I would have taken much longer to recover if I had not heard from Frisk.”

“No problem. And I’m not gonna spread your problems around, Tori. It’s just that you mentioned your kid, so I hoped she’d be able to help. Stars know I’m no good in situations like this.”

“That may be so, but you did not need to be. You evaluated the situation and took appropriate action. Thank you for that.”

“Oh, no problem.”

“I can see why you are-”

“Mom? Are you coming?” Frisk’s voice echoed down the hallway.

Tori smiled and stood. “Well. Anyways. I had best see what is planned for my afternoon; there are few things that can slow Frisk down when she has an idea in her head.”

They followed the sounds of chatter and silverware to the kitchen. They arrived to find Frisk in a standoff with the plant monster who served as Tori’s cook, both preparing food on opposite sides of the kitchen and giving each other sidelong looks.

“Hello, Frisk. Are you and Fern preparing lunch?”

“Hey, Mom.” Frisk carefully set her knife down and gave her mother a hug. “Fern already started soup and salad; I’m making a quick pan of meatballs. Nothing fancy. I have buns if we want to do sandwiches, or I can make rice or mashed potatoes or something.”

“Oh, sandwiches will be lovely; I have not had them in ages. Is there something I can do to help?”

“I think we’ve got it covered, but-oh, hey, Sans! I didn’t realize you were here! I thought you had
work.”

Sans fought the urge to disappear into his sweatshirt. “I did. Undyne’s watching my station for a bit.”

“So that’s what she’s up to! I guess you’d better get back before she destroys it completely, then. Would you like a meatball sandwich to go?”

He’d forgotten to pack any kind of lunch, so he’d been planning to sneak over to Grillby’s on his break to grab a milkshake or something. But hey, if Frisk wanted to give him free food, he wasn’t gonna turn that down. “Sure, that’d be great. Uh, thanks.”

True to her word, the sandwiches were simple - meatballs and a little sauce on a bun - but it smelled great. From the way the meatballs squished, they were probably soft enough that he could eat them if he was careful and distracted himself first. She took an absurd amount of time wrapping it in parchment paper, then handed it over to Attie.

“Here y’go, Mr. Sans!” the little girl said, presenting the sandwich to him with exaggerated care. “BONE appetit!”

“Thanks,” Sans replied, deliberately avoiding eye contact with anyone else in the room.

He hid the sandwich away in his inventory, said his goodbyes, and headed out. The bus was right on time, so he rode it to the nearest stop he knew he could teleport from and made his way back to his sentry post.

It...wasn’t as messed up as he was expecting, honestly. Sure, the lumps of snow Undyne had kicked up stood taller than he did, but his sentry post was still standing.

“How did’ja do all this?” he asked, settling himself back on his bench. It wobbled funny, probably due to having an armored fish sit on it for a while. “I was gone about an hour and a half. Not that long.”

“NGAAAAAAAAAH! IT’S TRAINING! DON’T QUESTION IT!”

“Uh-huh. Don’t think I haven’t forgotten that you used to ask Paps over to ‘train’ in making dinner.”

“That was a legitimate test of skill and reflexes!”

“For you, maybe. The rest of us seem to get by without needing to dodge weaponry every time we enter a kitchen.” He sidestepped to avoid a golden spear that circled around and tried to come at him from his blind spot. Heh. She was starting to get really pissed if she was breaking out the special attacks. “Y’know I taught ‘im to cook when he was just a babybones, right? He was no master chef, but he could at least boil pasta. Without burning it.”

“Well aren’t you just an articulate little SHIT when you’re sassing someone off, huh? Why don’cha talk like that ALL THE TIME instead of turning into a STUTTERING LITTLE MESS whenever you’re NERVOUS??”

Ouch. Sans gave a wink and a shrug, but that hit a bit harder than he expected. “Why don’t you wear your armor all the time? We all have our weird quirks.”

“UGH! JUST GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!”
“Oh, so I get the afternoon off, then? Awesome.”

A gauntlet swiped at the back of his sweatshirt as he was about to teleport away. “Don’t. You. Dare.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You KNOW what I MEAN!”

“Yeah?”

“UGH!!!!” Undyne tossed him into a snow poff and stomped off, leaving powdery clouds in her wake.

“Oh, and I think I have a lead on Graciela Lira.”

“What?” she called, from somewhere off in the forest.

“I think the composition of whatever Frisk was injected with will prove that it wasn’t an accident, or at the very least, that Graciela was messing with things she shouldn’t have been. Might wanna get the full composition from Alphys. In your spare time.”

“YOU SUCK, SANS!”

Sans grinned, settling himself back onto his bench. It was fun poking the proverbial dragon, even when she bit back at him like that. It was a bit of a relief to return to his old habits, too, especially after trying to hard to be nice to Tori and Attie and Frisk. It helped balance things out.

Then he remembered what he had to go home to, and his good mood evaporated like snow in Hotland.

His shift was over all too soon, and he headed home. He crept in through the front door of his apartment warily. It was quiet. He’d only worked a single shift, but since sentry shifts were only six hours long he still got home earlier than the factory workers. What a relief-

“Hello. You must be Sans.” A huge bear appeared in the doorway of one of the bedrooms. “I don’t believe we properly met this morning; you were still asleep when I grabbed those three lumps you’re rooming with. I’m Tim; folks call me Little Tim.”

The only possible explanation for that was pure irony; the guy stood taller than Undyne. “Hey. Yeah, I’m Sans.”

“Interesting.” He glanced Sans over with obvious care. “Well, you don’t look like much.”

“Gee, thanks, man.”

“Be careful around Dusty. And keep your bedroom door unlocked unless you want your roommates angry with you. I picked the lock for you this morning, but next time you’re dealing with the fallout.”

“Gotcha.” He waited until Little Tim disappeared before continuing on towards his room.

That was...odd. If Little Tim was a supervisor, why was he home so early? Maybe he had the day off, but still.

It was tempting to lock the door despite the warning, just to mess with his roommates, but their
reactions thus far weren’t nearly as interesting as Little Tim’s. He seemed like an even-keeled sort of monster, and that was a rare thing. But then...what was he doing around such a violent group of thugs? Had he, like Sans, been out of options?

It took a few days to really settle in, especially because Sans avoided the apartment as much as possible. Sharing space with so many fleshy-type monsters was awful, even if a few of them - like his roommate Ripper, the praying mantis - mostly ignored him. They were violent, they were suspicious, and upon further inspection they had so much LV that it made his head ache.

Even Little Tim.

The worst, though, was Dusty. After that first confrontation, he seemed to go out of his way to target Sans. Maybe he didn’t like being sassed, or maybe he sensed that the skeleton was more than he appeared; either way, Dusty had made it very clear that he Did Not Approve of Sans’s presence in the apartment.

That was alright. Sans had enough to worry about, between making sure Tori was alright and getting everything organized for the trial. Someone had managed to convince Alphys into coughing up the chemical composition of whatever Frisk had been injected with. (He'd only heard rumors, but it had possibly involved a standoff with the Royal Guard, a raise, or a few stacks of dubious manga. Possibly all three.) Undyne called to give him the news, and while he didn’t understand her explanation - he wasn’t a chemist, and worse, neither was she - it appeared that they had solid evidence of foul play. Better yet, some of the embassy’s lawyers were looking at suing the hospital for covering up the incident.

But all that was in the future. Before they could move forward, Graciela Lira had to face Judgement.

Sans was conflicted. On the one hand, Graciela had hurt Frisk, and by extension, Attie and Tori: the three people he cared most about (besides Papyrus, who - despite everything - still counted). On the other...well, his nightmares about fighting Frisk weren’t getting any better as the trial grew closer.

Maybe it was selfish, but...he almost wished he didn’t have to kill another human.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans never apologized to Toriel back in chapter 22, when they were discussing Sans ignoring her for months on end. He expressed regret, but didn't actually say the words. This is a step forward for both of them, to say the least.

Toriel will be okay. Getting over trauma is always rough: like her, many people will go weeks or months where it seems like they're improving, only to have something random and stupid bring everything back. If you have a condition like this, I recommend the assistance of a professional. Surrounding yourself with good people goes a long way, but so does the help of someone who can work with you to develop long-term healing and coping strategies. Don't be stubborn like Toriel, is what I'm saying.

But yes! Thanks to everyone who's left kudos and comments!! I always look forward to seeing the responses after I post chapters. It really does keep me going. I'm sorry it
takes me a few days to respond sometimes...but I promise, I do read each and every one!

SPEAKING OF WHICH: I got my very first fanart this week!!! Venelona illustrated a very embarrassed Sans from way back in Chapter 8. Thank you, thank you, thank you!
In Which the Judge Returns

Chapter Summary

...And does what I think we all knew he would have to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day of the trial burned its way into Sans’s eye sockets bright and early. Dusty and Schreger had disappeared to whatever it was they did (he’d picked up bits and pieces and it sounded like debt collection, which was sketchy; possibly for Muffet, which was worse), and their roommate was asleep. Sans had known Aaron back when Woshua’s gang was still operating out of Waterfall, smuggling drugs and picking on Temmies: a creepy guy, but good in a fight. If rumors were believed, the seahorse was working as a bouncer for some nightclub downtown. His roommates were gone as well, as was Little Tim; the cannery still needed workers, after all, even on such a momentous day.

Overall, there was an uncomfortable tension in the air. Even people who didn’t normally follow the mysterious workings of government had picked up that something unusual was happening. A few monster businesses - normally opened on Saturday - were closed for the day, ostensibly out of fear of riots, but riots hadn’t stopped anyone in the Underground. They were probably just staying home and watching the trial.

There seemed to be a distinct split between businesses that were offering to broadcast the trial and those that had refused to. Sans was glad the decision wasn’t up to him, especially knowing how it was going to end. Broadcasting a major event would probably encourage employees to not skip work, but on the other hand, it could cause coworkers to turn on each other if things went poorly.

And...things were going to go poorly.

Tori had texted him late the night before to let him know that the Kingdom of Monsters had drafted up a statement regarding the incident. They were going to read a short version - the one without all the scientific details - before the trial. Hopefully that would justify what Sans was going to do.

As for how much of the trial would be televised, that was still a point of contention. Officially, the media could only broadcast the trial live up until a guilty verdict if there was one. The idea was that if Graciela went free, they could plaster the news all over the world if they wanted to. If she was guilty, however...

There were no appeals when dealing with the Royal Judge. Members of the Royal Family could intercede on behalf of the accused and mitigate a sentence, but the Judge’s word was final.

Punishment was administered immediately.

Sans checked his phone. It was still early, but he couldn’t go back to sleep. The trial was scheduled to begin at 2:00 so he had plenty of time to get ready, but he didn’t know what else to do with himself.
He teleported over to the embassy, feeling cold and shaky. He didn’t want to confront Frisk - he
didn’t think he could stand seeing her or Attie, not with what he was about to do - but he wanted to
be around other people. People who weren’t trying to kill him or provoke him into a fight.

The main lobby of the embassy had various areas where monsters and humans could wait for
appointments. There were couches in various sizes, large hearths and pools for monsters who
required fire or water, and even a small, carefully-contained patch of ice. Sans grabbed some
magic-infused juice from a nearby vending machine and settled himself into a chair, letting the low
rumble of conversation wash over him.

“Sans?”

He started, looking up at the monster who had approached him. He hadn’t been sleeping, exactly;
just very, very...calm. “Hey, Tori.”

“I am surprised to see you here. Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, ‘m fine. Just. Uh. Waiting…”

“I...see. Do you wish to wait in my office? I am heading there now to coordinate press releases
with our media team.”

“Nah, don’t worry ‘bout me.”

“Sans.” She bent down a little, her red eyes glittering with concern. “Please. Come with me.” It
wasn't a question.

He followed her as she stood and left, clutching his bottle of juice in both hands. Despite the
additional magic, he still felt like he was about to fall to pieces.

Tori’s office was huge, but didn't have much decoration. The room looked a bit crowded despite
that; she was just so big that everything else had to be as well. Official photos didn’t do it justice.
Everything looked normal-sized compared to such a large monster, so it wasn’t until folks actually
walked into the room in person that they realized that the desk stood nearly five feet tall. Sans
could see over it...barely.

He hoisted himself into the massive chair that sat in front of the desk. “So, what’d you wanna talk
about?”

“Sans...are you sure about this?”

“...What?”

“This trial. It will...well. It will change everything. Even after working with them for so long, it is
difficult to predict how humans will react to certain things. We have strong support among certain
factions, but there is no telling how the public will see this. There are a few small, but very vocal
groups that oppose us having anything to do with this case. Some of them have powerful friends in
politics and media. They can cause quite a bit of trouble for us if things don’t go well-”

“I’m gonna stop you right there, Tori. If you want to speak up for Graciela, do it at the trial. If
not...you’ve gotta know that I can't change my verdict because of what you say. That’s not how
this works.”

“I…I understand that. I just want you to know how-”
“It doesn’t matter, Tori. That’s what I mean. It doesn’t matter what the fallout is; I have to give my verdict according to whether or not I believe she’s broken the law. I could go easy on her if she’s guilty, if you or someone else from the Royal Family speaks up, but we don’t exactly have the authority to put a human in jail, do we.”

“No. I suppose we do not.”

“Then there’s really only one possible outcome.”

She sighed, pausing in her mindless shuffling of papers. “It does not have to be this way.”

“Then next time, let’s make sure there are other options.” He scooched off the chair, wobbling a little as he landed on his feet. “I’ll see you at the trial, Tori.”

“Sans, wait!”

He paused.

“I have discussed with Undyne, and we are working to prevent Frisk from appearing at the trial. It is unusual - she was the injured party - but Asgore and I will be present on behalf of the Royal Family. She...for all she does for us, she is still very human. I fear she would attempt to ask for mercy, and that is something we cannot allow.”

“Okay.” It was a relief, all told. Odd, yes, but at least he wouldn’t have to face Frisk as the Judge and see the disgust and fear she still felt for him. And if Frisk wasn’t there...

“Atlas will be in a secure location; I am watching her for the evening, but I do not want her at the trial either. I am taking steps to ensure that she does not see any part of it, at least until we figure out what the...result will be and can plan an age-friendly explanation.”

“Okay.”

“Sans...do you truly believe that this is best?”

It was a strange question, coming from Tori. Despite everything - all her neuroses and paranoia and haunting past - she took charge of situations. She didn’t ask other people for their opinions, especially not in a tone that sounded more like Attie than the Queen of Monsters.

Sans examined his friend. She looked defeated, like she was in a dark tunnel with no way out. Like he himself had all too often, back in the Underground.

“I don’t think there are any good choices this time around, Tori, but I don’t have the option of sitting this one out. I’ve got to do something, even if it turns out bad. Believe me, I’d much rather let you political types hash it out, but I’ve always been lazy that way.”

He left Tori’s office with a halfhearted wave, heading towards the nearest closet he could teleport from. She didn’t stop him, that time.

Teleporting to the gym seemed like the best course of action. His locker room was calm and mostly quiet; the thumping bass from the upper floor of the gym was soft and easy to ignore. He stumbled a little on arrival, knocking over his trombone, before collapsing in a heap against one wall.

What was he thinking, talking to Tori that way? What if she got mad at him? He should’ve just agreed to whatever she wanted and made excuses later. Or maybe lies would’ve made her even
more angry? He didn’t know. The whole “friends” thing was hard. Being allies was easy: you just didn’t betray the other monster, and if someone punched one of your allies you started a bar fight and took the attacker out in the ensuing chaos. It was more of a battle formation than a relationship.

Well. Hopefully he didn’t mess things up too badly for her.

Time ticked by slowly. After a few texts from Undyne asking him where he was, he slowly got dressed. The familiar weight of his armor seemed to drag him down, and it took all the socks he’d stashed in his inventory to make the boots fit, but he struggled through. Stalling for time, he carefully wrapped and re-wrapped his hands in bandages to give them the appearance of muscle under the new gloves he’d bought. It looked a bit strange and exaggerated, to his untrained eye sockets, but once the gloves were on the lumps were less obvious anyways.

He went to put his mask on, but hesitated when his fingers hit one of the spikes on his collar. He hadn't thought much about it in a while, actually. It was an old thing, leather worn smooth by time, a gift from Papyrus from better times. It had started out as a joke between them: Papyrus had been a young guard at the time and the new head of their household, the voice of authority, while Sans had been the one to enforce that authority. The "muscle." The "attack dog." Ironically, the collar and the nickname had endeared him to most of the dogs around town, so he'd kept wearing it. Even when it had turned into a tool for punishment, another thing Papyrus could use to drag him around, it hadn't felt right to take it off.

But that chapter of his life was behind him. For better or for worse, he was his own monster now. The collar was laid aside carefully, draped over a hanger. With careful hands he settled the leather mask over his face, wincing as the magic connected and gave him back his sight and hearing, and lowered the metal helmet over that.

He was ready...and yet, not ready at all.

Undyne had asked him to meet her in her office, located in a small building near the embassy that served as Royal Guard Headquarters. There were no magical barriers - anything of that sort would hinder the guards themselves, after all - so she’d asked him to just teleport straight into her office. After texting her to make sure the coast was clear, he let himself vanish.

“Woah,” Undyne said. “You really do look different. And feel different. That’s some crazy magic right there.”

“Yeah,” he said. He didn’t sound like himself at all, either. That was the one part of the disguising magic that always took the longest to adjust to, and he barely kept from jumping at the sound of his own voice.

The captain settled herself the way she did when addressing Frisk or Tori in public: a mask of polite respect that looked strange on her face. “Well, let’s get this show on the road, Judge. I would introduce you to my vice-captain, but he is very busy organizing security at the site of the trial.”

He nodded, appreciating the slightly awkward gesture for what it was: reassurance that they wouldn’t run into Papyrus on their way out.

“If you’ll follow me, one of my guards has one of the Royal Family’s cars pulled around to the side entrance. We were given special permission to use that.”

He followed her, despite knowing the building like the back of his hand. It was terribly amusing to
see the guards he knew so well, many of whom wouldn’t give him the time of day normally, making frantic gestures of respect and awe as he passed.

They didn’t give a damn about Sans the Skeleton, but they sure as hell respected the Royal Judge.

The drive out was long and tense. He could feel Undyne’s eyes on him more often than was probably safe, given the amount of traffic in the area around the embassy, but he didn’t care. He felt restless and tired at the same time, and the urge to start running laps warred with his desire to fall asleep. Neither seemed like a particularly good idea, and in the end, nervous energy won out.

“Is everything alright, Judge?” The quirk of her eyebrow was really unnecessary, but then again, he had been wiggling his legs like Attie when she was tired of sitting.

“Yes, Captain.”

He ignored her triumphant grin - he was in his formal uniform, and that always brought out a certain side of him, and if she expected him to refer to her like that on any other day she was shit out of luck - and tried to keep his hands from shaking.

The last time he’d worn this outfit for any length of time, he’d killed Frisk. He’d killed Frisk. What if she’d stayed dead? The monsters would have gotten their seventh soul and tried to go to war with humanity. Undyne and Papyrus would have led the battle; Asgore wouldn’t have been much help on the tactical side of things, not after absorbing seven human souls. The humans had rallied their troops quickly enough when faced with relatively peaceful monsters and a conciliatory Frisk; if they’d been attacked, it would have been so much worse.

The monsters could have done some damage, especially if they’d managed to unleash Asgore’s power upon them, but humans outnumbered monsters hundreds of thousands to one. It would have been a massacre. Maybe the very young kids would have been spared - assuming humans could recognize them as kids - and monsterkind would have survived in some capacity, but who knows how long that could last?

And without Frisk, Attie wouldn’t exist, either. That thought made his soul feel tight and wobbly. A world without Attie...what a sad place that would be. Sure, he was extremely biased, but still. He had nearly destroyed not only the people he had come to care about very, very much, but his entire race as well.

Great job, bonehead.

“Judge? We’re here.”

Sans looked out of the car window. Undyne was parked at the main entrance to the Underground. A number of guards - both Royal Guards and Queen’s Guards, and a few private security personnel as well - were lined up along the entrance. Reporters and bystanders were crowded on the other side of a striped rope, sequestered away from the action. Aside from a few reporters chatting with the shiny black eyes of their cameras, the crowd had the noise level of wind in the trees.

Magic hung thick in the air, laced with fighting intent. It itched at the back of Sans’s skull like little claws, digging into bone and making him feel uncomfortably exposed.

Then his door was opened by a guard in full plate armor. He heard nothing as he stood on slightly shaky legs, hoping the cameras didn’t pick up that detail. Undyne exited as well, leaving the car to the guard who had helped them out, and put on her helmet before leading him inside.
The trial was to be held in the huge, open cavern just on the other side of where the barrier once stood. The heavy doors that replaced the barrier, closing off the area, stood open in the face of a parade of gawkers and media. A few had begun slipping through, ushered onwards by the guards, but as soon as they caught sight of Sans they began muttering quickly.

The noise grew to a roar by the time he made it through the doors. Undyne had to fend off several enthusiastic humans who insisted on getting some kind of hint on the identity of the Royal Judge, and only backed off when she threatened to revoke their press credentials.

“They know they aren’t allowed to ask you questions,” she muttered under her breath to him as they crossed the cavern, already half-full of people. “They’re just being annoying. Eff’n reporters.”

Under his mask, he smiled.

She led him back into the area where the king’s private residence stood: a grand palace that had always seemed a bit out of place, given the overall poverty of the area. There were guards everywhere, both human and monster, and the ones that didn’t look like they were buried in work nodded as they passed.

One of the palace’s side rooms - probably once a staff room of some kind - had been prepared with a table and chairs. Nothing fancy, but Sans didn’t care as he let his legs give out.

Undyne looked at her watch. “It’s 1:15. The trial will start right at 2. I need to check in with my vice-captain to see where things stand security-wise, but I’ll be back about quarter-till to get you ready to go.

“I know this is very different from how you normally work, but this is how we’ve arranged things today. The main “trial” will be in the Cavern of the End, where reporters and observers are gathering now. When the trial begins, King Asgore - acting on behalf of the Kingdom of Monsters - will read the charges against Graciela, then you’ll both be brought out. Queen Toriel will act on behalf of the Royal Family and her daughter, the offended party. She’ll make a statement as well. Then you’ll do...whatever it is you do.

“If Graciela is found innocent, I’ll escort you out and Graciela will be free to go. I think she has someone present who’ll be able to take her wherever she needs to go. If she’s found guilty, I’ll lead you both to the Judgement Hall for sentencing. You can proceed as normal from there. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Any questions?”

“Queen Toriel -” and it sounded really, really strange to call her that - “said that the reporters would only televise the trial and the release of the accused, assuming she is found innocent. Is that still true?”

“Yes. Reporters will not be allowed in the Judgement Hall. That’s the reason we’re setting things up in the Cavern of the End; well, that and we may have forgotten to tell them that the hall and the cavern are two different places.” Her grin was sharp. “It’s really too bad they won’t have the opportunity to set up bugs and recording equipment and spy robots and such, isn’t it?”

“What, no spy robots?”

She cackled. “Well, I’ll leave you here. Feel free to leave anything you need to in this room; it will be guarded until you return, and no one will be allowed in.”
“Gotcha.”

As soon as she was gone, Sans pulled his helmet and mask off. It was stuffy under there even without the bad memories that were crowding into his skull. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to using his own eyesight instead of the helmet’s magic, but once he did he breathed a sigh of relief.

Not much longer. It would all be over soon.

Not much longer.

He pulled out his phone, for lack of anything better to do. There were a few messages from Tori - mostly vague apologies for pressuring him - and he replied with equally vague assurances that he was not pressured. There was a day-old message from Frisk that he’d somehow missed asking if he could watch Attie, immediately followed by a slightly confused retraction of the request with a mention that Tori had offered to watch her instead.

Too bad. Watching Attie sounded so much better than this mess.

He mindlessly scrolled through some encyclopedia site, trying to take his mind off what was coming. If every trial was like this then he was going to find a way to resign. Usually his assignments were quick and dirty: he was summoned, shoved into the Judgement Hall, and either let the accused monsters go or dusted them, whichever was warranted. In a few rare cases he’d been called to judge a monster who was guilty of something that didn’t merit dusting; those were trickier. Lowering monsters’ HP enough that they surrendered but didn’t dust was difficult, and not every monster had the wisdom to recognize defeat.

Not that he could do that here, of course. This was an all-or-nothing trial. If Graciela was guilty of trying to assassinate the Ambassador of Monsters - and all signs indicated that she was - then he would have no choice but to execute her. When he was in the role of Judge, laws were absolute, regardless of the political consequences.

He hadn’t lied to Tori. There was a strange compulsion associated with being Judge that he doubted she fully understood. He literally didn’t have a choice to slack off once he was in the Judgement Hall with a guilty party. Whether that was some kind of magic woven by the Royal Family or the lingering influence of past Judges, he couldn’t say; and in the end, it didn’t matter. Only once had he ever fought against it, and the only reason he’d succeeded was because the accused wasn’t actually guilty of anything more than existing. Well, and some well-hidden resentment against the many monsters who had killed her, but that wasn’t a punishable offense.

And yet, that mercy had still incapacitated him for days afterwards, wracked with gnawing pain and the lingering urge to kill. After all, simply being human had violated the laws of the Underground, and the sentence had been death. It helped that Frisk hadn’t done anything, but it was a thin distinction.

At least this time around, he had a better reason to do what needed to be done. A cold comfort, but a comfort nonetheless.

A text alert interrupted his macabre thoughts.

*Capn Undie 1:40 PM*
Be there in 5 to pick you up. Be ready or I’ll LITERALLY pick you up.

He grinned and stuck his stuffy mask and helmet back on. That almost passed as affectionate, for her.
Papyrus must have been keeping things running like a well-oiled machine, because Undyne showed up exactly at 1:45 instead of being waylaid by a dozen lost guards. “It’s time,” she said, posing dramatically in the doorway.

He quirked the ridge of one eye socket at her, realizing that the gesture would be wasted with his mask on.

“You’re doing that eye thing at me, aren’t you.”

“Yep.”

“Ugh. Let’s just...c’mon.”

She led the way back to the Cavern of the End. As they got closer, Sans could hear the dull roar of voices echoing through the caves. They sounded restless, hungry. Something in him itched to give them what they wanted, and he cursed himself for it. The doors in front of him looked as menacing and immovable as the barrier ever had, separating him from everything he hoped and feared would be true.

Abruptly, silence fell.

Asgore’s voice was muffled from their position, but Undyne seemed to be keeping track of things through an earpiece she had acquired from somewhere and had taped near the subtle ear-hole in front of her head fins. She looked off into nothing, nodding along every few seconds.

“Oh, that’s us.” She opened the doors easily, with one hand, and led the way into the cavern.

It was packed. A gaggle of human reporters took up a surprising amount of space, easily identified by their bright badges and logos in a variety of languages. Dozens of cameras were pointed at the center of the cavern. From a door on the other side a woman he’d grown used to seeing in pictures and security recordings entered, flanked by human security guards.

Graciela Lira bore little resemblance to the painted, primped nurse Sans remembered from the hospital. Her dark hair was no longer pulled back in an elegant bun, but hung loose over her shoulders. The freckles and small imperfections on her face were obvious without the benefit of makeup to hide them. There were dark shadows under her eyes and her mouth was turned down in a scowl.

He barely noticed the security guards and Undyne stepping off to one side. It felt like the cave itself was holding its breath, and Sans - no, the Royal Judge - was part of it. It was a strange sensation, switching into his role, but it always came with an eerie rush of calm that he got nowhere else. When he was the Judge, he knew with absolute certainty that he was where he was meant to be.

Or, at least, that was how it felt.

He examined the woman in front of him. Her face twitches belied her nervousness, but there was no guilt in her expression. That didn’t mean she wasn’t guilty, merely that she didn’t think she had done anything wrong.

He looked deeper, digging into her subconscious and slowly losing his grip on his own reality. It was a similar sensation to checking a monster, but far more intense; and unlike a proper check, it wasn’t influenced by what others wished to reveal about themselves. And there was much that Graciela wished to hide.
She had grown up a lonely, angry child, feeling lost among a crowd of siblings. Acting out at school had been a bid for attention; when that didn’t work, she took out her anger on others. It had truly been an accident, that first time she punched another girl in the face, but the power rush it gave her had been heady enough to overpower her guilt. And it garnered the attention of others. Parents and teachers were unwilling to believe that a pretty little straight-A student had acted out of sheer anger and had been swayed by her crocodile tears. She had been given therapy, not punishment, and the therapists had been so terribly easy to fool.

Most of them, anyways.

From them she had learned the art of manipulation. Her research into psychiatry left her little time for her other studies, but she passed her falling grades off as the results of stress. Stress was something she knew intimately. Her parents were always dragging under it, stretched thin under the financial weight of her treatment when they were barely getting by already, and she watched them fall apart with the awe of a child watching a delicate glass figurine shatter into dust.

Her teachers had been sympathetic to her plight; it was easy to maintain her previous grades with minimal effort with the right sob story. College teachers were harder to fool, but once she figured out the exact level of effort that gave the appearance of struggle while also making slow progress it was easy enough. She got more praise for being the “most improved” student than she ever had when she got top grades. And it left her time for her own personal projects.

Then monsters appeared. Her mother - a mage of some small power - had told stories of monsters, and despite the fact that she had no further use for her family Graciela remembered those stories. Monsters were vicious, hateful creatures that had attacked humans without provocation. They needed to be destroyed.

Equality for All was an organization that ran parallel to that goal. They were too soft for her tastes - only attacking people they disagreed with, instead of monsters in general - but she knew that a large-scale attack wouldn’t work when so many people were still sympathetic to monsters. So she joined the group and watched as it steadily grew more violent, waiting for monsters to slip up and retaliate.

Except...they didn’t.

They were violent, yes, but generally only towards their own kind. That stupid ambassador was given a level of awe and respect humans reserved for their deities; none of the monsters wanted to upset her. They behaved themselves for her. And slowly, Equality for All petered out.

Mostly.

There was still a core group that she kept contact with. She kept her head down; she’d never been arrested in any of the protests - violence was left to the peons, and she was too valuable a tactician to risk - so when one of her compatriots who worked at the hospital recommended her as a pediatrician, no one questioned it...or looked too closely at her credentials. And the job gave her easy access to monsters for study. Oh, she didn’t do anything bad to them, merely...observed.

Documented. Waited.

The unfortunate little monsters that died under her watch were the exceptions. Being a monster specialist, even a pediatrician, meant she was called in to help out with almost every monster case the hospital took. It was annoying: the overtime didn't nearly make up for the long hours.

So she decided to experiment to pass the time. She had heard that monsters were at least partially dependent upon love and companionship, and had found - to her delight - that simply bogging a
few busy families down in paperwork for a few days caused their children’s health to deteriorate quickly. It wasn’t even hard. Monsters had a deep-seated distrust of hospitals in the first place, and visiting people when they were ill was a foreign concept. A few nudges here and absent-minded comments there, and the busiest monsters happily neglected their children.

(Somewhere, distantly, Sans felt his soul burn with fury.)

Actually killing the kids hadn’t been the plan, but she had done her work too well. It was no great loss, really, and enough sympathetic voices sat on the hospital board that she got away without issues. After all, she was working with an entirely foreign species; the occasional accident wasn’t proof of wrongdoing, was it? It was like school all over again, except with a few teachers in on the joke.

They wanted something in return, though. It wasn’t enough to dust a few kids; they wanted someone more. The big fish. The ambassador. Who, conveniently enough, had been admitted with appendicitis just as they were ready to move.

It was supposed to be a simple mix-up. She had to dress as a nurse - her, a fully educated and licensed doctor! A specialist! - which was downright insulting, but the nurse turnover was so high that no one questioned an unfamiliar face. Even if someone had recognized her, the drugs should have been slow-acting enough that no blame could be pinpointed. A manufacturer’s error. But that stupid skeleton had to come in and ruin everything, and she’d been caught in the act. Dressed as a nurse, no less.

Who knew the Queen of Monsters was so vindictive?? Graciela didn’t know what political favors had been traded around, but she had quickly found herself without friends or support and in the custody of monsters. The “interrogation” was a joke; as soon as she was allowed a proper lawyer she was going to bring down the whole monarchy on charges of human rights violations.

But this trial was nothing like what she expected. There was no jury, just a howling mob of reporters and a scrappy little monster who looked more like a movie villain than a judge. Sure, he gave off a terrifying magical aura, but he was hardly a threat. She just had to fool him like she’d fooled everyone else, and she’d be free to bog the whole system down in lawsuits. They would pay.

They would all pay.

Sans pulled back to reality, shifting his weight to keep from stumbling backwards. A brief glance around showed that his examination had only taken a few seconds; Undyne and the security guards hadn’t even reached the edge of the cavern yet.

Tori gave her speech about the charges against Graciela, but he couldn’t have repeated a single word of it if his life depended on it. He simply waited until she finished and turned, deliberately disregarding the agitated woman beside him, to face his king. “Guilty. On all charges.”

The roar of the assembled spectators was deafening, even in the strangely echoed magic that allowed him to hear through the leather mask. The reporters were furiously chattering; most of the monsters were making eager noises of celebration. A few stood silently, like they couldn’t believe their ears.

Asgore appeared taken aback by the commotion, but only for a moment. “SILENCE!”

In response to the king’s roar, the noise slowly trickled into something much quieter.
“The Judge has spoken, and his power to read souls is without question. The Royal Family does not wish to intervene. The punishment will be administered immediately, in accordance with our custom. Guards, escort them to the Judgement Hall to complete the proceedings.”

Sans grinned wildly as the reporters protested this; he needed to give a cookie to Undyne or Papyrus or whoever had come up with this plan. He ignored the part of him that felt physically ill at the thought of what would come next.

*Don’t think like that. Focus. Debate morality later.*

Undyne ushered Graciela and her guards through the doorway first, then followed up the rear with Sans. He appreciated the gesture; exposing his back to a human sounded like a bad idea. Undyne may not be familiar with how the Judge normally operated, but he could feel her protectiveness that came from a wretched life in which she lost everyone she ever cared about—

He turned away, trying not to unleash his power on anyone else. This was one reason why trials were usually conducted in private. He didn’t need to know. He didn’t _want_ to know. He just needed to get through this quickly, and…

…and they were already in the Hall. How was that possible?

Undyne nodded to him the way she’d nodded to her mother that last day of her childhood, hard and hopeful and left, shooing the other guards in front of her.

And he was alone in the Judgement Hall with a human. It was all too familiar.

In a desperate bid to distance himself from his memories, he examined the Hall. It had been under construction the last time he was there, after all; he never had made it back to see what, exactly, had been changed.

What he saw took his breath away.

The stained glass windows hadn’t been restored; they had been replaced. Where once the window frames had held rough shards of colored glass scavenged from across the Underground - half of which had gone mysteriously missing over the years - they now held glass deliberately cut and arranged into actual pictures. Flowers and stars intermingled around symbols of power and justice: scales, crossed swords, a hammer, and a dragon with a head that looked suspiciously familiar.

Tori’s doing, probably. She was one of the few (survivors) who knew about his special weapons, and he was willing to bet gold that Frisk hadn’t randomly decided to decorate this place with something that must have been so terrifying to her.

But he was stalling.

He took a step forward. Graciela - who had also been looking around the hall - jerked back wildly. Her handcuffs had been removed, leaving nothing but pink lines around her wrists where she’d been tugging at them earlier.

She looked up at him with a pout he recognized from her memories and a calculating gleam in her eyes. “Hey, mister; you wouldn’t hurt me, right? I mean, it was a mistake, really.”

*Graciela is trying to be friendly.*

“No, it wasn’t.”
“Wh-what? You don’t really think that, do you? You have no way of knowing what went on in my head-”

*Smells like bullshit.

“Maybe, maybe not, but I wonder what your friends in the hospital would say about that.”

For a moment the mask slipped, revealing the ugliness beneath. “They sold me out?? Those bastards! And after everything I did for them! No wonder they handed me over to you animals! Let me tell you, it was their idea-”

*Graciela is trying to pass the blame.

“Yes, it was. And you agreed to it.”

“Then it’s their fault! They should be here, not me!”

*Graciela feels triumphant!

“You had a choice. You were not coerced, you were not manipulated. You were selected because of your previous actions, and no one asked you to kill children.”

Decisions, decisions. He wanted to make it quick. He wasn’t like Tori when she was angry; he had no stomach for torture. Graciela had to die, but that didn’t mean she had to suffer needlessly.

A blaster would take care of that, but the corpse it would leave behind would be messy and horrifying to the humans. Blue magic was out of the question; it would take too long and would probably cause more questions than he wanted to deal with. He couldn’t use his usual bones - that was part of the contract, changing bullet patterns to disguise his identity - but what, then?

The woman was still whining. “It’s not like I asked for any of this! It isn’t my fault! It isn’t my fault!”

*Graciela feels her sins crawling on her back.

Sans summoned a bone...carefully. A long, thin shard of bone wasn’t easily identifiable without examining it closely, and she wouldn’t get the chance to. She was still wringing her hands, now looking fearful as he stepped closer with the shard in his left hand, but the magic of the encounter limited how far she could move.

A quick movement sent it flying towards her and straight through her heart. The surprised look on her face faded a little as she looked down and saw what had happened, but she was dead before she could register the pain. One point of damage was all he could do when he didn’t want to fight, but he could deal damage several times faster than any monster he’d ever met. Even if Graciela had managed to pull the bone shard out before it nicked her HP down to nothing, the Judge’s power would’ve finished her off. Karmic Retribution was something no one with that Level Of Violence could avoid.

He withdrew and dismissed the bone shard with a single motion, then stopped. Waited. It occurred to him after a moment that he was waiting for a time anomaly, and he walked away disgusted with himself. Even the rush of new LV felt cold and slimy, somehow. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to curl up in a little ball and never move again.

Undyne met him at the door. “Is it done?”
“Yes.”

“Did you leave anything in the waiting room?”

“No.”

“I’ll escort you back to Royal Guard HQ, then home.”

“Okay.”

“Unless you’d rather go somewhere else?”

He breathed deeply. There was somewhere else he would rather go, but that wasn’t an option.

“...No. Home.”


He didn’t remember the walk back through the caves and out to the car, or what the guards did with the body he’d left behind in the Judgement Hall. He didn’t remember the drive down the mountain and through the town below.

But when Undyne dragged him out of the car in front of a familiar house, he remembered that. There were no lights on and the sun had set while they were driving, but he recognized it clearly.

“What-”

“Shut up. You gonna teleport away or come inside?”

He didn’t argue.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter:
YOU WON!
You earned 80 XP and 0 gold.
Your LOVE increased.

Friends, Romans, countrymen, I am sorry for the delay. My computer and I had the following exchange the other day.

Me: It's time to do important things, like uploading the next chapter of this story I post on the internet that is read by some really awesome people!
Computer:
Me: Computer?
Computer:
Me: ...We're gonna disappoint all those awesome people, aren't we.
Computer: Shh, am thinking.

BUT things are better now. I occasionally take breaks from writing and research to work in IT, so computer repair is something I'm familiar with. It's amazing what a few new parts and some optimization will do. It's still a bit uncomfortable, like a new pair of shoes, but I'm breaking it in slowly.
WHICH IS WHY things are late. And I'm sorry. But hopefully things will be more stable now?

Anyways, I wrote this judgement scene using different mechanics from the similar scene in *Respect*. I didn't put in all the actions - I felt it would slow things down too much - but I did add the little flavor text, like I did when Sans fought Papyrus and when Frisk fought Undyne. Hope it flows nicely!

I wonder whose house Sans was just dropped in front of. HMM.
The Trouble With Judgement

Chapter Summary

A certain young woman faces uncomfortable sleeping situations and even more uncomfortable truths.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Frisk’s eyes were glued to the screen. It all made sense now. It all made sense. No wonder she’d been deliberately kept away from the trial.

Her first reaction was rage. Fierce anger burned through her, making her chest feel heavy and her breaths feel hot. It took conscious effort not to release the fire magic her mother had taught her over the years, just for the sake of unleashing something tangible upon the world that echoed what she felt inside.

She felt it. She acknowledged it. Taking a deep breath, she counted - one, two, three - and breathed out. She was calm.

Calm.

She turned the TV off. Undyne would give her a full report later, even if it left out certain important identities, and at that moment she needed to focus.

Sans was the Judge. Incredible as it was, the facts were undeniable. His height, his gait, his twitchy little mannerisms: it all added up. Oh, the disguise was good - what she remembered from her own fights with him gave the impression of a much flesher monster - and the voice was odd, but there was no doubt in her mind.

That was why Sans had been so jittery around her after she’d broken the barrier. That was why he’d avoided her and snapped anytime she got too close. His wariness hadn’t been anger: it had been guilt for letting her go.

(Okay, knowing Sans, it had probably been a bit of both...but Frisk had only seen what she wanted to.)

So. He was the Judge. He was the mysterious monster who had fought her to the death so many times. It was surprising, really, that she hadn’t recognized his magic sooner. Sure, he hadn’t used his signature bone attacks during that fight, but she could feel the differences between different monsters’ magics.

Except...she hadn’t really known how to do that before she broke the barrier, had she? It had been Asgore and Toriel and Undyne who had taught her those things. And hadn’t Undyne said something about a disguise, something that helped protect the Judge’s identity?

Then...maybe it wasn’t so strange that she hadn’t recognized Sans, but he still could have told her, right? Or at least hinted at it? Even if he couldn’t tell civilians, she was still the Ambassador of Monsters and a Princess of-
Wait.

Frisk was a princess. Her parents ruled the monsters.

Her parents knew. Heck, Undyne knew. Papyrus definitely didn’t - she couldn’t see him reacting with anything less than abject horror at the thought of his brother holding down a reputable job - but Undyne was third in command of the kingdom. And Undyne knew that she’d fought the Judge, that she’d hated and feared him in equal measure since the barrier fell.

No wonder everyone had conspired to keep her away from the trial.

Deep breaths.

She was not going to let the anger consume her. She had to keep a calm head and think, not react on impulse.

Fact: Sans was the Royal Judge.

Fact: neither he, nor anyone else who knew, had told her about this.

Fact: she had no idea what his job technically entailed, but it clearly had something to do with fighting. Possibly fighting humans, specifically, if Toriel’s press releases were to be believed. A dangerous occupation for a monster.

Fact: he had killed Frisk repeatedly when she was trying to save monsterkind from their imprisonment under Mount Ebott.

Fact: most of her friends had killed her, too.

Fact: after 57 LOADs, he’d inexplicably stood aside and let her pass.

That last one implied that he had some awareness of the time loops she manipulated. No one but the Judge reacted differently after she LOADed unless she changed her own actions as well, small moments of deja vu aside.

How much did he remember? How much did he think she knew? Was that part of why he hadn’t told her about all this? Did he remember everything and assume that she hated him for it? She had been afraid for so long that the Judge knew something about the SAVEs and LOADs, that he was lurking around every corner waiting to take her out. Knowing that the person she’d feared was Sans...

Frisk stood up abruptly. She was thinking herself into circles. There was no point dwelling on how much she didn’t know. She would be much better off discussing it with Sans whenever he...got off duty. She texted Undyne, asking for an alert when the trial was over. She’d call him or something. They were adults; they could do this. The backs of her knees hit the couch cushions and she collapsed.

She fell asleep between one thought and the next, curled up around a spare pillow.

A small sound woke her up sometime later. It was dark; she was grateful Attie was with Toriel, or she would never have gotten away with taking a nap. On the other hand, Attie was not home, so what…?

She paused in scrambling for her cell phone when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. On the loveseat, sitting very still, was a figure in dark clothing. She didn’t need to let her eyes
adjust to know who it was.

“Sans?”

He didn’t move. He was sitting with elbows on his knees, holding something shiny - his helmet? - in his hands. His skull seemed to glow a little in the light of the crescent moon peeking out from behind the clouds.

Frisk approached him slowly. She didn’t want to startle him (for his peace of mind and her own physical safety), but he seemed...lost, in a way she hadn’t seen since she pulled him out of his basement clinging to a single last point of health. He didn’t react when she crouched in front of him, easing the helmet from his grip and setting it on the coffee table behind her. It was a strange setup, a metal shell with a formed leather mask underneath. That was clever, she thought. The leather probably protected his face, and it gave the impression of a nose and ears where he had none.

Devoid of anything to hold, his gloved hands curled into fists, which she teased open with her own fingers. The phalanges were stiff and tense but eventually allowed the intrusion.

“Sans? Are you with me?”

Frisk hadn’t really noticed in the dark, but his eye sockets were completely blank. Could he see like that? Was he even conscious? She wasn’t sure how to tell without his input. There wasn’t exactly anyone else she could go to for information on magical skeletons (or, at least, no one who she trusted enough to share this particular secret with).

She rubbed the backs of his hands with her thumbs, trying to bring her almost-friend back to reality. It was strange, feeling the bones of his hands so padded. Maybe that was the problem. After a few attempts at getting a reaction and failing, she carefully began teasing one of the gloves off.

To her surprise, it took a bit of effort. The reason why became clear as soon as she had the glove halfway off: he’d wrapped his hands in strips of cloth to fill out the gloves. The wrapping patterns weren’t even, but seemed to roughly follow the bulges and indents she saw on her own hands. He used bandages to mimic musculature. Clever. She unwrapped his hand completely, then did the same to the other.

His fingers twitched, then stilled in hers.

Was that a...good sign?

He wasn’t protesting, right? Okay, so removing his gloves wasn’t particularly intimate, but the connotation of removing clothing was there, and it was still a good step farther than she really felt comfortable with. The last thing she wanted to do was violate his privacy, especially when he seemed so fragile.

And yet...he had come to her. He hadn’t told her anything, but either he had assumed someone else had or he had enough faith in her deductive skills that he trusted her to put the pieces together.

He trusted her. The realization made her heart skip a beat.

There was a lot of symbolism in his uniform; maybe it weighed as heavily on him as it did on her. Surely, it wouldn’t be weird or awkward to help him out of it, right? It didn't look comfortable to be sitting around in. He had to be wearing something under his armor (there was no way the bulges she saw over his arms were actual muscle, after all) so it wasn’t like she was stripping him down, right??
Cautiously, hoping that she wasn’t betraying his trust, Frisk lowered her hands towards his feet. The boots were old and a little stiff, which made sense if he hadn’t worn them in years, but there were signs he’d started taking care of them again. The leather smelled of olive oil and something tangy she couldn’t place. Some kind of homemade leather conditioner, perhaps. She-

-jumped a little when something landed on her shoulder, only to realize that it was one of Sans’s hands. His eye sockets were still dark when she looked up, but…

When he didn’t move after a long moment, she returned to pulling off his boot. It came off fairly easily once she had the laces untied and loosened; the real challenge was not laughing once she had it off.

Because Sans…was wearing pink, fluffy socks.

The absurdity of it in the middle of such a tense moment was too much. Oh, the practical side of her understood, it really did. His boney feet were definitely not made for boots like that. She’d never seen him without socks, ever, so it made sense that he would use familiar methods to hold his work boots on. And the…the socks were clearly, clearly doing their job-

Nope, no use. She was shaking. Noise was one thing, but with his hand on her shoulder like it was he could clearly feel her c-cracking up…!

“you okay?”

His voice was so quiet that she almost missed it. And the tone…well, it stopped her laughter very quickly.

“I should be asking you that.” Her statement was punctuated by the dull thump of the second boot hitting the floor. “Are you okay?”

It seemed to be taking Sans a moment to process, so Frisk worked on his socks in the meantime. He had four more layers underneath the pink fuzzy socks before she got down to a thin pair of black ones with red stitching around the cuff. She left that pair on; it looked like something he would wear under his sneakers. Also, they were a little smelly and she didn’t want to touch them unless she had to.

Granted, she would have manhandled a hundred smelly socks to take that look off her friend’s face. What was wrong? He’d just killed someone; he wasn’t the one who-

Actually, no, that made sense. Killing always took a toll. Sans was, at times, a con-man, an information broker, a prankster and a pain in the ass, but he was one of the few monsters who hadn’t openly tried to murder her. Until she was staring at him across the Judgement Hall, he hadn’t made a single move to fight her. Why? And what kind of monster did that make him?

“no,” he finally whispered.

Frisk took a moment to recall that she’d asked him a question; she hadn’t expected him to actually answer, and certainly not so truthfully. Carefully, she put a hand on the back of one of his. “Want to get out of that outfit?”

He made the slightest of nods.

“Want help?”
He hesitated, but his cheeks started turning a little pink after a moment. “uh, yeah.”

The overcoat came off first. It was long - his boney butt was pinning it under him - so she merely threaded his arms though and pushed it off his shoulders to lump behind him on the loveseat. He helped half-heartedly, then went limp when it became obvious that they were pulling against each other.

Next was the armored shirt with its plates. They were scales, she realized after she scraped her finger against one. They were also big, at least compared to fish scales; what kind of creature dropped scales so large and so hard that Sans could wear them as armor? Did he even know, or had the outfit simply been provided for him?

The shirt came off over his skull with a little difficulty, partly because she’d accidentally grabbed the padded undershirt as well and partly because she was paranoid about poking him in the eye sockets. She was pretty sure she managed. The skeleton before her wasn’t complaining, at least.

“Sans, your pants…”

“oh. uh, help me up…”?

Frisk supported him as he stood, shaky and wavering, and very determinedly looked at the far wall while he wriggled himself out of his pants. When he was done, she lowered him onto the larger couch and collected the pieces of his uniform.

The Delta Rune glared accusingly at her from the back of the overcoat. You did this, it seemed to whisper. You are part of the Kingdom of Monsters. You made him what he is. You are complicit in his pain.

She set it aside with the rest of his armor.

Sans looked a lot smaller, hunched over on her couch. The black t-shirt and gym pants he’d worn under his uniform looked startlingly baggy on him, especially when contrasted with the padded armor he’d been wearing. Both his arms were clenched around his middle, and the posture emphasized the lack of flesh. He looked so strange without a sweatshirt or jacket or something to hide in.

Unsure how to ask him what was wrong, she sat beside him and pulled her feet up onto the couch.

It took a while - maybe fifteen minutes, maybe half an hour - but eventually she felt something hard and smooth and a little warm hit her shoulder. Her first thought was that Sans had fallen asleep, but when she looked over his eye sockets were open. He was still staring off into the darkness of her living room with that same blank expression.

“Better?” she asked.

He nodded against her arm, then shifted so he was turned a little more towards her. “S-sorry.”

He sounded more like himself, at least. “For what?”

“Didn’t, uh, t-tell...you…” He trailed off, his mouth working like he was trying to find the words. Somewhere between sentences he’d started shaking.

“Shh. It’s alright. You can explain later. Right now, I need to make sure that you’re okay. Are you okay now?”
“Y...no? Not sure. Everything’s hazy.”

“Okay. Just tell me what you need.”

It was too much to expect that he would actually do that, of course. For all that he’d done, all he’d suffered, Sans had the same pride every monster had: the pride of someone who’d survived a hell on Earth and knew the worth and the weight of his own mortality. To ask for something he couldn’t convince himself he needed - something he might not even think he deserved - would be an admission of weakness...and guilt.

So when he leaned into her silently instead of responding, she merely put her arm around him and shifted to accommodate his pointy bones.

He had a lot to explain, but for the moment his trust was all she needed.

And maybe a little more wiggle room; her leg was falling asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter:
UndyneBESTIE!!!! 6:42 PM
You're welcome!!

This chapter was one of my favorites to write. I know several people were looking forward to this, and are probably disappointed that it wasn't more...explosive. But Sans needs a bit of comfort right now, and Frisk is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. For now, at least.

Thanks so much for stopping by, everyone! Please close the door gently on your way out; don't want to wake up the sleeping beans...
In Which Masks Crumble

Chapter Summary

...But the foundations for something better are built in their place.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans woke to sunlight trying to force its way into his eye sockets and the smell of something warm and floral tickling his nasal ridge. It was the most relaxed he’d been in...ever, maybe. That thought was startling enough to make him question his surroundings, and he opened his eye sockets.

He was sitting on the couch in Frisk’s house. Sitting, not laying. It wasn’t terribly comfortable; his spine was twisted and bent in odd ways that sent a dull ache radiating through his back and neck. By contrast, whatever soft thing was under his head was pleasantly soft...

Oh. That was Frisk. He’d fallen asleep leaning against her shoulder.

Huh.

He panicked for a brief moment before remembering why he was there. That’s right; Undyne - bless her fishy little soul - had brought him to Frisk’s instead of back to his new apartment after the trial. He’d thought he was more stable at the time, better able to cope with the aftermath of what he’d done. It wasn’t the first time he’d killed someone, after all. But...it had been a long time, and everything was so different that it was hard to get into the mindset he used when he needed to do something truly awful. Something about the Judge-magic helped him focus when he was on the job, but even then he’d been fighting memories. That just made everything so much harder.

A soft knock at the door made Frisk shift a little, and he realized that one of her arms had found its way around his ribcage. That was...Definitely a thing. He wasn’t sure how he hadn’t noticed that before, but apparently he was still out of it. The touch felt oppressive and itchy now that he was more awake.

He carefully grabbed the arm and started extracting himself, but he wasn’t quite gentle enough.

“Wha…? Sans?”

“Someone’s at the door. I’ll get it. Go back to sleep.”

“Nnnnkay.”

Something furry brushed carelessly against his leg, making him jump. Oh; TOSS must’ve been curled up against Frisk’s other side, enjoying the body heat. Sans scratched him behind the ears, running a gentle hand down the soft fur, as the cat jumped back up onto the couch.

Once Sans had successfully separated himself from Frisk, he took a good look at her. She was sitting up still, one leg tucked under the other and listing dangerously to one side above an oblivious TOSS now that the skeleton she’d been using to balance herself had rudely escaped from her clingy human hands. She wasn’t going to win any beauty awards - mouth open a little to let a thin line of drool drip out, hair hanging down in tangles over her face and shoulders, and the
makeup she hadn’t bothered to remove the day before smudged around her eyes - but he was surprised to find that it didn’t matter. She looked perfectly lovely to him.

The knock sounded again, a bit louder, and he hurried off to answer the door. He barely remembered to pull his sweatshirt and sneakers out of his inventory and slip them on before he was faced with a blast of frosty air.

“Hell-oh, Tori. Hey.” He craned his sore neck up to meet her eyes. “You, uh, need Frisk? She’s sleepin’ still.”

The surprise and skepticism evident in the quirk of Tori’s eyebrow spoke volumes.

He stepped out and closed the door, just in case things got...explosive. Or Frisk woke up and heard how terribly he was embarrassing himself. “Uh, it’s not what it looks like-”

“And what, pray tell, does it look like? Besides you spending the night with my daughter? I was unaware that you had grown so close, or that you would be up for such...activities...after the events of yesterday.”

“Wh...I...we didn’t…”

His attempt to melt into a small puddle of bones and embarrassment was interrupted by a loud, barking laugh. “The look on your face is delightful, Sans, but I am aware of the after-effects of the...particular magic associated with your station. You left with Undyne, did you not? Why did she bring you here?”

“I dunno. Not that I’m complainin’, but...I thought she was gonna bring me home.”

“Hmm. She has been meddling again, then. I will have to speak with that girl.”

Sans didn’t think it would do one iota of good, but silently wished Tori luck anyways.

“At any rate, I would like to-”

“MR. SANS!” Attie came running from the direction of Tori’s car. “YOU’RE HERE!!”

“Hey, kid.” He patted her on the head. Her little brown pigtails were crooked, and his fingers itched to straighten them, but he could wait until Tori was gone.

“I didn’t know you’d be here! Granny Ree didn’t say you’d be here!”

“Granny Ree didn’t know I’d be here.”

Tori quirked an eyebrow. “‘Granny Ree’ needs to return home and get ready for a brunch with several very important people. Sans, can you...?”

“I’ve got the kid.”


They both said their goodbyes to Tori, then stood on the front step for a moment looking at each other. Attie was wearing her puffy coat and sneakers, hand-knitted hat and mittens. On her back was the same bright pink backpack she’d brought with her to the hospital when Frisk was sick.

Sans really didn’t want to wake Frisk up. He remembered a little of what he’d said (and, stars, done) the night before, and he wanted to settle himself before facing that particular reality.
A brilliant idea popped into his head. “Hey, kid, yer mom’s still sleeping; wanna go to the park?”

She grinned widely. “I think that would be a lot of fun! Can we swing on the swings and jump into snow piles?”

“Sure, ‘s long as there’s snow piles big enough.” It must’ve snowed sometime during the night; the snow cover was distinctly thicker than he remembered.

“YAY!”

“Shhh!”

“Oh, right. Can I leave my backpack inside, though?”

“Well...okay.” He opened the door slowly, half-expecting Frisk to be standing behind it.

She wasn’t. She was still on her couch and still asleep, but she’d shifted sideways until she was curled up with her head on the arm of the couch. TOSS was curled up in a very similar position across her butt. At least it looked more comfortable than the way she’d been sitting, even with the cat.

He owed her an explanation. Officially he was supposed to execute anyone who found out about his job, but he was keenly aware that killing Frisk would be...less effective than one might assume. Besides, Tori hadn’t freaked out and tried to dust him for being a threat to her daughter, so he was probably in the clear.

That did, however, mean that there would be talking involved. Talking. As much as he didn’t enjoy fighting and killing people, he was good at it. He was not good at talking without putting his foot in his mouth. Actually, putting his foot into his mouth would probably be a benefit; then no one would be able to hear the stupid drivel that came out of it.

He told himself that his bones were rattling from the wintry air instead of anxiety. He almost believed it, too.

Attie attached herself to his hand like a limpet as soon as they were out the front door. Getting through the barrier was easy with her, and they found themselves tracing the familiar path to the nearby park.

“So...how’ve you been?”

“Really good! Granny Ree doesn’t let me go to the park very much or read stories, but she’s nice and fuzzy and lets me cuddle with her sometimes. And she bakes really good pies, but she doesn’t let me help.”

“Aww, no need t’pout, kid. Maybe if we get back in time, we can help yer mom make breakfast.”

“Can we make oatmeal?”

“Do you have oatmeal?”

She shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Then maybe.”

“Does that mean yes?”
“It means if you have oatmeal, we’ll make oatmeal.”

“Oh.”

They walked on for a bit, Attie skipping ahead a little and humming while Sans tried not to panic over the little patches of ice that she kept barely missing. Frisk’s wards were good, but he was pretty sure that just protected against other people attacking her, not falling off icy sidewalks.

“Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you fix my pigtails? They feel funny.”

“Uh, sure. You wanna do that now or when we get to the park?”

“Now, please.”

Since she said please, Sans stopped and fixed the pigtails. It was easier to just take them out and re-do them, even if he didn’t have anything better than his own claws to comb her hair with.

“Better?”

“Yeah.”

She took his hand and they continued on to the park.

No one else was there. It was a Sunday morning; a lot of humans were probably at church, and the rest weren’t crazy enough to come out in the bitterly cold weather. Why was he out there, again?

...Oh, right. He’d suggested it.

“Mr. Sans! Come help me build a snowman!”

“You sure you don’t wanna build a snowlady?”

“No! A snowman!”

And so they built a snowman. Sans genuinely wasn’t sure what the difference was, but after spending the better part of an hour packing snow together he didn’t really care. Attie found some sticks and pebbles for the eyes, nose, mouth, and arms, but he drew the line at putting her scarf on it.

“It doesn’t need a scarf.”

“But it would look pretty!”

“Looks prettier on you. ‘Sides, won’t cha get cold?”

“Won’t the snowman get cold?”

“Yeah, that’s the point. You don’t want ‘im to melt, do ya?”

“No!”

“Then keep your scarf on.”
“Okaaaaay.”

He pushed Attie on the swings next, finding out - to his utter horror - that when she asked to swing and jump into snow piles she had intended those to be one single activity. The snow on the playground wasn’t that deep around the swings, and he remembered Frisk’s warning about using blue magic on her daughter. Thankfully, they were both okay.

“I’m sorry for landing on you, Mr. Sans,” she said, patting his skull with her mittens. “I was trying to jump in the snow. I didn’t think you’d try to catch me.”

“Snow’s not that deep, kid. Let’s make a bigger pile before you try that again, ’kay?”

“Okay!!”

Sans was already sore from the snowman - he’d gotten out of shape awfully fast, just his luck - but between the two of them they managed to get enough of a landing pad together that he was confident Attie wouldn’t break anything when she jumped.

Around the fifth or sixth time she got on the swing for him to push her, a familiar ringtone went off.

“Uh, hang on.” He answered the phone. “Y’ello?”


Shit. “Uh…”

He’d been running away, he realized. He hadn’t wanted to face Frisk, hadn’t wanted to see the look on her face when she saw him in the light of day, so he took her kid to the park. That nonsense about ‘settling himself’ was just an excuse. Shit, she was gonna be pissed.

“That’s not reassuring.”

“We’ll, uh, be back soon?”

“Wha-”

He ended the call and stuck it back in his inventory.

“We, uh, need to go, kid.”

“But I don’t wanna go!”

“Yeah, but yer mom’s up.”

“Then she can come play with us too!”

“I think she’s too hungry.”

“Then she can eat breakfast and then come play with us!”

“Nope. We’ve gotta head home.”

“But Mr. Sans…”

“Don’t gotta butt, kid. C’mon.”
She whined and dragged her feet a while longer, but eventually slouched back towards home with him.

Frisk was looking more worried than angry when they stepped into the house. “Sans, you left your-oh, Attie!”

“G’morning, Mommy!”

“Take your shoes off at the door, sweetie; they’re all snowy.”

Both Sans and Attie did as she asked.

“I didn’t realize you were home, Attie. Did Granny Ree drop you off?”

“Yep. I did leave my backpack right there so you would see it. And then - oh, hi TOSS! - and then Mr. Sans took me to the park because you were sleeping and we didn’t want to wake you up.”

“I see. Well, that was very nice of Mr. Sans. What do we say?”

“Thank you, Mr. Sans!”

“Now go wash your hands. I’m making pancakes.”

“Can I help?”

“Wash first, then help.”

She bounced off to do as she was asked.

Frisk looked Sans over with an expression he struggled to read. “Welcome back.”

He nodded.

“Feeling better now?”

“Uh. Yeah. Thanks for...uh…”

“No problem. I really wasn’t expecting...everything, really, but your reaction in particular. Does that happen every time?”

“More ‘r less. It’s a weird kind of magic; not really sure how it works, but it really takes it out’ve-” Abruptly, he realized that she wasn’t asking about generalities. “Your case was...different.”

Frisk glanced down the hallway quickly. Attie was humming to herself, apparently more interested in playing with water than actually washing her hands. “Just tell me one thing.”

“Sure. Anything.”

“Why did you do it? Why did you confront me in the Judgement Hall?” Her voice was a whisper, barely audible.

“I had to. It’s...crap.” He realized he was shaking, and he clenched his hands. Hopefully Frisk couldn’t see. “So the way the Judge works is that the king - or queen, I guess - can refer a case to me. To the Judge. I have this...ability to read magic pretty well, and to read body language almost as well, and whatever magic comes with being the Judge enhances both. I can see whether a person is innocent or guilty. I can see a lot about them: details about their past, how they feel about
what they've done. If they're guilty...well.”

“What was I guilty of?”

He winced at her tone. She sounded like a broken child, not the angry, vengeful woman he’d been preparing himself for. It went straight past his defenses and into the squishy part of his soul. “You were a human in the Underground. You’ve seen the laws. Officially, that was illegal. You had to die. Didn’t need much more’n that.”

The look on her face shifted to something almost afraid, and he realized abruptly that he’d messed up. He’d just admitted that she was guilty, that he’d killed her, but in the most recent time loop...they hadn’t fought. He had stood aside and let her pass.

He had basically admitted to knowing about the time anomalies, and he didn’t know how to react.

Unfortunately, Attie twirled back into the room just then, singing some song about hills. Frisk backed off, expression still wary, and he knew the conversation wasn’t over.

Sans couldn’t eat breakfast. He’d been fine earlier, playing with Attie, but his nervousness made him nauseous. It was frustrating. He’d been getting better with the whole eating thing, but staring down at the pancake on his plate he just...couldn’t bring himself to put anything into his mouth.

Frisk had poured him a glass of some kind of juice, so he drank that instead.

“Attie, do you want to go watch TV?”

The little girl hummed thoughtfully. “I’d rather listen to the secret you were telling Mr. Sans about.”

“...Why do you think I was telling Mr. Sans a secret?”

“Because you were standing really close and whispering.”

“I see. Sorry, that’s an adults-only secret.”

She pouted. “Am I an adult, yet, Mommy?”

“Not quite.”

“Oh.” She turned to Sans. “Can I listen to your secret, Mr. Sans?”

He pretended to consider it for a moment. “It’s an adults-only secret. Are you an adult?”

“...No.”

“Then let yer mom ‘n I talk and we’ll figure out how to turn it into an adults-and-Attie secret. ‘Kay?”

“Okay!”

Frisk watched her daughter skip over to the living room and plop down on the couch. His uniform had been moved somewhere else, thankfully. “Come with me; we can talk in my office.”

The TV was showing some kind of bright, flat fantasy world when he walked by, accompanied by overly cheerful music. It didn’t look a whole lot like anime, but maybe it was something similar?
“Here.” Frisk’s office looked a little strange to him without the nest of pillows and blankets he’d slept on while waiting for his hearing. The curtains had been opened and the morning sun highlighted the bookshelves that lined the walls, giving the room the feel of a secret library.

Sans sat in the chair that was pushed at him, resisting the urge to pull his legs up and curl into a ball. He could do this. He was going to face Frisk. For once in his life, he wasn’t going to run away.

“So we were talking about the role of the Judge,” she said. “You said that I was guilty, that I ‘had to die.’ Why let me go, then?”

The suspicion in her eyes betrayed exactly what she was doing: she was giving him an out. He could take it, pretend he hadn’t implied that he remembered exactly what had happened. And Frisk would probably let him do it, too. That expression...that was not the expression of someone who wanted to talk about time-space shenanigans.

But he wasn’t going to run away.

“Because I’d already killed you over and over and it didn’t really do much. I didn’t think letting you go once would hurt.”

Her eyes went wide. “You...you do remember, then.”

“Yeah, kiddo. Frisk. I remember.”

“I thought...”

Whatever she thought, it seemed to be taking her a lot of effort to find the right words for. That was alright; he didn’t mind waiting.

The air was cool and dry and still smelled faintly of pancakes and syrup. Outside, a few birds who were crazy enough to brave the last remnants winter were singing to each other. Probably complaining about the weather.

The sounds of the city were almost unnoticeable, aside from the occasional woosh of a car in the distance. The chaos of the highway was too far away to be audible. Even the noises from the show Attie was watching were low and distant.

“I thought I was the only one who remembered,” Frisk whispered into that quiet, eyes bright with tears. “I thought...even Attie...I can’t tell if that’s because she doesn’t understand what’s going on or if she genuinely doesn’t remember. I just...”

“H-hey, are you...?”

“I’m not crying,” she sobbed.

He panicked, but only for a moment. Her office at the embassy had tissues on the desk, and a quick glance showed that her home office had some too. “Here. ‘Tsokay.”

“Not crying,” she insisted petulantly, even as she took the tissue and dried her eyes. “Sorry; I just...I didn’t know anyone remembered what happened.”

“Yeah. Well...”

“How? Why? Do you know? Do-”
“Hang on, hang on. I think...it’s a long story, but I, uh, have a few theories. I helped out with some experiments as a kid. Some guy was interested in time magic. I figure that’s probably where I got this...weirdness, I guess.”

“What kind of-”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Alright?”

“It’s...in the past. It’s not important.” And no one else remembered the guy anyways, so it made sense that whatever Frisk’s magic did to the timeline worked on a similar premise. At least, that was the best explanation he could come up with.

“Okay. Okay. Then...you knew, the whole time. That I was SAVEing and LOADing, I mean.”

He tilted his head to the side, trying to make sense of her words. “Oh, is that what you call the time anomalies? Sounds weird when you say it like that. Like files on a computer or a game or somethin’.”

“Yeah, sure. I guess I don’t think about the terminology much anymore.”

“...Huh. Okay.”

“You knew, though.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I knew.”

“Then why...o-oh. Oh stars.”

“What?”

The look on her face was one of pure horror and guilt. “You remember. I’m so sorry, I didn’t...I was trying to help...”

“Hey, Frisk, what’s goin’ on?”

She visibly steeled herself. “When you were...when Papyrus...when we were looking for you, back in January, I LOADed a few times when trying to find you. I thought you were dead. Sans, I’m so sorry; I would’ve never done that if I’d known...”

Well, that explained why his sense of time had been shot to hell. And the...circumstances hadn’t helped, either. Had he died? He’d probably never know. Did it matter? Not in the long run. “You were...tryin’ to help. Don’t worry about it. You had no idea I would remember that.”

She sniffled a little, drying her nose, but nodded.

Shit, he needed a distraction. He had a good idea what she’d wanted to ask about before she got sidetracked on guilt, and tucked his hands into the sleeves of his sweater to hide the shaking.

“Look, I just...I didn’t care back then, in the Underground. ‘Bout much’ve anything. There was Tori, sure, and keepin’ Boss happy, but other’n that? I was just a waste’v EXP. Best I could do was keep Boss all in shape, with food ‘n clothes ‘n shit. Couldn’t even watch his back properly. Dusted a few folks for ol’ King Stabbybuns, but that’s all I was good for.” Especially once a certain weed had started mucking around with time and he lost all sense of days and hours.

“Then...you didn’t know what would happen if Asgore got the seventh soul.”
He laughed, but it hurt somewhere deep inside. “I didn’t think you’d survive long enough to meet ‘im. Bunch’ve monsters all power-hungry ‘n stubborn between you and New Home? Nah. I thought you’d be toast long before you got to Hotland.

“And what if you had? Well, all’ve us were freaks. We were! All ready t’go to war with the humans. And for what? They would’ve killed us all. ‘N call me crazy, but dyin’ up on the surface didn’t seem a whole hell of a lot better than dyin’ down in the Underground.”

She looked at him with the strangest mixture of pity and frustration. “Sans...when was the last time you believed in something?”

The question caught off-guard. Of course it did; how did a guy prepare for something like that?? “Uh...what?”

“Never mind; silly question. I guess it just...hit me. You really just go with the flow, don’t you?”

“Well. I did. This whole thing - the life-without-Boss-thing - ‘s all...new. Really new.”

“Hmm. True. Still...” she steeled herself, her eyes flashing with determination. “Who was it who gave the order? To...meet me in the Hall. You said it was the king or queen who gave you your cases. So...who was it?”

“No, you really wanna know? ‘Ts not like you can’t guess.” Tori had been in the Ruins for a hundred years, after all.

“Tell me.”

He took a deep breath. “It was Asgore. He heard a human was goin’ through the Underground makin’ friends. Think that scared ‘im more than if you’d been a murdery little shit like the rest’ve us; at least then he would’ve known how t’deal with ya. So he told me to stop you, any way I could. Reminded me of the laws’n stuff.”

“Well. At least you’re good at your job.”

He flinched like she’d stabbed him.

“No, you know how many times you killed me, Sans?”

“I...no. I never counted. Lots?”

“Fifty-seven.”

“Shit.”

“And then you just...let me go. Why?”

“I...you...” He stopped, gathered himself, and sat up a little straighter. “You...didn’t kill Boss. Papyrus. Even after he...well, I guess from the time anomalies - the saves or whatever - he probably killed you a few times. Still, you didn’t kill him. Ever. Not even once. ‘N I was tired. You weren’t a threat, not really. Even if you had killed Asgore, hell, it probably would’ve improved things for us. We would’ve stuck Undyne on the throne - or Tori if we could’ve found her - and things would’ve settled down a bit. There was...really no reason to keep fighting.”

“Hmm. Is that why I didn’t see you for three days after? You were hiding from Dad - from King Asgore - because you failed to do your job?”
He laughed. “Nah. I met up with ‘im after the barrier broke, ripped off my badge and threw it in his face. Told ‘im I was done with all this crap. Wasn’t a cure, didn’t help me any, but-”

“Help you any? Sans, were you hurt? Did you react like you did last night?”

“...Don’t worry about it.”

“Sans...”

“I killed you 57 times, Frisk; why the hell do you care?”

“Because you’re my friend.” The statement sounded almost like a question, like she wasn’t sure if friendship was even an option.

He laughed again, and it felt like it was burning the inside of his ribs. “You’re my friend. After all that, you think we can be friends.”

“I would very much like to be.”

“Kiddo, Frisk...look. Let me level with ya. I’m a piece of shit. Boss knows it, Undyne knows it, Grillby knows it. The dogs know it. Everyone I’ve ever met knows it. I’m worthless, okay? And you...you’re not. So you just go on with your happy life, raise your daughter to be some ferocious warrior or a movie star or somethin’, and leave me alone.”

He gathered his magic, preparing to teleport away, but he never made it. It wasn’t that he changed his mind or couldn’t summon the magic; no, he couldn’t escape because Frisk - the Frisk he’d killed 57 times - grabbed him around the shoulders and pulled him into a very firm hug, faster than he could dodge in his drained and unfocused state.

Some long-forgotten fight-or-flight response made him freeze when she grabbed him. The first thought that ran through his skull was that she was going to crush him, and a few months back he would’ve just let her, especially if he knew Boss wouldn’t care. But...like he’d told Frisk, this was all new - all different - and he didn’t want to die anymore.

She didn’t crush him, despite his fears. She just held him firmly to her chest, her arms wrapped around his ribcage. It...didn’t feel too bad, actually. Usually his aversion to touch kicked in and he started feeling itchy, but for whatever reason he didn’t have as much of a reaction. She was probably hoping that he’d hug her back or something, but he couldn’t bring himself to move.

He just stood there in her arms, quietly, wondering what was going to happen to him now that she knew the kind of monster he really was.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: forgiveness hard to give, and often even harder to accept, but it has many mental and physical health benefits. Holding grudges is bad for you, apparently.

(Bummer.)

I promise that this exchange was Toriel was written long before I received this glorious big of fanart from last chapter from the generous and ever-talented venelona. Great
minds think alike, haha! (Venelona, your scene was funnier. I tip my proverbial hat to you. Thanks for all the fanart!!!)

Thanks so much for reading, and for leaving kudos and comments! I really can't adequately express how much each and every one of you mean to me. Even the people who lurk and don't interact; I see the hit count. It's because of all of you that I'm motivated to keep posting this story. I hope you all have a fantastic week!
In Which Time is Precious

Chapter Summary

...But all too susceptible to manipulation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A light tap at the door ended their moment. Sans found himself blushing a little as he disentangled himself. Why, he wasn’t sure. It just felt…

Well. He wasn’t sure how he felt.

“Mommy?”

“Yeah, baby boo?” Frisk blew her nose and dried her eyes, composing herself.

“Are you crying? It sounds like you’re all stuffy.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Oh. Is Mr. Sans crying?”

“...Are you done watching TV?”

“TV is boring.”

She groaned a little and stepped around Sans to open the door. Attie stood there in her pink skirt and white shirt, rocking back and forth on her heels. It took him a moment to realize what was strange about that picture: she wasn’t wearing stripes. It didn’t matter as much, she was human, but it still startled him.

“What do you want to do, then?”

A book was produced from somewhere behind her back. “I would like Mr. Sans to read me a story. Please.”

It wasn’t Where the Wild Things Are or The Very Hungry Caterpillar, but a small chapter book with a picture of some human kids on the front.

He’d been wrong, he realized, when he said that everyone knew he was a piece of shit. There was exactly one person in the world who looked up at him like he’d hung the moon and stars. He didn’t deserve it, not in the least, but it was gratifying.

But Frisk would never let him spend time with her daughter. Not now that she knew what he was.

“...Mr. Sans?”

A hand on his shoulder made him jump, and it retreated quickly. “Sans?” Frisk asked. “Can you please read to Attie in the living room for a moment? I need to look for something in here.”
He nodded, not trusting his words, and let Attie lead him back out to the living room. It didn’t seem possible that she’d just forgiven him; life didn’t work like that.

They got through all but the last chapter of the book before Frisk reappeared, a tan folder in her hands and a satisfied smile on her face. She listened quietly while he stuttered through the last few pages, then held it out to him. “I knew I had this here and not at the embassy,” she said, more to herself than anyone else.

He took the folder hesitantly, unsure whether it was intended to help or harm him. Or what Frisk’s definition of either of those things were. Attie peeked over his arm as he opened it.

It was…paperwork, complete with pictures of a familiar fire elemental. Pele. The hard copy of the report Undyne had filed was right there on top. She hadn’t attached his name to it, as he’d requested - officially she found out about Pele from an “anonymous source” with none of the usual snarky comments - but otherwise it appeared accurate. The information he and Grillby had gathered about the Sparks and the girl’s parents was all there.

There was also something interesting he hadn’t known. Pele had a sister, Fuku, who was possibly still alive. She’d been in school in Hotland when the barrier broke, then…well, neither Pele nor Grillby claimed to know where she was.

Regardless, Pele had been officially placed in Grillby’s care. He was going to get regular visits from someone at the ambassador’s office for a while to make sure everything was in order - Sans couldn’t imagine that going over well - but ol’ Grillbz was officially a guardian.

Nothing in the folder mentioned skeletons.

“This is all great, but…”

“Oh, stop.” Frisk was curled up on the loveseat, watching him through narrowed eyes over a cup of something that smelled like tea. “Grillby didn’t outright say who rescued Pele from whomever had her, but he said you knew something about it. Do you?”

“Mmmaybe?”

She tilted her head to the side, as if amused by his struggle between the instinct to lie through his teeth and the desire to impress her.

Attie, on the other hand, was staring at him with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. “You rescued someone, Mr. Sans?”

“Uh…”

“And you rescued TOSS for me. And you saved Mommy. Right, Mommy?”

Frisk’s grin grew. “That’s right, Attie.”

“Wow,” the kid whispered, as if she couldn’t believe her own ears. “You’re a hero, Mr. Sans! I’ve never met a real hero before!”

Sans couldn’t help but laugh. *He* was a hero?? He’d just stopped being an asshole long enough to do something useful. There was a hero in the room, but it sure as hell wasn’t him. “Lemme tell you somethin’, kid. See that lady sitting over there?”

“Yeees?”
“Way back before you were born, she took a trip to that big mountain outside town. She didn’t know it at the time, but there were a whole bunch of monsters under there.”

“You mean in the Underground?”

“That’s the place. Problem was, none of us could leave. Every single monster in the whole world was under Mt. Ebbo, and we were all stuck there.

“Now this lady saw that, and she didn’t like it. She thought it would be better if we could leave, if we could live up here on the surface instead of under a big ol’ mountain. So she made friends with a bunch of people—”

“Were they nice?”

“Huh?”

“The people, were they nice?”

“Pfft. Nope, we were mean as hell, but she was nice to us. Even when we said we wanted to kill her and steal her soul, she made friends with us anyways.”

Attie gasped, both arms wrapped around herself to cover her chest.

“And y’know what? She did. She broke the barrier that was keepin’ us all down there, and helped us move to the surface. Then she scared the human government into letting us stay. Then she set up this whole system where people could help out anyone who needed food or clothes or...or help finding a job or a place to live or anything like that.

“So...if you’re lookin’ for a hero, kid, you’ve been livin’ with one the whole time.”

The awestruck stare had been turned on Frisk, who looked like she was on the edge of tears again. Oops.

“Mommy, you’re really a hero? You saved all the monsters in the whole world?”

Frisk took a quick sip of tea, her face growing distinctly pink. “Well. Not all of them. I mean...I helped, but...”

“That’s amazing!”

“It wasn’t really—”

“Mr. Sans only saved three people, but you saved bunches and bunches! Like more than a thousand!”

“Almost ten thousand,” Sans interjected. “And I only saved two people; TOSS is a cat.”

“Wow,” Attie whispered, any moral difference between people and animals going straight over her head.

Frisk coughed. “So you admit that you saved Pele, then?”

Shit. “Uh. Yeah.”

“I thought so. I’ve been worried about her. Actually, that’s why I was looking for you back in January; Grillby wouldn’t tell me much, but said you knew more.”
“Oh.” He remembered that she and Undyne had been bugging Boss about him before their big rescue, but he’d never thought to wonder why. “I. Uh. It’s a weird story. Uh…”

Attie sighed loudly and rolled her eyes. “Is it another secret?”

“Not really? I mean, kinda, but most of it’s just a little gross.”

“Eeeew! You should tell Undie then. She likes gross stuff, but Mommy doesn’t.”

Frisk laughed. “Yeah, Sans, tell Undyne.”

“I did.”

“You told Undie and not Mommy?”

“You told Undyne and not me?”

He barely resisted smirking at the two of them, wearing their identical expressions of outrage. Both of them were blatantly bluffing. He shrugged. “Thought you two didn’t like gross stuff?”

“I don’t!” Attie said, an expression of alarm on her little face. Like she’d just realized what she’d been saying.

Sans patted her between her pigtails. “That’s alright. I’ll just tell yer mom.”

Little green eyes narrowed. “Okay…?”

“’Nless you wanna hear the gross stuff?”

“No!”

“Kay then.”

Attie huffed off to her room, muttering about gross stuff and parents and how everything was awful.

Frisk pulled another mug of tea from somewhere and handed it to him. “Now, where did you find that adorable little girl? Another attempt to get drugs for a prank?”

“That was one time, and it would’ve worked if Boss hadn’t tracked me down at the worst possible second!”

“Uh-huh.”

“...I found Pele in the Lab. In Hotland.”

That wiped the teasing grin right off Frisk’s face. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m joking.”

“That’s not...ugh. Did you really find her in the Lab?”

“Yeah. I told Undyne, but looks like it didn’t make it into the full report. I asked her to leave me out of it, so she probably couldn’t justify it.”

“Well, hell. How did she react to that?”
“With a lot of swearing and what sounded like smashing things.”

“Sounds about right.” She took a sip of tea. “Dammit, I thought we’d moved past the child experimentation. That was a condition of Alphys retaining the title of Royal Scientist. Now I’ve got to see if we can replace her, and if Undyne’s started the official process. Actually, this explains the requests she's been submitting for an audit of the Lab. If this happened back in December she’s probably been looking for an excuse.”

“Wait, you don’t know if you can replace her?”

“Well. Legally, sure we could, but it would be a logistical nightmare. Someone would have to clean out that train wreck of a building, for one thing. We’d have to spend years going through all her crazy notes. Half of them are in some strange code I think even she forgot how to read. I wonder if…”

The way Frisk trailed off had him leaning forward a little, uncomfortable with the pain and uncertainty he could read in her voice. “What?’

“Oh, it’s just...there’s only one person I can think of who might know how to go through all this. I don’t want to bother him, but maybe he’ll be willing if it means getting Alphys out of power.”

For one terrifying moment Sans thought she meant him, but she didn’t look like she was teasing anymore. “You found another scientist? Who?”

“Not a scientist, exactly, but someone with a lot of experience. Do you...well, if you remember the RESETs, do you know Flowey?”

He choked on nothing. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t...couldn’t focus. Flowey. The whiny little weed who had made his life hell for years and years and years before Frisk fell into the Underground. (Or, in real time, about a few weeks. He was pretty sure, at least. Time magic did terrible things to his memories.)

(A small bright yellow face, smiling. Vines covered in dust. “Aww, you're too late, Sansy! And here your brother was just DYING to see you!”)

“Y-yeah, I know Flowey.”

“Sans? What happened?”

“He killed...he killed everyone. Killed Boss. Papyrus. Tori. Couldn’t kill me; dodged too fast. Yeah, I know him.”

Hands on his made him tense, ready to lash out, but the gentle fingers simply worked the mug out of his clenched hand and rubbed smooth lines across his bones. It was weirdly soothing, that touch, like the North Star: like something immovable and constant when he felt like everything else was falling apart around him.

When she spoke it was slowly and carefully, like she wasn’t sure if her words would cut the last threads tying him to reality. “I didn’t realize you fought him. He never said.”

“What d-did he say about me?”

“He said you were no good. Told me to stay away from you. I guess...I mean, given what I’ve learned in the past 24 hours, he could’ve been warning me about the fact that you were the Judge, but...that doesn’t seem right. He insisted that you were dangerous, that you’d kill me if you found
out that I had the ability to SAVE and RESET.”

But he had known. Oh, not right away, but he’d very quickly figured out what was going on. He told her this in a hesitant, stuttering voice that made him cringe, but Frisk seemed to hang onto his every word.

“So...you knew about me, and you didn’t try to kill me. Well. Until the Judgement Hall.”

“...Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I just...didn’t care by that point. Figured I’d seen just about everything. The weed wasn’t exactly creative, the last few times he got through the Underground. Worst he’d do was feed into Papyrus’s ego, puff ‘im up and turn ‘im loose in Snowdin as some kind of mini-tyrant.”

“Oh, stars.”

“Eh, wasn’t half bad, some’ve the time. He actually improved things...once or twice. Cleaned up crime real nice.” By being the biggest, meanest monster in town, yes, but in some of those cycles there had actually been less death than when Flowey didn’t interfere at all.

“Could you...it sounds like most of it was pretty terrible, from how you reacted, but...can you tell me about it a little? Flowey is the only other person who ever had this ability, that I know of, and he wouldn’t talk about it.”

“He had the ability?”

Frisk ran fingers through her hair, tracing it where it fell over her shoulders. “I apparently ‘stole’ the ability from him. He says that the person with the highest DETERMINATION controls the timeline. When that was him, he could do whatever he wanted. When I fell into the Underground, however...”

“That’s...that doesn’t make sense. How does it still work now that you’re up here? And...”

“I have my suspicions. It’s very vague, and I don’t know how much is me just projecting, but...there was a short period of time before I fell when I was sick. Very sick. I couldn’t keep track of days; I kept losing weeks at a time. Or what felt like weeks; I’d wake up and find that no time had passed at all. I was hospitalized and medicated a few times, but it felt like that just made things worse. I learned to hide it, mostly, but I thought I was losing my mind.

“I think...I think part of that, at least, was Flowey. I don’t know. I fought him a few times myself, and in one of those fights he absorbed the six human souls. After that he had the ability to SAVE and LOAD, and I couldn’t; not until I freed them. It was strange, though. Each soul had its own SAVE and LOAD ability, and they didn’t overlap or overwrite mine. I don’t know what that means. I don’t know how Flowey was LOADing on his own when he claims to not have a soul at all.

“My working theory is that both Flowey and I are capable of using SAVEs and LOADs, but at the same time we can both prevent each other from using that power. Maybe it has something to do with monster magic; maybe it’s because no one had tried to kill me before I fell into the Underground. I don’t know.

“Either way, right now I’m keeping Flowey from messing with time; but if something happened to me and I didn’t come back, he would be able to do whatever he wanted. Assuming no one else has
that power and knows how to use it. Does that make sense?”

Sans shrugged. “You’d know better than I would.”

“Well. All I know is what Flowey told me, and I don’t know if he was lying to me or not. He isn’t exactly a lion of courage, but last we spoke he had a lot more experience than I did.” She sighed, shifted a little. “So...was it all bad? Is there anything good you can tell me?”

He thought hard. There had to have been some good things, right? He could do that; he could find a story for Frisk if that was what she wanted. “There was, uh...early on, there was this one cycle. I guess the little guy wanted to make friends at first, heh. He...spent a lot of time in Snowdin. Talked nice to most of us. I was skeptical; didn’t trust ‘im. That wasn’t the first time I’d lived those few weeks, ‘n I was starting to notice that most of the weirdness was related to this little talking flower.

“Flowey didn’t like that. He wanted to know everything ‘bout everyone, y’see. So he played nice. Took things slow. Got Boss on board, and all the dogs, and Undyne; he ‘n Undyne didn’t get along too well most’ve the time. ‘N all of them came after me to tell me how dumb I was not to trust this happy little flower.

“So I gave ‘im a shot. I agreed t’see him somewhere in Waterfall, in a cave just above the Dump. And...” He trailed off, memories flooding back with more clarity than he expected.

“What? What happened?”

“He showed me the stars.” Sans blinked a little at the odd sting in his eye sockets. He paused, trying to find the words to wrap around that singular experience. “There are a few places in the mountain where wear and tear opened holes, but they’re mostly few and far between. Flowey found one just a little bigger.

“It was hard to get to, not somethin’ most folks could do. The cavern was cut in half by the barrier, so there was only a small area where you could actually sit. Had to go through some real tight tunnels, too. But...”

How did a guy explain what that had looked like?

“The sky was...bigger than anything I’d ever seen. I’d grown up looking at this...this roof always over my head, but this was was different. It went on forever. There were all these tiny little lights up there, and...it took me a minute to realize that those were stars. I’d read about how big they were, but looking at them? Just tiny little dots, half of ‘em not even visible? Heh. I’m a short guy, but I’d never felt so small.”

Sans breathed for a moment, enjoying the memory he’d all but forgotten. He could feel a dopey grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, but he didn’t care. Frisk knew worse things about him, now, and had shown that she wouldn’t mock him for it. At least not seriously.

*But she could, if she wanted to.*

“It sounds lovely,” she said. Her smile was gentle, as if she was somehow able to feel to his unspeakable awe at seeing the outside world for the first time in his pathetic life. “What happened, then? Did you and Flowey become friends that time around?”

“Uh...no. Woke up the next morning in my bed at the beginning of a new cycle. Flowey...he never tried that again.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”
“Heh. Between everything, I’d forgotten all about that. Never had the guts to go back there; was too afraid that he’d figure out I knew about the time anomalies.”

“Young that be bad?”

He glanced over at her, nonplussed. “Because that would make me new, different from everyone else in the Underground. That was how he played the game: every time he’d find somethin’ new, get a different reaction from someone, he’d poke and poke and poke at it until he’d exhausted all possibilities. I don’t even wanna consider how many possibilities something like that would open up.”

Frisk shuddered. “I...see your point. I’d only thought it was ironic that both you and Flowey were trying to hide things from each other, but...yes, that would be an awful situation. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“Wasn’t your fault. Not that. You went through the same thing, sounds like. And you didn’t mess around with your powers that I could tell, not even after we...well…” he shrugged, not sure how to put words to all she’d been through.

“Sans...I’m no saint.”

“Never said y’were.”

“Yeah, but...I’m not even a particularly great person. I just do what I can. I mess up more than I’d like to admit, really.”

“Waddaya think makes a great person, then? No one’s perfect. You made the best of a bunch’a bad situations, and you accomplished more for us monsters than we ever could’ve if we’d tried all this without you. ‘M not saying ya never mess up, but give yourself a bit more credit?”

She smiled down at her tea, a light pink blush spreading over her cheeks. “Well, thanks. I...to be honest, it’s going to take me some time to come to terms with everything I’ve learned in the past 24 hours, both the good and the...the ugly. But...I don’t want this to come between us. I don’t want us to go back to how things were before.”

“Oh. I get it...and I don’t want that either.”

Sans didn’t stay long after that, stuttering his excuses to Frisk and Attie and heading out in a daze. He’d never considered a world where Frisk knew about what he’d done and didn’t hate him for it. Most of his nightmares about her finding out about his job had ended with her dusting him, actually, or at least trying to. Not...weird conversations about the past.

Not wanting to face anyone yet, he headed to the library. A corner reading nook over in the reference section was open, so he grabbed an old encyclopedia and flipped through it absentmindedly until one of the librarians interrupted him, looking very worried. Oh, right; it was a Sunday afternoon, and the library closed early. He re-filed his encyclopedia and headed back to his apartment.

He still felt a little dizzy and distracted, like he was watching the world through a pane of frosted glass. Between the aftermath of the trial and the continual surprises, he just felt...numb. It was a miracle he made it back to his new place instead of following the habitual path back to Boss’s. That was the last thing he needed, regardless of how much he wanted to curl up somewhere warm and familiar and sleep for a day and a half.

“You’re back,” growled a low voice. Sans - immediately on edge - relaxed slightly when he saw
the tall, hulking form of Little Tim in the corner. “We were wondering where you’d got off to. Holed up with a mate, somewhere?”

Sans fought to keep the grimace off his face at that. Not because of the insinuation - no matter what anyone said, no matter what part of him wanted, the idea that he and Frisk could be together in that way was laughable - but because of the question itself. Some animalistic monsters had a tendency towards a more bestial mindset, taking what they wanted and exchanging the secret parts of themselves instead of keeping it hidden like anyone with - say - a smidgen of self-preservation. He hadn’t thought Little Tim was one of them.

“Go to hell.”

The bear monster laughed, low and slow. “No need to growl; I was merely making a joke. Do you really think any of us would be here in this trashcan if we had someone to share a home and life with? To help us cook and clean and put up whatever silly decorations women like? No. But then, where were you?”

Sans ignored the question and continued on towards his room. This brought him closer to Little Tim than he would’ve liked - almost within arm’s reach - yet the other made no move to stop him. He could see the burning curiosity, but without the motivation to actually act to discover the answers he wanted.

Little Tim would have made a terrible Judge.

And what business of his was it, what Sans did? A cannery shift manager? He might command an army of humans and monsters that tended the terrible machines that cooked and sorted and packed and sealed food, but he wasn’t Sans’s boss.

Sans grinned, completely disregarded Little Tim, and shuffled into his room.

He woke up the next morning still groggy, despite having slept almost twelve hours. It was Monday, even if it felt like Saturday was weeks away, and that meant that his roommates had come and gone.

Dusty, on the other hand, had not. The big, hulking mole monster was rifling through the cabinets, his little badger sidekick in tow, in what Sans had observed was his usual morning ritual. Get up, threaten the neighbors, dig through the cabinets to find the most obscure food for breakfast. Sounded like a great time.

“An’ just where’ve you been?” he growled, moving to tower over Sans in two long steps. Schreger trailed along in his shadow, fiddling with a lock and a pin, picking the lock and clicking it shut in quick succession.

Sans, unwilling to back down, stood his ground and grinned. “Just keepin’ an eye on things.”

Dusty snorted. “Like a worm like you’d see anythin’ farther than ‘is nose.”

The skeleton grinned pointedly.

“Pah! Stupid little thing. You’re worse’n a worm; you’re dirt. And you smell like that human place with all them books. You stay out’ve our way, y’hear?”

“Uh-huh. And what if I decide not to? I live here too, y’know.”

“Y’think yer just dealin’ with me? Naw. I’ve got everyone behind me. None’ve us want you here,
human-lover. We know you work for the Guard. We don’t want any of your spying in here.”

“And what’ll you do if I tell Captain Undyne about this conversation?”

Sans sidestepped as one webbed claw slashed downwards, the offset thumb nearly catching him across the ribs. He was careful not to let his grin show anything but perfect ease with his situation.

“Jus’ you wait,” Dusty muttered, turning back to the cupboards. “Jus’ wait and see what we do.”

“Just wait,” Schreger echoed.

Click went the lock.

Well. That wasn’t ominous at all. Sans shrugged casually and teleported away as soon as Dusty’s back was turned, wondering how he always managed to provoke his roommates.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: replacing bad memories with good ones is Frisk's favorite coping mechanism.

Thanks for reading! Sorry for missing last week's update. Family Drama happened, and things got busy. I sincerely apologize; I'll do my best to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Congrats to everyone who survived finals and/or graduated! And to anyone who isn't quite at that point yet, good luck: the end is nigh.
In Which Someone Bites the Dust

Chapter Summary

...But not anyone we’ve gotten too attached to, don’t worry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For a few days, Sans’s life had a strange sense of normalcy to it. He stayed out of his roommates’ way, only lingering long enough to sleep in the bed he’d carefully trapped against anyone but himself. His waking hours were spent either at his sentry station, the library, or the gym. Or Grillby’s, where he paid off his dishwashing debt and had a few beers.

Between the number Papyrus had done on him, the amount of magic he’d expended during the Judgement of Graciela Lira, and the fact that he still wasn’t eating much, he was far weaker than he wanted to be. It would pass, though. It was hard to get into the habit of working out - he wasn’t very motivated by nature, he ached constantly, and he felt pathetic next to most of the other gym patrons - but it was better than risking Dusty getting pissed at him and making his life miserable. Or nonexistent.

Someone must’ve been keeping tabs on him, though, because an exhausted-looking Undyne appeared at his sentry station that Thursday afternoon to taunt him about it.

“It’s adorable,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve seen you lift anything heavier than your phone.”

“I was working out before this whole emancipation business, y’know.”

“Yeah, like twice a week for half an hour. Still more work than you do most of the time, but not exactly combat training.”

He scoffed. “I’m a sentry. My job description is basically to sit here and watch for people who shouldn’t be here. Even fighting them isn’t technically required.”

“I’ve handled a bunch of bruised human teenagers who would be very happy to hear that.”

“Uh-huh. Why’re you really buggin’ me, then?”

“Aww, can’t I spend some time with my favorite little sentry?”

She sidestepped the small bone he flicked in her direction.

“Your phone is charged, right? The new one, I mean.”

He stuttered for a moment, not quite following that change in topic, but hauled his phone out anyways. Being magic-based, it only used electricity as a supplemental power source, unlike his old one. It was fully charged. “Yeah?”

“Cool. So. Shorty-”
“Nope. Why are you so concerned about my phone?”

“Oh...no reason...”

He gave her a Look; she was clearly lying.

“OKAY, FINE. You should be getting a call sometime this afternoon.”

“And...?”

“AND WHAT???”

“Well, ‘nless you’ve suddenly decided to stalk my phone calls, why do you care?” She had no reason to even know that he was going to get a call unless...

...Oh no.

“Undyne, what did you do?”

For once, she ignored the lack of title. “I didn’t do anything! I’m just...waiting.”

“For me to get a phone call.”

“Yes.”

“From Frisk.”

“...I never said that.”

“It’s all over your face, and it’s not that hard to guess. What, is she gonna chew me out for somethin’ and you want to watch?” Was Frisk still angry with him?? She hadn’t seemed angry the last time he saw her, but she’d had a few days to process everything. Maybe she changed her mind?

There was something very disturbing about the way Undyne giggled. “Nope.”

“So-”

His phone rang, loud and sudden. He suppressed an embarrassing yelp but couldn’t quite keep from jumping and tossing the phone into the air, so it took a moment of fumbling to get a good grip on it so he could answer. The caller ID read: "Guess Who? :-)

“Uh. Hello?”

“Sans?”

He ignored Undyne’s wild gesturing. “Yeah, this is Sans.”

A pause, like she was waiting for something. Then: “Do you know who this is?”

“H-hey, Frisk.”

She laughed. “I have a question for you, if you have a moment.”

Sans wasn’t sure what he expected, but from the laugh it sounded like she was in a good mood. So that was encouraging. “Sure?”
“...Is Undyne there?”

Well. After all that buildup, he’d expected something a little more ominous. “Yeah. Here, let me-”

“No, no; sorry. That wasn’t what I originally...she just hasn’t been around the embassy much the last few days, and we spoke last night, so I figured she might be there. That’s not what I wanted to ask.”

“Ohokay??”

There was another pause, and Sans could practically feel her determination through the phone. “If you’re available, would you like to go out to dinner sometime this weekend? I think there’s a few things we need to discuss, and I’d like to do it in a more comfortable setting.”

It took him a moment to process that. A more comfortable...she was asking him out? Or was it just to gain information from him? She did remember that he was a murderer, right??

“Sure,” he blurted when his internal clock realized it had been several seconds since the question and Frisk was still waiting for a response. “I. Uh. Sounds...good.”

She chuckled. Again. It sounded less stressed, almost...relieved? “Alright. What day works for you?”

“Well, I have to…” He trailed off watching Undyne’s exaggerated hand signs. “...Never mind, I just got the weekend off. And threatened, I think. So. Um. Saturday??”

“Sure, that sounds good. Grillby’s or somewhere fancy?”

Shit, shit, shit. Did Frisk even like Grillby’s? “I...you can pick.”

“Alright. Hmm...have you ever been to that Italian place a few blocks from the embassy?”

“No, actually.”

“Want to try that?”

“Uh. Sure.” He wasn’t contributing anything to the discussion. Would Frisk get angry that he wasn’t helping her plan this out? “I can meet you there, or at your place...?”

“Oh! Well, I have an evening meeting, actually, but it should be over by around 7:30. If you want to meet at the embassy we can either walk or drive there after, depending on the weather. They’re saying it might rain, and I’m pretty sure neither of us want to walk that far in the rain.”

She was nervous, he realized. Probably as nervous as he was. She was rambling. “That sounds, uh, great. It sounds great. Thanks for asking me.”

“Thanks for agreeing to come! With me. To dinner. To talk.”

“...Sure.”

The click of Frisk hanging up was nearly drowned out by the jet engine sounds Undyne was making.

“What??” He held both hands in front of him, trying in vain to ward off the insanity.
“HAHAHAHA! YOU’RE BOTH SUCH INCREDIBLE NERDS!!”

“Oh stars.”

“YOU BOTH TOTALLY DESERVE EACH OTHER!!”

“Yeah, uh, I’m not sure how much you overheard, but Frisk asked me out to dinner—”

“FUFUFUFU!!”

“-to talk. We’re going to meet up to talk. Because of...stuff.” He glanced around his sentry station, but it looked like Alphys hadn’t managed to extract herself from whatever bureaucratic hell Frisk was concocting long enough to bug his station again. Unless she’d gotten into the trees…? Hmm.

“Pft. Stuff? Stuff?? Sounds to me like you guys finally cleared the water and started swimming in the same direction, so to speak.”

Sans couldn’t decide if that was supposed to be an analogy or an attempt at a pun, but his grin twitched anyways.

“SO. How are you gonna prepare for your date?”

“It’s...not a date.”

“BUT IT COULD BE! You have to be prepared for ALL contingencies!!”

“It’s really not. Frisk isn’t the kind of person who’d hide her intentions like that. If it was s’posed to be a date, she would’ve said so.”

Undyne gave a frustrated little scream. “YOU’RE MISSING THE POINT! SHE’S EVEN MORE NERVOUS THAN YOU ARE! SHE’S NOT GONNA MAKE A MOVE ON YOU UNLESS SHE THINKS YOU LIKE HER BACK!!”

“Wait, you think Frisk likes me?”

“YES!”

“Romantically?”

“YES!!!”

“...The hell gave you that idea?”

There was a bit of sputtering and a good deal of flailing while Undyne sorted out her thoughts. After a moment, she took a deep breath, visibly composed herself, and glared at him with enough force to make up for her missing eye. “You were nice to Attie, numbskull.”

“Uh...sorry…?”

“No, no, you don’t get it. ARGH! Okay. So. D’ya know how many people actually take an interest in Attie’s life?”

Sans took a moment to count on his fingers. Frisk, Undyne, Toriel, Asgore...and should he count Papyrus? “...Five or six?”
“THAT WAS A RHETORICAL QUESTION! STARS, SANS! WHY DO YOU DO THIS? My POINT was that there aren’t many of us. I care. Frisk cares, obviously. The king and queen? They do what they can - yeah, even Asgore, when it comes down to it - but they have an awful history with human kids and it’s hard for them to separate what happened back in the Underground from Attie.

“So that leaves me. And you.” She did some quick mental math. “And...Greater Dog??”

“Wasn’t sure if I should count Papyrus. He did take an interest in her life, after all.”

Undyne shot him a dark look and completely disregarded his point. “So. I’m busy with the Guard. Frisk’s busy with the embassy. That means that neither of us are able to see the kid as often as we’d like. Finding another person who cares?? That’s great!”

“So...what, I’m being recruited as a live-in babysitter?”

“NO!! Well, if it doesn’t work out between you two, but...BUT NO. You do really well with kids. That’s an important quality in a guy.”

“Wait, really??”

“Yup. I’d’ve jumped your brother’s bones ages ago otherwise.”

“Wow, that’s way too much information. Also, aren’t you into girls??”

She shrugged this off in an effort to appear casual, but there was a certain tension to the way she was holding herself that hadn’t been there a minute ago. Sans didn’t push; he’d heard rumors, but he had exactly zero interest in Undyne’s preferences as long as they didn’t include him. “I wouldn’t mind a kid or two, especially after seeing Attie grow up, and Papyrus is strong even if he’s a bastard. But I’m not raising a kid alone, I’m not taking a kid from her dad, and I’m not raising a kid with a dad who beats his family.”

There was something ugly in her voice that made him fear for Papyrus’s safety for a moment. “...Right. So you think Frisk is interested in me...because I’m good with kids.”

“And other things, but that’s for her to say.”

“Ooookay.”

“And speaking of kids: you’re allowed to name your firstborn daughter after me.”

He sputtered. “We aren’t even dating! Kids is...not even an option right now!!”

“Oh, so you don’t want kids with Frisk?”

“I never said that. And can monsters and humans even have kids together?” A skeleton-human hybrid sounded...well, a little horrifying, just from an aesthetic point of view. Not that he thought he’d care much about the appearance of any offspring of his, he had no right to judge (heh), but looking like a nightmare would make the poor kid’s life more challenging.

Undyne was laughing at him, though. “Sure they can! They’re a little more...magic-y than most humans, and there’s an issue with certain monsters and their compatibility with humans, but it’s not much different than having kids between two different types of monsters. I’m sure you’d make it work.” Her grin grew devious. “They take after the monster parent, some’ve the time.”
And now Sans was thinking of an adorable little baby skeleton girl, one with his magic and Frisk’s smile...and that was definitely not a mental image he needed in his head. Not if he was going to stay sane. “We aren’t even dating, Undyne!”

“THEN GET ON THAT, NUMBSKULL!”

He groaned and retreated into the hood of his sweatshirt. Maybe if he ignored the crazy fish, she’d go away…?

Undyne wasn’t going away; she was laughing at him. Again.

He ignored her harder.

“Aww. Can’t deal with the teasing?”

“She doesn’t even like me, okay? It’s been less than a week since the trial; she has enough to deal with.”

“Frisk was the one who asked you out, remember?”

“Yeah, to talk!!”

Why did fish even have eyebrows, Sans wondered, as Undyne ruthlessly abused her eyebrow privileges by waggling hers at him in a roguish fashion.

“And why do you even care about any of this?”

“Because I wanna see my BESTIES happy! And if that means tying you down, then that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

It was Sans’s turn to laugh. It was one thing to daydream; it was another to think that he could be in any way tied to Frisk’s happiness. He didn’t even think it had anything to do with him, personally; she was just far too self-contained. The only person she ever let her guard down with was Attie, from what he saw. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about her parents or friends - she cared more than he’d ever thought possible - but her happiness didn’t hinge upon them.

“Just you try it, Captain,” he said, in the even tones of the Judge. His eye flared with magic for a brief moment.

“Pft. I’m not crazy enough to take you on in a fight. Why d’ya think I’m trying to bribe and bully you into this?”

She must’ve been running on pure coffee to be so chatty. Still, it made him squirm, hearing the terrifying Captain of the Royal Guard claim that he was her equal - possibly her superior - in battle magic. That had to gall her, that she spent so much time and effort training, while he - who barely bothered moving most days - had a power that could rival hers.

And yet she was laughing with him. She was treating him like a friend.

“Well, I’ve gotta go,” she said, retrieving her helmet from wherever she’d dropped it.

“Administrative crap and all that.”

“Have fun.”

Undyne snorted. “It’ll start being “fun” again when your brother gets that stick out’ve his ass. Paperwork is his specialty; when he’s pissed off like this, though, he suddenly forgets how to file
That sounded like Papyrus. He wasn’t going to skimp on the parts of his job that actually mattered, but he could make Undyne’s job a lot more difficult. Wear her down before the traditional attempt on her life. She knew all of this, of course - it was a game they’d played for years, ever since Papyrus had been promoted to Vice Captain of the Guard - but recent revelations brought all of this into a new light.

Oh, hell, he realized belatedly, remembering the look on her face, She wanted to be part of our family. The constant criticism of the apartment he’d shared with Boss suddenly made sense, as did her blindness to all their arguments. She and Boss were coworkers, yes, but their relationship clearly went beyond that. Sans just didn’t know how far until she brought it up. Stars, that explained why she’d been so antagonistic towards him before! He wasn’t just a lazy slob of an employee; with his reputation, she’d probably seen him as a threat to the family she wanted to build!

The only real connection Undyne had was to Asgore, and that was because Asgore had trained her. She had no other family, or at least none who acknowledged her. And Papyrus? They’d worked together for so long that they were efficient partners. Friends, even. Of course she’d want to attach herself to the family of a friend! Even if that family wasn’t what she wanted, even if it was broken until the jagged edges cut both Sans and his brother in horrible ways, it was still more than she had.

No wonder she was so angry at Papyrus. No wonder she’d pushed for Sans to break up his family. Papyrus had probably never known about her plans (Undyne, at her best, was an ambush fighter; if she’d raised the topic with him he never would’ve escaped her clutches) and yet, from her perspective, he had betrayed her. That had to cut deep.

Well, no helping it. Better for her to know about Papyrus’s true nature before kids came into the picture. She’d spoken about her plans in an odd, detached kind of way; she didn’t sound infatuated with Papyrus or anything. She wanted children and a strong father for those children, someone who could both defend and care for them. It wasn’t the romantic view of family life most humans dreamed of but it was the best most monsters could hope for. Better yet, it didn’t depend on any one person. Undyne would move on and find someone else if it meant that much to her. Or settle down with a nice fish-lady if she didn’t want kids after all; such inclinations were unusual, given how much kids meant to monsters, but not unheard-of.

The whole encounter made Sans think very hard. His...whatever was going on with Frisk was very different from what Undyne had wanted with Papyrus. He couldn’t imagine trading Frisk for some anonymous woman, human or monster; he wanted a life with her in it no matter where she fit. As long as he found some way to spend time with her and Attie he would do his best to be happy. Or, at least, content.

And that was terrifying.

It threw him off balance, too, which made it almost acceptable that he didn’t see what was coming.

Sans stepped through the doorway to his apartment, tired emotionally and physically after such a long shift, and immediately took a bullet to the skull. It wasn’t a big one - a tiny leaf, probably from Ripper the praying mantis - but it cut his HP in half. He immediately dropped into a crouch and dashed behind the kitchen counter, summoning a bone into his hand as he did so.

“C’mon,” growled the familiar voice of Dusty. “Don’ play games with us, little guard.” He spat the last word like a curse.
A low sigh punctuated another round of leaves, which Sans dodged much better. None of them touched him, though a few came close. He took a moment to slip a piece of monster candy into his mouth; it felt slimy against his teeth, and the urge to chew made him feel a little bit itchy and sick, but he could feel his HP ticking back up slowly. He swallowed his anxiety; he didn’t have a choice if he wanted to get back up to full health.

“He is a sentry, not a guard,” Little Tim rumbled.

That was surprising. Little Tim was more level-headed than the others, less likely to lash out at random despite his LV. The fact that he was participating in this meant that all this had been planned in advance. And despite the neutral tone he was using, Sans was not going to let him forget and try to play both sides later.

Sans danced away from another wave of leaves. All of his roommates were present, which was probably why they’d planned this the way they had. They were watching for the moment, letting little Ripper wear him down. And who knew what they’d do after the fact? As a sentry he was attached to the Royal Guard, and the Royal Guard had its enemies. Enemies who, it appeared, were right in this room.

Had Tori known when she sent him to this place?

He shoved the thought down. It was making him angry, and angry was not what he needed to be. He needed…


...He needed to remember how he’d been before, in the Underground.

Ripper was huffing a bit at the end of the next wave of leaves, and Sans straightened slowly. He looked around at the other monsters, casually dismissing his opponent, letting the bone in his hand swing idly.

“Oh, was that all? I thought you assholes had a grudge against me or somethin’. An ambush and a love tap? Is that all you’ve got?”

“Dusty-”

“I’MMA KILL YA!”

Sans grinned widely as Dusty escaped Little Tim’s tenuous influence and charged. This was how he liked to fight: from the bottom of the intelligence scale on up. No need to give an expert manipulator time to plan and coordinate. And if he could just...

There was a crash as Dusty and Ripper collided into a mess of fur and claws and insectoid limbs. A quick glance told Sans that Ripper was barely clinging to his last point or two of health, chirping waveringly in a dialect no one else understood.

A big, meaty elbow brought a swift end to that. Sans wasn’t entirely sure he even realized he’d dusted someone, but Little Tim sure did.

“Dusty, STOP!”

The bear monster tackled Dusty as Blaze and Travis cheered him on. Neither the fire elemental nor the fish monster made any move to join the fight, despite the fact that their roommate and coworker had just been dusted. Aaron didn’t appear to care, but from what Sans remembered of
the horse-fish he didn’t care for much besides his own reflection. If anything, it looked like he was just there to satisfy his own vanity. What about the open and unbuttoned shirt and the disturbingly well-defined abs was supposed to be attractive, Sans wasn’t sure.

Shuffling off to his left made him freeze. There was one housemate unaccounted for.

Right.

The black and white-striped face of Schreger, Dusty’s partner in crime, slowly crept into view. For one moment Sans thought he was free, that the badger monster was focused on the fight, but the beady little eyes were looking right at him.

Pivoting on one leg with a muffled curse, he tried to keep his back to the wall and traced his eye sockets over all the enemies in the room. Little Tim and Dusty’s altercation had devolved into a full-on fistfight, egged on by Blaze, Travis and a petulant Aaron, but they were both getting tired. Schreger? He was fresh, at full HP, and probably pissed at the way things were going.

The only consolation was that Schreger was dumb enough to work with Dusty. He was clever enough with his fingers, and had probably half an inventory of locks that he picked as a nervous tic, but he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box.

Sans waited for him to make the first move.

They stood there staring at each other for a long moment before the badger dropped to all fours and charged across the room. Sans dodged easily - it was a little harder than sidestepping Dusty, but not by much - but it forced him to move. Given the choice between moving closer to the fight or backing towards the corner he instinctively chose the corner, but that gave him less room to dodge the subsequent claw attack. It barely nicked him, bringing his HP down again painfully, but the monster candy was only half gone.

And then it was Sans’s turn to go on the offensive. He didn’t give Schreger the chance to follow up, instead summoning a wave of small bones that forced the other monster back. Most of his attacks were too large to use indoors outside a properly contained encounter - not if he wanted to keep living in this apartment - so he settled on a steady stream of bones. If he could force Schreger to turn tail and run…

But no. Another claw swiped at him the moment he took a breath to steady himself. He dodged it better, but he was running out of options-

“What the HELL is all this commotion??”

Sans choked a little, swallowing the rest of the candy. Undyne - of all people - stood in the doorway, Lesser Dog’s snarling face looming over one shoulder.

“Really? You guys are supposed to be smart monsters; do you really want to bring in the- is that dust?”

Everyone else in the room collectively edged away from Dusty. Schreger even arranged himself against the wall next to Sans, the little shit, like he hadn’t just been trying to take Sans’s skull off.

There wasn’t much to identify Ripper, but all monsters were required by law to carry some form of ID at all times (on their person, not in an inventory) for situations just like this. One of Undyne’s claw-tipped fingers brushed some of the dust away to reveal an ID card, a little bent from the force that had dusted the guy but still legible.
“Ripper, then. A roommate or a visitor?”

“Roommate,” Little Tim growled. “And one of my employees.”

“Uh-huh. Who did this?”

No one responded, but the bear monster’s glare - directed at Dusty - spoke volumes.

“Ugh. You’re all terrible. LD, call in backup; we’ve gotta take the whole lot down to HQ for interrogation.” Her eyes passed over the group, narrowing slightly on Sans. He couldn’t tell if that was good for him or terrible, but she was clearly surprised at his presence. Weird.

He clenched his fists, refusing to let his bones rattle and betray his nervousness. Why did he keep getting himself into these situations?

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Ripper wasn't a nice person. I'm not saying he deserved to die, but few people will miss him. The bartender at a small pub near his workplace will keep his usual seat open for a full week, though, even after he learns what happened to the guy.

In unrelated news, have a picture of baby badgers.

Someone asked how monster babies are made. My headcanon is that, like with humans, it does require a male/female pair for most monsters. (If there are - say - clam or earthworm or jellyfish monsters, they'd follow conventions similar to their real-life counterparts.) This chapter isn't intended to imply that there's a romantic relationship between Undyne and Papyrus, merely that she wanted kids and he is the only guy she knows well (besides Asgore). Her desire for kids developed as a result of spending time with Attie, and caught her by surprise. Having a civil agreement with Papyrus would've given her what she wanted without the hassle of finding a partner: a convenient arrangement...or so she thought. She hasn't told anyone but Sans, and she let it slip in an effort to built rapport. It hit her harder than she expected, saying it out loud.

Finally, Sans used the monster candy as a heal over time. It's an effective way to deal with small bits of damage without over-healing, since his health is so low.

I think that's about it. Hope everyone has had a great week. I know I'm a bit late again, but next chapter should be on time regardless.
Sans wasn’t sure what to expect from a Royal Guard interrogation. While the Kingdom of Monsters hadn’t outlawed torture as a means of gaining information, Undyne had recently been persuaded by human research to look at alternative methods. After all, a confession isn’t worth much if it’s false.

He was led through the hallways of the Royal Guard Headquarters by Lesser Dog, and since he was cooperating (unlike several of his roommates) there was no need to use force. In fact, Sans was pretty sure he caught LD whining under his breath apologetically a few times. It was a long stretch from the frantically reverent welcome he’d received a few days prior, but no one messed with him.

The small room Sans was led into had bars on the window and door, a bench in the corner and...nothing else. He’d spent a few nights in a similar cell back when he drank heavily, before Boss - before Papyrus - put a stop to that. It was a room where people were put to cool off and sober up. Nothing fancy or comfortable or potentially dangerous allowed.

He hadn’t been patted down beforehand or asked to empty his inventory, which was...surprising. Maybe Undyne wasn’t too mad at him after all?

That line of thinking only lasted him the first few hours.

The clock in the hallway read 12:02 AM when he was finally let out by a very tired-looking cat monster. One of the new recruits, apparently; Sans didn’t recognize her. Still, she didn’t grab at him or try to strongarm him, just ushered him into the interrogation room where Undyne was slouched over a mug of coffee and a pad of paper.

“You roommates are idiots,” Undyne said, without looking up. “I don’t get why you picked them.”

He settled himself into the chair across from her, eyeing the restraints attached to the table and floor uneasily. “Didn’t have much choice.”

“Pah. Not sure these guys are a step up from Papyrus. At least he doesn’t dust people ‘xcept in the line of duty.”

“Hmm.”

“Whatever.” The mug was drained in one go and set off to the side with enough force that it wobbled. “So tell me your version of what happened earlier.”

“I came home from my shift and was immediately attacked. Ripper, the, uh-”
“Victim?”

“Sure. The ‘victim.’ He hit me with a bullet as soon as I walked through the door. Took my HP down by half. Then Dusty tried to attack me, but hit Ripper.”

“So it was an accident?”

“Maybe. Dusty knocked ‘im with an elbow as he was tryin’ to get up, but he was furious enough to maybe not notice? Little Tim got mad after that and tackled Dusty; Blaze, Travis, and Aaron just watched. Schreger snuck around behind and attacked me while they were goin’ at it, but he only got two swipes in before you interrupted.”

“Uh-huh.” Undyne looked over her notes. They were incredibly messy. Sans couldn’t read them upside down, or even tell which language they were supposed to be in. Possibly a combination of English and Monster; a few of the letters looked like p’s and q’s, but there was a curl that definitely looked like a Monster taun. “Your HP back up to normal?”

He closed his eye sockets and concentrated on himself for a moment. “Still at roughly half. ’M fine-”

He jumped when one of her hands slapped down on one of his where it rested casually against the table, then relaxed slightly when green healing magic began to flow through that connection. It stung a bit as his lingering wounds closed, but he felt much better afterwards. “I don’t think this is a normal part of an interrogation.”

“Shuddup,” she grumbled. “You’ve already been cleared to go. I just took a statement and held you for your personal safety. Now we’re having a nice chat.”

“That sounds...ominous.”

“Yeah, well, I guess there’s gonna be a shakeup at your place. Dusty’s being held pending a murder charge. Little Tim and Schreger are cooling their heels overnight; we’ll let them go in the morning as long as they’re calm. The rest were already released.”

*Watch your back,* her expression said.

“‘Kay.”

“One more thing. What set this off?”

“Hmm?”

“This was a hit on you. Why?”

“Dunno.” He thought back. “Uh...Dusty called me a guard, and Little Tim knew I was a sentry. Sounds like revenge against the Royal Guard?”

“...And the Guard walked in and saved you. Great.”

Sans shrugged. Sure, kicking Schreger in the ass would’ve been satisfying, but he wasn’t going to fault Undyne for doing her job. Not when it meant he got to walk out of there with all his limbs. “You guys did show up at a terribly convenient time.”

“LD and I were on patrol a few blocks over. Someone called in a disturbance, and dispatch radioed us.”
“You were on patrol...in that neighborhood?”

“We can’t not go into an area just because people there don’t like us. They’ve gotta be safe, too.” Despite her words, her shoulders were slouched and her head was bending slowly towards the table. The expression on her face looked lifeless, empty, and Sans didn’t think he’d ever seen her look less like herself. “I like keeping a personal eye on the rough areas. Keeps the lowlifes from forgetting my face, and shows the good folks that they aren’t forgotten.”

“Well, I sure hope those guys’ll think twice about starting somethin’ next time.”

“Hah. Sure they will. Get out of here, asshole.”

Sans sat and stared at her a moment longer. Undyne wasn’t angry, just...exhausted. Frustrated and defeated, but mostly tired. “You, uh, okay?”

“You should be, too. How many people are even here? You oughta go home.”

Even as he said that, he hesitated. Undyne’s house wasn’t far from Royal Guard HQ and the embassy, but she didn’t spend much time there. Boss had brought him over a few times, and from what he remembered, it was empty. Quiet. Neat and tidy, despite the indoor pool she’d had installed to accommodate her fishiness.

“...You want me to teleport you to Frisk’s place? Don’t glare at me; turnabout’s fair play’n all that.”

“Nah. I have paperwork. Which you’ll be helping me with if you don’t get your ass out of here in the next five seconds.”

“Heh. Tempting, but nah.” He waved at her as he stepped into a shortcut, not bothering to leave through the front door.

He reappeared behind his apartment building. It was dark and quiet; most people were asleep, thankfully. There were a few night owls smoking near the back door, and...and well, the lights were all on in his apartment. All of them.

Yeah, no, he decided. Another step brought him to his locker room in the Pumped Gym. He was pretty sure that he’d...yep, right there under a pile of clothes was the blanket he and Attie had used for their picnic. It was sheer dumb sentimentality that had prompted him to hold onto it all those months ago, but it was going to come in handy.

The blanket made a surprisingly comfortable bed for what it was, and the pile of clothes made an even better pillow. Who needed an apartment when he could live in this dark, quiet little room?

Of course, he realized the next morning, he didn’t quite have everything he needed. He’d left some of his things at the apartment - including the Dimensional Box from Undyne that she would undoubtedly want back - so he would have to return at some point. Plus, he’d had to pay for six months’ rent up front; the frugal side of him didn’t want to give up so quickly.

And really, the gym wasn’t a viable long-term option. There wasn’t a single electrical outlet anywhere that he could see, which was inconvenient. Maybe if he still had his generator...but that had been sold with his hot dog stand, and he had no idea where to get another. Food wasn’t a problem; juice would keep just fine in his inventory and pure monster food took a long, long time to spoil. Laundry was a different story. He did have that date meeting with Frisk, and regardless of
his usual level of cleanliness he did want to look nice for her the meeting.

(Sans was going to kick Undyne so hard her LV went down for putting stupid, terrible, beautiful ideas into his head.)

So. He needed to get into his room and retrieve his remaining belongings, preferably without his roommates seeing him. Then he could use the coin laundry in the apartment basement to freshen his good outfit up. Then he...

Then he...

It hit him like a brick to the skull, that strange feeling of being adrift. It made no sense. He was better. He was better. He didn’t miss Boss. Papyrus. He didn’t miss his...his brother. It was nice, not having the dread of impending punishments looming over him.

But...nothing had changed, not really. He still had to watch his back. Instead of dealing with one monster he knew very well, he had to try to keep track of seven (six, now). Instead of dancing around Papyrus’s whims, he had to try to figure out how the dynamics had shifted now that he’d gotten one roommate dusted and three more thrown in jail. And he had no Boss to cover for him, to threaten and intimidate anyone who dared to mess with him.

The only option was to FIGHT, and if he slipped up just once...he’d be dust.

There was no going back; he knew that. Sans had thoroughly burned his bridges. Papyrus wouldn’t forgive him easily - if he ever did - and undoubtedly was living a much easier life without someone else to take care of. Then again...Sans vividly remembered how lethargic and depressed he’d been in the weeks after Attie went home. If Papyrus was experiencing a fraction of that...

What kind of monster was he, to let his brother go through something like that?

A wise one, some part of him whispered. He didn’t treat me as a brother. He hasn’t for years. He’ll dust me if I go back.

And he had something to live for, now. He had sort-of-friends, people who-

Ding!

-texted him when he was feeling like the world was converging in on him and dragged him out of his dark thoughts.

Frisky Dreamer 10:23 AM
Hey, Sans?

You 10:26 AM
Hey

Frisky Dreamer 10:27 AM
Sorry to ask this, but can you watch Attie today?
A meeting came up and everyone’s busy.
The embassy’s childcare center is closed; too many people down with the flu.

Sans had never been more grateful for the common cold.

You 10:31 AM
Sure
Want me 2 come over now?

Frisky Dreamer 10:32 AM
We’re at the embassy, if you wouldn’t mind picking her up.
Meeting starts at 11.

You 10:34 AM
B rite there

He’d done a load of laundry when he first got to his new apartment (more to play with the coin laundry than to do anything productive), so he had a single pair of pants and a ratty shirt that were still clean. His sweatshirt mostly covered the shirt anyways.

Stepping from his locker room to his preferred storage closet at the embassy was almost as easy as breathing.

Frisk’s office door was cracked open a little when he approached, and he could hear a pair of familiar voices inside. Attie was chattering on about something he couldn’t quite make out, but whatever it was made her mother laugh.

“Hey,” he said, knocking on the door frame.

The door immediately opened and a little human girl attached herself to his sweatshirt. “Hi, Mr. Sans,” came Attie’s muffled voice.

He patted her on the head and glanced over her head into the room. Frisk was sitting at her desk, books and papers haphazardly splayed across the surface but a soft grin on her face. What detracted from the scene was the grin on Undyne’s face, which looked absolutely predatory.

“Hey, Frisk. Undyne...aren’t you supposed to be sleeping?”

Frisk turned, raising an eyebrow at the captain. “Have you been up to something? Is that why you stole my coffee this morning?”

Undyne’s only response was to glare at Sans in a resentfully sleep-deprived manner. He shrugged; if she was going to get on his case about exhaustion then he was going to return the favor, no matter how many glares he got.

“Well...anyways, thank you so, so much. Sorry to run, but I have a bit of prep work to do before things start and...Undyne? Are you coming?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. Attie? Be good for Mr. Sans. Sans, if you could take her home that would be great. Feel free to help yourself to whatever you need. Homework is...um, all over my desk right now. If you don’t mind...”

Sans waved her off. “We’ll pick it up.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

“Bye, Mommy!” Attie said, extracting one arm to wave at her mother.

“Bye! See you...soon. Ish.”

The smile Frisk threw as she passed him was more worrying than reassuring, as it was probably
meant to be. She looked almost as tired as Undyne.

“Mr. Sans! Mr. Sans! Let’s go home and play tea party again!”

Sans looked down at Attie, then over to the desk covered in school books. “I think you have a little bit’ve work to do before we can play tea party.”

“Then we can play tea party after schoolwork?”

He sighed. “Let’s see if yer mom’s home by then, huh?”

Attie grumbled something under her breath, but helped pack the books up. She didn’t have all of them with her, so it was easy to grab the bag in one hand and Attie’s hand in the other.

“Hang on.”

“Okay!”

Sans teleported over to an empty corner of the park, hidden behind some trees. It was where he had usually appeared when he teleported to work, back when he had his hot dog stand, and he didn’t know anywhere closer to Frisk’s place that he could teleport to.

The day was warm, one of the first true days of spring, which was great because Attie didn’t have her winter coat. She didn’t seem particularly bothered - she was skipping along, humming some nonsensical tune - but Sans was eager to get her inside. Humans got sick when they got too cold, didn’t they? Or too hot. Or too tired. Or pretty much anything else.

“Mr. Sans? Isn’t that your hot dog stand?”

He looked where she was pointing, and sure enough, it was. He’d recognize that dingy cart anywhere, even with the fresh coat of paint. Yeah, it had apparently been converted into something different - was that a cooler, hooked up to the generator? - but the wheels he’d replaced a few years back were the same, as was the slightly shoddy patch job along one edge of the counter.

“Yeah,” he said. They approached, a little warily in Sans’s case, and took in the changes. That was definitely a cooler, probably for what the new paint job advertised as…

“Nice Cream?”

A rabbit monster with sky blue fur snapped to attention from where he’d been dozing off behind the counter. “Uh, h-hi, kid. Yeah…” He trailed off as he saw the skeleton, suddenly deciding that a rogue splot of paint on the counter needed all his attention.

Sans grinned widely. “Carn, right? Your brother used to sell that...ice cream in Snowdin. The stuff with insults on the wrappers.”

“H-hah, uh, yeah. N-never sold very, uh, very well. Uh.”

“Takin’ over the family business?”

“U-um...well, I, uh, had some money saved up, and...and someone was selling a c-cart, and...humans like n-nice things, right? So, uh, Nice Cream. Like ice cream, but...n-nice?”

He chuckled. This kid...he wanted to get angry, but the guy was barely out of stripes. And anyone who could appreciate bad puns was probably okay. Besides, he couldn't blow up with Attie right
there, even if he wanted to. “Well, what’re you sellin’ these Nice Creams for?”

“For...money?”

“And how much money for two?”

This took a moment to sink in. “OH! Oh, you want to...u-um. Let me see.” Carn tapped his fingers on the counter. “15 gold each? O-or, or, since you’re my first customers...10. 20 for two.”

Sans pulled the money out of his inventory and plunked it down on the counter in two neat stacks.

There wasn’t a huge selection - and between all the stuttering, he wasn’t sure whether he’d gotten Very Vanilla or Cool Coconut - but Attie appeared very happy with her Sweet Strawberry (which was worryingly blue) as she trailed behind him all the way home.

“Look, Mr. Sans! Look what it says: “I have no idea what you look like, but you probably look nice today.””

“Huh. That’s...not what I was expecting.”

“What does yours say?”

He carefully peeled away the wrapper and searched the inside. “It says, “Your claws are looking sharp and deadly.””

They considered this for a moment.

“Mr. Nice Cream Guy isn’t very good at writing nice things, is he?”

“Looks like he’s not.”

The ice cream itself was, thankfully, much better than the compliment on the wrapper. A little too sweet, but a decided improvement over the sour and bitter monstrosities Carn’s brother used to sell in Snowdin. It had a hefty amount of magic, too, which felt nice even though he didn’t need the HP.

There was just one problem.

Attie.

Who was, apparently, affected a lot more by vast amounts of sugar and magic than Sans was. She garbled something incomprehensible, literally running circles around him as he walked down the sidewalk.

“What was that?”

“Brain freeeeeeeze!”

That didn’t sound good. “Are...you okay?”

“YEPYEPYEP!”

“Okay?”

Someone turned a corner up ahead and he grabbed her shoulder to bring her to a stop. An older human woman walking a tiny white dog approached, smiling at them. “Well hello, Attie!”
“Hi, Mrs. Bakker!” Attie flattened herself so she was eye level with the dog. “Hi, Ping-pong!”

“And who’s your friend?”

“This is Mr. Sans! He’s my favorite babysitter!”

“Ah! Well. Nice to meet you, Sans. I’ve heard so much about you, but I didn’t get a chance to stop by when you were staying with Frisk.”

“...Hi,” was all Sans could think to say.

“I’m Jane Bakker; I have the house across the street from Frisk’s. The yellow one. I don’t get to see Frisk or Attie around too much - we all work odd hours - but if you need anything feel free to stop by!”

“Oh, don’t do that, sweetie; Ping-pong doesn’t taste too good. You’ll make yourself sick.” Jane turned to Sans, a wide grin on her face. “Sugar rush?”

He nodded. He had no idea what a sugar rush was, but Attie had just eaten a lot of sugar very quickly, so that was probably an apt description.

“Don’t worry; happened to my kids all the time. You’d better eat all your lunch for Mr. Sans, right Attie?”

Attie pouted. “But I’m not hungry anymore!”

“Good luck,” was Jane’s ominous comment as she waved and escaped down the street with Ping-pong.

Right. He checked his phone. It was about 11:30; almost time for lunch.

And he’d just fed Attie a bunch of sugar. Which, according to the internet, tended to suppress appetites in humans.

Frisk was quite possibly going to kill him.

“WHEEEEEE!” Attie screamed, dragging him at a full run through the barrier. They passed through so quickly he almost missed the rush of amused affection from the magical construct. “LET’S PLAY TEA PARTY!!!”

“School work first!”

“NOOOOOO!”

So here was Sans’s dilemma. He wanted to make a good impression on Frisk, which meant taking care of her daughter. And preferably getting schoolwork done. But he’d also given Attie a ‘sugar rush.’ The internet helpfully defined this as “A purported state of hyperactivity caused by excessive consumption of sugar,” also called a ‘sugar high’ (which sounded way too much like drugs, and didn’t help his growing dread). That meant that sitting down was not going to be an option until...whenever this wore off.

He checked the list of schoolwork. “Hey, don’t you have a bouncy ball somewhere?”
“YES!!”

“Let’s grab it and do times tables.”

“Okay!”

“And don’t forget your coat.”

“Aww!”

They went out to the back yard - sufficiently bundled up - and stood at either end with their backs
to the old wooden fence that surrounded it. The barrier shimmered overhead, giving a slightly
mottled look to the sunshine that danced over them. It was almost like being underwater, but
brighter.

“Okay. I’m gonna ask you a problem and throw the ball, and you’ve gotta answer. Then you ask
me one and throw the ball back. Okay?”

Attie was vibrating in place like a Temmie.

“...Okay. One times one is…”

“ONE!” she screamed, running forward and tackling the ball. It was just as well that she had her
puffy coat on, really. “What do I do now?”

“What’s the next number on the times table?”

“...Two?”

“Then you throw the ball back and say…”

“One times two is!”

“Two.”

They got all the way up to five times five before Attie got tired. Sans had deliberately been
throwing the ball harder - cheating a little with magic - so she would chase after it. The yard
wasn’t that big, but it helped.

“Can we have lunch now?” she whined, trudging back into place with the ball.

“Thought you weren’t hungry?”

“I’m hungry now.”

“Y’sure? We can go all the way up to ten times ten-”

“ONE HUNDRED!” She threw the ball into the air so hard it bounced off the barrier, dashing
inside before he could stop her.

Well. That solved one of his problems.

Lunch was leftovers of some kind of chicken and noodle dish with a cream sauce. Attie raved
about it, and Sans was feeling better than he had in weeks, so he warmed up the whole container
and split it in half. It wasn’t bad, actually. He’d been gradually working up to more solid foods,
so the chicken wasn’t a shock to his system, and the noodles hadn’t held up exceptionally well in
the microwave so they were nearly mush. Listening to Attie chatter on about her friends at the embassy was distracting enough that he barely had time to think, anyways.

Attie didn’t mind. She even helped clean up dishes, and they were halfway through Science before Frisk came home to find them sitting calmly at the table with no evidence of their earlier activities.

“Sans? Is that...an ice cream wrapper? With a vaguely insulting compliment on it?”

...Almost no evidence of their earlier activities.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: A "sugar high" is actually a common misconception. Scientific trials have shown no difference in the activity of children who have had sugar and those who haven't. There is a measurable release of serotonin - the "happiness molecule" - after eating carbohydrates and starches, but this doesn't necessarily convert to hyperactivity. The brain is a powerful thing, though: if we associate sugary foods with more energy, we can fool ourselves into thinking that this is actually the case.

However, reader and regular commenter kawaiiloverq requested a scene involving a sugar high all the way back in Chapter 6, so here we are. Is it the sugar? Is she just really happy to spend some time with her favorite babysitter again? Either way, she got really excited for a bit there.

Venelona strikes again with more fanart from the previous chapter! Venelona, you are truly a legend and words are not enough to express my gratitude...or how hard I laughed when I saw Undyne. :-)

Apologies for this being a bit late. I was going to post it last night, but my internet cut out just as my mouse was hovering over the button. Then AO3 has been a bit wonky all day with regards to formatting. What can ya do.

I hope you all have a wonderful week!
The Trouble With Spaghetti

Chapter Summary

A young woman reflects on the perils of pasta, puns, and potential boyfriends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Frisk stood in front of the mirror in the ladies' room. She was ready for anything. She was ready for anything.

"Anything" being, in this case, a date meeting with a guy she was interested in. The first guy she was ever seriously interested in. The guy who, if Undyne was to be believed, was interested in her as well but didn't dare hope that she reciprocated.

Which, certainly, made things...interesting.

Frisk knew her strengths and weaknesses, her wants and her limitations. And what she'd always imagined - always hoped for - in a hypothetical partner was someone who would step up and be assertive. Not controlling or demanding, but willing to speak his mind and push back when she got ridiculous.

But she'd developed an interest in Sans. He could be difficult when he wanted to be, but that was (mostly) a facade. His relationship with Papyrus had shown that he was practically a wet noodle when it came to people he cared about. So the idea that he was going to sweep her off her feet and be a proactive and supportive partner was...a nice fantasy, but not very realistic.

And to her surprise, she was okay with that. She had enough DETERMINATION for the both of them. They could take things slow, build up his self-confidence by showing him how much he was really capable of. She could accept if she gave more than received in a relationship.

It was what she was used to, after all.

With a firm nod, Frisk headed to her meeting.

Her incredibly boring meeting.

Evening meetings were always hit-or-miss. Sometimes dignitaries who were in town for other reasons would have some free time, and would happily stop by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Monsters outside normal business hours. Sometimes allies from the other side of the world would call her up for "morning" meetings, which often meant working odd times and days. And sometimes it was the only way to pass sensitive information with the diplomatic team.

Undyne, Toriel, and several government ministers were already in the meeting room when Frisk walked in. She murmured a vague greeting to room at large and took a seat in the small chair across from her mother.

"Is Dad coming?" she asked.
Toriel sighed. "Asgore is...delayed. We can start without him, but I would prefer not to; he intends to lead the meeting, so we would need to repeat everything when he does arrive. I would prefer that we wait."

"Understandable. Did Attie settle in alright?"

"She was giving Fern and Gelle a hard time when I left, but I trust that they will care for her until we return home. Do not worry; enjoy your evening off."

Ignoring Undyne's wide, toothy grin, Frisk pulled a pen and notepad out of her inventory. She couldn't help but worry about strange people watching her daughter. She'd met both monsters before, but didn't know them well. All she really knew was that Fern - her mother's chef - was overbearing in the kitchen, and Fern's sister Gelle was a member of the Queen's Guard. Undyne had approved Gelle, which meant a lot, but it didn't completely calm Frisk's nerves.

Asgore arrived fashionably late, offering no excuse but a heavy sigh when his wife questioned him. "We can begin," he said, in the deep, slow voice he used when he was genuinely calm. "We are here to discuss the ongoing progress of the multinational agreement to recognize the rights of monsters..."

Frisk struggled to pay attention. The agreement her father was talking about was one of the most important things she'd ever worked on, after all. It would finally - more than eight years after the barrier broke - give monsters a standard set of rights, allowing them to be treated just like any other citizen of whatever nation they chose to call home. No longer would they be confined mostly to a single country: they could immigrate and build lives elsewhere.

And the biggest secret monsters carried could finally be brought to light.

But she already knew all this. It had been her main project for the better part of five years, the source of most of her late nights and early mornings. Progress had been put on the back burner for a few months due to rumblings of unrest in the Underground, but she hadn't forgotten anything. Hearing her father rehash everything - again!! - didn't change any of the facts.

Her mind kept trying to drift to Sans. What was he doing? She hadn't heard from him since his (somewhat embarrassed) escape from her home the evening before. What a letdown it would be if he decided not to show up!

"Frisk? Did you have something to add? You look upset."

Years of practice in politics let her recover somewhat gracefully. She leapt on the last subject she remembered hearing. "Did you say that Turkey wants to see an advance copy of the treaty? They weren't on the original list of countries we were working with, and they have a history of oppressing certain religious and ethnic minorities..."

She nodded along senselessly to the reply, trying to look engaged. She'd look up the exact situation with Turkey once she was able to focus.

The meeting dragged on and on and on until, abruptly, her mother stood. "I believe we have confirmed that little has changed since the last time we had one of these meetings. We have already spent more than half an hour extra here, and I know many of us have families. I will have a summary of our project status sent through the usual channels; we can reconvene when we have something more to discuss."

Frisk gathered her notepad and pencil as quickly as she could without appearing to be in a hurry.
Her parents were too distracted to chat; they were too busy making awkward small talk. They were leaving together for once, ostensibly to discuss the situation in the Underground. At Toriel’s house. Overnight. The two of them got along relatively well, given their history, but outside the public eye they didn’t spend much time together. Maybe, just maybe, they were finally starting to reconcile in their private lives also?

Undyne trailed along behind them - she was their ride home - but not before bestowing many significant looks and vaguely threatening hand gestures that were probably supposed to be encouraging.

It was redundant, but appreciated nonetheless. Frisk had no intention of letting Sans slip out of her clutches. Well...if he hadn't gotten bored and assumed she wasn't coming, of course. She winced; if she had to wait half an hour for him, she would've been at least a little bit upset.

As it turned out, patience was apparently one area where Sans was significantly better than she was. He was sitting in the lobby messing with his phone, looking at first glance like he was perfectly relaxed and a little bored; but there was a tenseness in the lines of his hunched shoulders, barely visible under the red turtleneck he'd put on, that proved he wasn't nearly as apathetic as he appeared. Then something alerted him to her presence - of course; he was the Royal Judge, his ability to detect magic was what he was known for - and the stress melted away into something that looked an awful lot like relief.

"Hey," he said, dropping his phone onto the floor casually. (In fairness, it looked like he was trying to slip it into the pocket of a sweatshirt, but since he wasn't wearing one he just looked like an astronaut trying to get used to gravity again.)

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said, politely pretending not to notice him diving after it. "It was a long meeting, and Dad was running late…"

"No problem. Is, uh, everything…okay?"

"Yeah. Just an overview of the same projects we've been working on for years. It's good to have us all on the same page, but…"

Sans shrugged, looking like he wanted to say something but didn't quite dare. Which was odd in and of itself, because he had never seemed to have a problem talking back to anyone before. (Not even his brother, and look where that got him.)

"Ready to go? It's a nice evening, but we're a bit later than I expected. My car's around back or we could walk; it's only a few blocks away."

"Interesting. Did he really want to walk, or was he saying what he thought she wanted to hear? Did he want to spend time with her or was he trying for flattery? Or was she reading way too much into

For a moment Frisk thought Sans was going to defer to her, but he caught himself. The little lights in his eye sockets twitched as they scanned her face, then he stood. "Walking sounds nice. Might was well enjoy the weather."
They walked together out of the embassy lobby and down the street, past the Royal Guard Headquarters and the building the Kingdom of Monsters used for most of its administrative work. (The official offices were in the Underground, on monster territory, but in reality almost everyone used the "shared office space" on the surface.) There were a few hotels nearby that catered to dignitaries and their entourages, scattered between parking garages and high-rise office buildings and the odd apartment complex.

The Italian restaurant was located in one particular hotel nearby. Both the hotel and the restaurant had an excellent reputation but a modest price point, and the restaurant offered discounts to the Royal Guard and the embassy staff. The Guard didn't often take advantage of it, not with Grillby's so close by, but folks from the embassy sometimes wanted to eat a nice meal somewhere that wasn't a smoky bar.

"Carla and Luigi's," Sans read as they walked up. "Aren't they video game characters?"

"Luigi is, I think. I was never too invested in video games. I'm not sure about Carla. I think it's named after the owners, but I'm not sure. All I know is that this is the best Italian restaurant outside Italy, and I get 15% off."

The moment Frisk said that, she wished she hadn't. What if he thought she was cheap? But the grin he gave her was understanding and conspiratorial and completely pleased. Like he was thrilled to be included in something.

Carla and Luigi's didn't require reservations for general dining, but Frisk was on the short list of people who could book the private dining and conference rooms they offered without too many questions. She also felt better giving them a heads-up since she had so recently been the target of an assassination attempt, even though she was certain that she - or Sans, for that matter - could neutralize any threat that came their way.

The waiter who let them to their private room was one Frisk recognized: a young woman with a nametag that read "Corina," but who answered to "Cory." Frisk made small talk as they walked, mostly about Cory's studies (she was taking courses in Biology at a community college part-time while helping to care for a sick father) and boyfriend (she had recently started dating and was still in that sickeningly-sweet lovey-dovey phase). Sans was quiet, but the way he was glancing around told her that it wasn't for lack of attention.

"Here are your menus; want anything to drink?"

"Water for me, thanks," Frisk said. Sans muttered something similar, and Cory sashayed off.

"This is...nice," he said, glancing around. "Not what I expected."

"It does hit a nice balance between formal and casual. And the food is good."

Cory delivered their waters, complete with little slivers of lemon on the rim, and gave them a few more minutes to decide what to have for dinner.

"So...anythin' good here?" Sans asked. He picked at his lemon sliver, looking a little lost.

"I've had the chicken parmigiana before; it's excellent, ais their spaghetti. Polenta is boiled cornmeal, and they serve it two ways with a nice marinara sauce: the soft is about the consistency
of mashed potatoes, and the fried is more like a dense bread. I think today I'm going to have the pasta ai fiori di zucca."

"And that is…?"

"Pasta with zucchini blossoms."

"You're going to eat flowers?"

"They're edible!" Sans was eyeing her with equal parts awe and concern, and a bit of disgust as well. "It's normally a summer thing, but we're experimenting with seasonal produce in the Underground. A few local growers have set up shop in some caves off Hotland, near the border with Waterfall, and one of them has an agreement with Carla and Luigi's. I'm supporting the local economy!"

And the skeleton across from her had started grinning in a way that was distinctly more amused than usual. "Whatever floats your boat," he muttered.

She stubbornly ordered her pasta, and Sans got the spaghetti. He must've been feeling better, which was a relief; his eating disorder was something she'd forgotten about, to her embarrassment, when she asked him out to this meeting. Good. One minefield navigated. Hopefully.

Once the door closed behind Cory, Frisk squared her shoulders. "So. Sans. I think we need to have a proper conversation."

"Yeah, okay." His words were noncommittal, but his expression looked grim.

"We've had a lot of miscommunications, and I would like to know where we stand. To be honest, I disliked you for a long time because of what others said about you, and because you...well, you were antagonistic."

He nodded, conceding the point. "I thought you were a bit stuck-up. 'N. Well. I was terrified that you'd find out how much I knew. I respected you, but...I made excuses not to think you were a good person. 'N I was sure you hated me, which made it easier."

"Easier?"

"...I don't often hafta deal with people I've killed before."

That made sense, but the reminder that he had killed people - people, multiple - was chilling. "Yes, I can see how that would be...a bit awkward. All the same, I have to admit that my evaluation of you has changed. Even with what I know. You aren't a violent person most of the time. You are kind and considerate towards Attie. You have a tendency to rescue helpless creatures; according to Undyne, that was true even before the barrier fell."

Sans muttered something probably uncomplimentary towards Undyne, looking away. "Jus' because I don't dust kids doesn't make me a good person. It means I'm not actually insane. Yet."

And didn't that bring up all kinds of questions. "You mean because of the RESETs?" Her own experience - running away from home, living on the streets, in and out of mental hospitals - made it very clear just how horrifying the effects of time magic could be. And the idea that she'd put Sans through something similar...

He didn't reply, but the look on his face said enough.
"I still think you did more than most people. I've worked with a lot of monsters; I've seen what they're like, good and bad."

"'Less terrible' isn't the same as 'good.'"

"Alright, then. What makes you so terrible?"

A grim, almost satisfied look came over Sans's face. "I have eight Levels Of Violence, 542 Execution Points. I've killed 30 people, including Graciela Lira. And you."

His tone was antagonistic, challenging. He was daring her to hate him, showing her the ugliest side of himself. And oh, it was ugly.

When Toriel took her in, right after she fell through the barrier, it had become very apparent that Frisk knew nothing about how things worked in the Underground. Toriel quickly fixed that. She explained the basics - bullet patterns, how to fight and show mercy - then set up a fight with one of the froggits that hopped around the Ruins chasing flies.

She told Frisk to try fighting, to prove she could take care of herself. Eager to please this mysterious monster who had offered to help, she did as she was asked.

The froggit had disappeared in a cloud of dust after a single hit.

She didn't remember much after that, just a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach and screaming and horror and what have I done and claws tugging at her and eventually a flash of fire and incredible pain and waking up in a bed of flowers. That was her first load, her first death.

She had not made the same mistake twice.

Sans, on the other hand…

"Why did you kill them?"

"What?"

"Why did you kill those 29 other people? 28, I guess; I have a pretty good idea of why you killed Graciela."

The door opened before he could respond, and Cory walked in with their food. She was cheerful enough that Frisk was reasonably sure she hadn't overheard any of their conversation, but made a mental note to leave a substantial tip just in case.

Sans seemed to deflate as soon as the door was shut. He ignored his spaghetti, instead playing with the sleeves of his turtleneck. "The first...four? Five? Five. The first five were on the streets. Paps...Papyrus 'n I...lived rough for a few years. Lots've folks wanted free EXP, didn't think we could defend ourselves. I proved 'em wrong.

"A lot of the rest were...well, there was this big competition to find a new Royal Judge. Lots of fights. We were supposed to hide ourselves, use generic bullet patterns. I was good at that. Dusted...twelve that day. Got the job, even though I wasn't the strongest. I've never been told why.

"After that I had two or three cases a year as the Judge. Didn't hafta kill all of 'em, but most either deserved the death penalty or wouldn't surrender when I'd beaten 'em. I didn't count, just kept track of LV and EXP, but it's not hard to do the math. Hid my stats from Papyrus. He started callin' himself "Boss" less than a year after I was made Judge and moved us to Snowdin, and...it would've
raised too many questions."

"So...he thought your stats were lower than they were?"

"Maybe? He knew I was lyin', but he could never make me show 'im the truth."

There was a look on Sans's face that she couldn't decipher, but it didn't seem pleasant. If he hadn't told Papyrus how much HP he had - for example - he could've been dusted accidentally. "So he had no idea just how low on HP you were last month, when Undyne and I came and picked you up."

"Probably not."

"So it's sheer dumb luck that he didn't kill you outright."

He wouldn't meet her eyes, but gave an uncomfortable shrug.

"Alright. What else?"

"I'm an asshole. A terrible brother. I'm a liar, a thief, and a conman. I picked your pockets all the way across Snowdin-"

"So that was you!"

"-'N I break promises all the time. I eavesdrop and either sell information if someone's willing to pay or use it as blackmail. I'm a regular piece of shit."

It was a hefty rap sheet. Getting involved with someone like him was not something to take lightly, even without the added pressure of her position within the Kingdom of Monsters. "And even with all that, I'm still pretty attracted to you."

There was no reason for Sans to start coughing, that she could tell; he still hadn't touched his food and skeletons didn't appear to generate saliva. "That's pretty sick, kiddo."

"Oh?"

"I'm a murderer. You're not. And you say...that to me? What does that say about you?"

Frisk felt a wry smile tug at her lips. "That I'm a stereotypical single mom. You took care of my kid, Sans. You voluntarily spend time with her whenever you can. She loves you, and I think you love her back just as much. You rescued TOSS and Pele; you saved my life. You separated yourself from your brother, which shows a level of courage most people never have to find in themselves. You seem to be a good judge of character, and a fair Judge in general. All of that tells me that you aren't just your LOVE."

"I killed you."

"And let me go. I was, technically, breaking the law by being human, and it did merit the death penalty; you didn't hunt me down or do anything to hurt me until you were ordered to. You had plenty of opportunities all across the Underground, but you decided to be an annoyance instead of a threat. If anything, I suspect your presence scared off a few people. It definitely distracted Undyne at least once. And even when we were engaging in our prank war over the years, you never did anything that would seriously hurt anyone.

"You've changed so much, even in the past few months. Yes, you've done bad things in the past, but I believe that you aren't a bad person at heart. You have an integrity about you that just can't be
"faked."

"I'm a conman."

"And a good one, from what I've seen. But I'd like to think I'm not a bad judge of character myself, and I think you've been honest with me."

He ran one head over the top of his skull, studying his spaghetti with a blank expression.

"If you aren't interested in me, then I would appreciate it if you would respect me enough to say so up front. I'm a big girl; I can handle disappointment. But otherwise...could we give it a shot?"

A long pause followed. There was a small crease at the corner of each of Sans's eye sockets - a strangely human-like thing, despite the lack of actual skin - that slowly smoothed over until Frisk could safely ignore the part of her that was curious about how his face would feel under her fingers.

"yeah," he muttered gently to his dinner. "we can give it a shot."

"Are you sure? I don't want-"

Abruptly he looked up, and there was something intense in his gaze that momentarily made her forget how to breathe. "Frisk, you mean more to me than anyone, I think. More than Paps and Attie. And it's...different from how I feel about them. It's hard to believe that you would want anything to do with me, after...everything, but if you really do then I'll do whatever I can to...uh...are you okay?"

Frisk resisted the childish urge to cover her face, which was probably as red as Sans's spaghetti sauce. "Yep! Just. That's. Great!" She cursed herself internally as she chugged half her glass of water.

"...Okay, what'd I do?"

He'd gone and proved himself just a tiny bit more attractive than she'd expected, that's what he'd done. "It's nothing bad. I just...appreciate it. Thank you."

Oh, who was she kidding? She'd never been in a relationship. She'd gone from a teenage runaway to the savior of monsters and their official ambassador, and then Attie had come along and re-routed her whole life, and none of that left any time for romance. It wasn't like one-night stands held any appeal for her, even if her schedule had allowed for such a thing.

So while she wasn't technically a blushing virgin, she was close enough for it to not really matter.

He was still looking at her with a concerned expression and those adorable little crow's feet by his eye sockets. "Are you...embarrassed?"

Yes, but not because of him. "I'm sorry; I think I made a fool of myself..."

"What? No, no. I thought I had…"

At least once he started blushing it made her feel a little less left out.

"Well. I, um. Let's eat before this gets cold, then we can talk about...maybe going on a proper date?"

Something in Sans's eye sockets shifted; the little lights inside looked brighter, maybe, or more
focused. Even his smile looked more real. "Tibia honest, I think that's pastably the best idea you've had all date."

Frisk narrowed her eyes. She couldn't tell if that was impressive or terrible, but if it was a pun war he wanted...well, she wasn't just going to let him win, strangely attractive smile or no.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: hmmm...over lv3, huh. you killed some people on purpose, didn't you? that's probably bad. though, maybe some of it was in self-defense...i don't know. help me out here. i wasn't watching. anyways, don't do that.

Videos of astronauts who forgot about gravity are hilarious. Don't just take my word for it.

I've done all the math, and Sans's numbers are - at the very least - feasible. He's not proud of it, but like many people who have done wrong and "gotten away with it" he feels like the other shoe is going to drop at some point. Needless to say, Frisk doesn't react the way he expects.

Also, Italian food is delicious.

A huge thanks to everyone who has read this humble story and left kudos and comments! I'm incredibly touched by your kindness. We definitely have more story yet to come, so stay tuned!
Sans couldn’t keep the grin off his face. Not even the reappearance of Little Tim and Schreger in the apartment could bring him down to earth. At least his utter disregard for anything and everything around him had disturbed all of his remaining roommates to the point where they left him alone, for the most part. Or maybe they were plotting again and he was too distracted to notice.

Frisk liked him. Frisk was...attracted to him? Was it even possible for a human to be attracted to a literal skeleton, given their physical makeup??

Probably. There were some really, really messed up humans. Oh, most of them were generally good people (in the same way that most monsters were generally violent assholes), but a few of them said and did things that even monsters wouldn’t consider.

But...Frisk wasn’t one of those people, right? Or maybe she was, and she was very good at hiding it.

Sans was selfish enough to overlook it if she was, honestly.

Well. There was still time for her to come to her senses. In between some genuinely bad puns they’d managed to schedule a date for that Thursday night, the first night they both had time off. (Undyne would’ve probably given him whatever time he wanted given the circumstances, but had little authority over Frisk’s schedule. Unfortunately.)

The date was close to some human holiday celebrating love, but all that meant to Sans was that the background presence of pink and red hearts that had been lingering since he escaped Boss suddenly took over everything. Even the library. Even the gym. When he asked, Frisk insisted that she didn’t celebrate the holiday and didn’t need anything, but the whole event remained a mystery. Given what humans thought of love he was too afraid to look it up online, so he took her word for it.

Sans had to work a shift that morning, and Frisk was going to spend some time in the office, but they planned to meet up around 6 and decide dinner from there. He’d offered to take her out (where, he had no idea; he’d hoped she’d volunteer something) but she said that after a long day, just dinner and good conversation would be perfect.

That was the word she’d used: “perfect.”

It made him feel nervous and pretty damn irritated. He wasn’t good with words the way she was, and he’d hoped to make it up to her by doing something special. But Frisk didn’t want something special; she wanted to meet at her place, walk over to someplace close (probably Grillby’s), and
walk home.

Which sounded pretty great, all things considered, especially since Sans still owed a certain fire elemental petty revenge for conning him into washing dishes. Being there with Frisk would give him plausible deniability. But who to pin the blame on? And, more importantly, what kind of prank could he pull without tipping Grillbz or Frisk off?

Decisions, decisions…

Little Tim cornered him after several days of being off in la-la land. “And what has gotten into you? I thought at first it was revenge, but unless you and Dusty - or Ripper - had some feud the rest of us didn’t know about, there’s no reason for you to be so…” he waved a hand over the skeleton before him, “…happy.”

“Got a date,” Sans said before his head caught up with his stupid mouth.

“Oh,” the bear monster said, walking away.

That was it. No snarky comments, no little digs about how Sans couldn’t possibly have a date because he was a filthy mess. It was actually rather nice.

Thursday rolled around much faster than expected, considering the constant nature of time. He was so on edge waiting for the inevitable retaliation - from his roommates, from Frisk, from the universe at large - that he almost didn’t believe his eye sockets when he checked his phone.

Good thing he’d done laundry, at least.

A restless energy chased him all day. Sitting still was almost impossible, a rare problem for him. What if Frisk changed her mind? A few months of friendship seemed so short compared to the years they’d been enemies, or whatever one called the target of angry pranks. It seemed more likely that she would come to her senses eventually and realize that Sans was not the kind of person a nice girl would date. Or Tori would-

Oh Shit. Had anyone told Tori that he was dating her daughter? They were still meeting most weeks, but it was mostly tea and jokes. He’d been distracted that week, but then, so had she. He hadn’t even considered that breaking the news was an option. She’d forgive him eventually...right?

Time seemed to crawl by during his shift. Sans was fairly certain that no one was using time anomalies, but it sure felt like it when he looked at his phone for the fifth time in five minutes. The urge to text Frisk tickled his fingers.

You 11:34 AM
R we still meeting 2nite?

Frisky Dreamer 11:34 AM
Yes.

Her immediate response made him grin. So she was nervous too, then. At least he wasn’t the only one.

Of course, knowing that they were both nervous didn’t make going through his clothes that evening any easier.

“So, a date, hmm?” asked Blaze in Elemental, his flames flickering in mockery. “What kind of
monster would dare date you?"

“Especially with your reputation,” Travis snickered. “Is it Undyne? I bet my fins it’s Undyne. Or
does she make you call her ‘Captain?’”

“She’s a stickler for the rules y’know. Does she use handcuffs if you’re naughty?”

Sans ignored the pair of them. Let them think what they wanted; denying anything would only
give them fuel for their rumors. And it was part of Undyne’s job, wasn’t it, running interference
for Frisk? Even if someone believed them, it was better for them to target the Captain of the Royal
Guard than the Ambassador of Monsters.

It didn’t mean he had to stick around and listen to their stupidity, though. He grabbed the first
outfit that looked halfway decent and wouldn’t stand out at Grillby’s, then headed for the door.

“We’ll see you tomorrow!” Travis warbled. “Don’ bother comin’ back here tonight! No one wants
to hear that shit!”

Sans flipped them a rude gesture with both hands and stalked out of the apartment with as much
aplomb as he could muster. (Admittedly, it wasn’t much.) Of course he wouldn’t be back. Even if
they actually knew who he was going on a date with, he wouldn’t want to expose Frisk to these
idiots. And if they didn’t want him walking in at odd hours of the morning? No problem; he’d
spend the night in the gym again. He’d really gotten used to his little nest there.

And the locker room mirror worked just as well as the one in the apartment bathroom.

Well, he thought as he examined himself, Guess these old bones can’t get much better’n this.

The brown t-shirt he’d grabbed from his closet declared him a “fun guy” (with a picture of a
mushroom on it, of course), though the pair of jeans he’d grabbed were a bit baggy. He didn’t
think he’d ever worn them before, actually; they felt odd, especially compared to the shorts he
usually wore. Even his dress pants felt more natural. His sweatshirt didn’t do much to help the
look.

Eh. Whatever. Frisk knew what level of fashion she was getting with him, and at least everything
was clean.

With that out of the way, he set the alarm on his phone and curled up into his blanket for a nap.

The tune that served as the default alarm tone on his new phone was a bit too gentle to be really
effective, in Sans’s opinion. It woke him up slowly, not like the loud, harsh noises he’d used most
of his life. A quick glance at the blinking screen gave him the time: 5:33. It was later than he’d
hoped, but it wasn’t like he was late. Grabbing something he’d prepared earlier that week - would
it really work? Would she be upset? - he teleported to the park.

And made a mental note to find a closer spot to teleport to. It was a little bit annoying to have such
a long walk just to get to Frisk’s place, but there were no obvious alleyways in her area. Plus,
humans usually didn’t react well to people appearing unexpectedly. Made ‘em jumpy.

You 5:45 PM
Im here

Frisky Dreamer 5:46 PM
Give me just a moment; I’m in the middle of something…
Sans waited, loitering around Frisk’s hedge and trying not to look suspicious. Well. As much as a skeleton in a hedge could avoid looking suspicious.

It only took a few minutes for Frisk - also dressed in jeans - to find him and bring him inside. She was babbling a mile a minute, nothing like her usual, composed self, but he found it amusing rather than annoying. He’d been wondering where Attie got that habit.

“I’m not sure what to wear; I haven’t worn jeans in ages, except to do yardwork. And sure, Grillby’s isn’t fancy, but he still runs a tidy place...if only to throw people off...”

She was messing with her hair the whole time, and she wouldn’t look him in the eye. It was a bit funny, actually, how nervous she was; she had no issues (verbally) taking his head off when she was angry at him, but here they were about to go on a date and she was rambling.

Speaking of which...he checked his preparations, then grinned up at Frisk. “C’mere a sec,” he said.

Frisk gave him a Look that said she wasn’t amused; mostly nervous, but a little worried.

“Aww, c’mon. Where’s your sans of humor?”

“...You’ve been waiting a while to use that one, haven’t you.”

“Oh, at least a week.” What was the point of having a girlfriend if he couldn’t pun at her?

She gave a funny little half-smile, but shuffled over to stand in front of him.

“Now take my hands.”

She did.

“And stand on my feet.”

“...What?”

“No, seriously, just do it.”

“Sans, you’re crazy. I’ll hurt you, and-”

“No you won’t. You’re almost as skinny as I am.”

“No, I’m very much not.”

“Psh, couldn’t tell. Now come on...”

He could feel the tension in her arms as she reluctantly allowed him to pull her close, her bare toes resting on his sneakers.

When she was settled, Sans grinned up at her. “Do you know where we are?”

“...In my kitchen, acting like idiots?”

“We’re... on a date!”

There was a momentary pause as Frisk tried to process that statement, eyes narrowed on confused suspicion. Then her whole face lit up. “What? You’re kidding!”
He let her step back, then pulled off one of his shoes. A dried, squashed fruit was taped to the bottom.

Her laughter was pure music. “Sans...just...why?”

To make her smile was the real reason, but he couldn’t work up the courage to say that. “Only the finest japes for you, m’lady,” he said, tipping an imaginary hat like some old-fashioned human gangster.

Her smile and blush were worth it, even if she did make him clean up the mess the smashed date left on her floor before they headed out.

It made him feel a bit strange and shaky, being so bold, but it was better than seeing Frisk be timid. And that, in turn, gave him real confidence, which helped him maintain his composure, which helped with the strange and shaky feeling. Sure, there was part of him that was sure this was some kind of unsustainable emotional bubble - that as soon as his confidence failed, he’d go right back to a stuttering mess - but it was easy to dismiss those fears in the moment.

Grillby’s was only a short walk away, and the weather was pleasant: there was still a tiny bit of residual snow on the ground, but the evening was warm enough for Sans to notice the difference. A few people they passed didn’t have coats at all. Frisk took hers off for a minute when he pointed that out (she was spending way too much time around Undyne, to take that as a challenge) but put it back on after a passing breeze made her shiver.

At least until they got to the bar. It had been warm enough in Grillby’s with one fire elemental; once Pele had regained enough of her health and magic, the temperature had risen noticeably. Sans was already sweating a little from nervousness when they walked in, and the heat didn’t help. It wasn’t fair that he could sweat at all, really, given his general lack of skin, but…

“She okay?” Frisk asked, settling herself.

“Yeah, fine. Just...warm in here.”

“Oh.” She looked surprised. “I guess...I thought y-uh, skeletons couldn’t sense temperatures?”

It took Sans a moment to realize that she’d probably heard that from Papyrus. The thought didn’t have as much of an effect on him as it once would have. Or maybe he was panicking enough already that the extra panic didn’t matter as much. “Nah. Well, we aren’t as sensitive to it as fleshy folks, but we can still feel extreme hot and cold. Like going from early spring weather to middle-of-summer levels of heat, for example.”

“...Ah. I see.”

Pele walked up then and took their orders, flashing both of them shy smiles. Her English had vastly improved; her words were still a bit broken, a side effect of trying to speak a language that didn’t come naturally to her kind, but she clearly understood what was being said most of the time. It was amazing the difference three months could make.

“So. How’s your week been?” Frisk asked, not meeting his eye sockets.

“Pretty good? Sentry duty’s been quiet. How’s yours been?”

She huffed. “Busy. We’re still dealing with the aftermath of the Lira trial, for one. Most people accept that, at the very least, we had a reason for doing what we’re doing, but a few groups are accusing us of human rights violations.”
“Oh. I’m...sorry to hear that?”

“Don’t be. We’re a sovereign country; if we want to use capital punishment on assassins, that’s our prerogative. The irony of the situation is that a lot of the countries complaining use capital punishment as well, so it’s not like they’re morally superior. They’re just playing politics.”

“Huh. Do they want something from us?”

“Some do. Some are just trying to make themselves look better internationally, or appeal to an internal group. At the end of the day it won’t have much of an impact on our relationships with the rest of the world - heck, showing we’re willing to stand our ground has earned us some respect - but it’s still a PR minefield in the meantime.”

Sans shook his head. “Well, better you than me, I guess. It’d be a shitshow if I was involved.”

Frisk laughed.

It was much easier to talk after that. They didn’t talk about anything nearly as heavy, just little stories and anecdotes, but Sans found himself fascinated. The woman sitting across from him was far more clever than he’d given her credit for. Oh, he’d known she was intelligent, but he hadn’t expected her quick wit or her willingness to match him pun for pun when he started teasing her.

So when he casually dropped his plan to get revenge on Grillby into the conversation, she was completely on board.

See, Sans was a regular at Grillby’s. He knew everything about the place, down to the grain of the wood on the floor and the location of the secret keys to the back rooms. Even things like, say, the precise size of the salt and pepper shakers.

Plastic wrap was an interesting thing to try to handle, but using a little bit of magic he managed to keep a few dozen little pieces from sticking to each other. He demonstrated his plan on their salt shaker, carefully angling himself away from the bar and the other patrons.

“That’s clever,” Frisk whispered, tipping the salt shaker over. The small piece of plastic wrap fit perfectly under the lid of the salt shaker, so it wasn’t immediately apparent that anything was amiss, but when she tipped it over the salt inside was stopped by a thin film of clear plastic.

“Thanks.”

“But won’t this be more a prank on the other customers, instead of Grillby?”

“Nah. See I’m gonna do the ones in the back first. When someone complains ‘n he can’t figure out what’s wrong, he’s gonna swap ‘em out.”

“Yeah, that’ll be annoying. But won’t he suspect you?”

“Probably.”

She hummed under her breath. “Okay. Thought: if you have a way of...‘fixing’ the salt and pepper shakers in the back without alerting anyone, what if you mix it up a little? Just do some of them, randomly. We can stop back by in a week or so and do some more. Then we repeat the process until we get bored or Grillby figures out what’s going on. If he suspects anything, I can vouch for you.”

“Interesting...playin’ the long game, huh?”
“I’m a politician. It’s a balancing act.”

The grin she gave him should have been illegal.

It took a bit of patience to find the perfect time for what he wanted. Both Pele or Grillbz were in and out of the back rooms regularly, and Sans had no way of telling whether they were anywhere near the storage room where the spare condiments were kept. Both he and Frisk made small talk while canvassing the room, smirking at each other as they nibbled their fries and watched for an opening.

Thankfully a group of college kids wandered in not long after they finished their burgers and started making a ruckus. They weren’t being destructive, just...loud. Which meant that Grillbz had to try to calm them down while Pele took other orders.

“I’ll be back,” Sans said, hunching over to hide his profile as he disappeared.

He reappeared in the bar’s storage room, which smelled like vinegar and smoke. Rows of condiments ready to be put out on tables lined several shelves near the door, along with boxes of extra dishes and cutlery, but most of the room was filled with various buckets and tubs of bulk food items. A few dimensional boxes arranged in a row likely gave access to magical or perishable components...and possibly a few illicit substances, though hopefully Grillbz wasn’t taking any risks with Pele around.

Sans stepped over to the condiments and went to work. The pieces of plastic wrap he had with him fit nicely under the salt and pepper caps, and if he stretched them a little they barely fit under the ketchup and mustard bottles as well. It was perfect. He rigged a few ketchup bottles, almost a quarter of the mustard, and a few salt and pepper shakers. And because he couldn’t resist a classic, he loosened the caps on a few ketchup bottles as well.

Hunching over, he concentrated on the table Frisk was sitting at and took a quick shortcut back.

The noise of the bar after the relative quiet of the storage room made him wince. He almost thought the place was under attack, but it turned out that the college kids had just tried to roast marshmallows on Grillby. They wouldn’t make that mistake again. And hey, no one (but Frisk, who jumped when he reappeared) had noticed him gone.

“Well?” she whispered, leaning in close enough that he was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. “How did it go?”

“Uh. Good?” His fingers couldn't seem to stop fidgeting with the hood of his sweatshirt as he described what he’d done.

“Awesome! I guess now we’ll just have to hope for the best, right?”

“Uhh. Right.” In his nervousness, Sans grabbed the first thing available and took a chug...and barely suppressed a cough of surprise.

That...was not his drink.

Frisk was looking at him when he dared to glance up, her head tilted in fascination. “That can’t be pleasant.”

“Ts fine.” He took another long draw, careful to keep his expression even. Drinking straight mustard was...really strong, honestly, but the look on her face made it worth it.
She was very obviously trying to read his expression, to figure out if he was pulling her leg, but decided to err on the side of caution and act like everything was normal.

Which just made the whole thing funnier.

Sans took another sip. Actually, he was getting used to the taste; after the initial sour burn, it wasn’t half bad. “So, any idea what else we’re supposed to do on a date? I mean, this is great and all…”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Oh. Okay?”

Frisk grinned widely. “Don’t worry about it.”

Her grin faltered when, a moment later, Sans reached across the table to take her hand and she instinctively flinched back. Of course, that was right when Grillbz walked up to give them the check, so it could be shrugged off easily, but Sans had the feeling something was up. He paid over Frisk’s objections; it was the least he could do, really - and waited for her to explain.

She didn’t.

“Hey, Frisk…everything okay?”

She tried - and failed - to look casual. “Yeah, yeah, everything’s…fine…”

“Right. Somethin’ wrong with your hand?”

“No? Why do you ask?”

“You just…”

“Oh! Oh. Sorry; I…I’m a little nervous about the whole…holding hands thing, I guess. Stupid, I know, but…”

“Nah, it’s fine.” He shrugged. “Sorry for…”

“No, I should’ve said something…”

“Well, now we know.” He wasn’t going to blame her; he had sharp claws, after all. That, and he’d always been twitchy with physical contact himself. He’d only tried because the few times Frisk had touched his hand, it hadn’t felt bad at all. Tingly, maybe, but it lacked that itchy sensation that came with most contact.

She hadn’t even hesitated to take his hand back in her kitchen before they left, he remembered.

But Frisk was looking relieved, so Sans didn’t feel the need to elaborate.

“Wanna head out?”

“Sure thing!”

They swept out the door before Grillbz could ply them with drinks at the bar.
Fun fact of the chapter: Sans' prank may not seem like much, but consider this: Grillby is made out of fire. Plastic wrap is made out of very thin plastic. Do you know what happens when plastic wrap is exposed to heat?? Good luck getting that off, Grillby. (On the other hand, at least Pele won't get blamed for this...)

We have **YET MORE FANART from Venelona!** This time, it's Sans and his (lack of) pockets. And a very comfy chair. I see why he chose to wait for Frisk in the lobby. I'd probably hang out in a place that had comfy chairs like that, too, even if I didn't have to wait for someone.

I hope everyone has a great week! If you're stuck in a heat wave, please stay safe and cool. If you've been blessed with good weather, enjoy it while you can. :-}
The walk through Frisk’s neighborhood was long and quiet, and the Sans of another time and place would have been panicking. The Sans of the present was surprisingly content. This didn’t feel like a silence around Papyrus or Undyne or the patrons of Grillby’s, full of expectation; no, this felt almost...calm. Peaceful. Frisk was happy to walk beside him in silence despite their long history, and Sans was happy to do the same.

It was a disappointment when they arrived in front of Frisk’s house.

“Well, I guess this is where I leave ya.” He eyed the magical barrier that protected the house with skepticism. He remembered the nervous energy he’d felt when he passed through it last.

“Come here,” she said, grabbing his hand.

He didn’t even have time to tense before it was placed on the barrier. It felt strange - almost tingly? - under the bones of his hand, not at all like it usually did. The closest sensation he could come up with off the top of his head was when Grillby had grabbed his arm during a particularly aggressive conversation about a bill. Was that what warmth felt like to humans? It was pleasant, actually. He could see why they were so addicted to it.

The soft click of the disengaging barrier brought Sans back to reality.

“It’s ‘coded’ to you now, for lack of better phrasing,” Frisk said. She shifted her hand so her fingers laced through his, which was surprising enough after her comments at Grillby’s. Her hand was shaking a little. “You can come and go as you wish. Please don’t, you know, abuse it.”

“Uh...no promises.”

She gave him a look. “I’m serious, Sans. If I wake up again and find that you’ve snuck Attie out to the park...”

“Okay, okay, sheesh. I’ll behave. So...why give me free access to your house?”

“We’re, um, kind of seeing each other now. I was-”

“Huh?”

“Human term. We’re...we’ve gone on a date.”

Sans felt his face tingle. He just knew his cheekbones were reddish. “O-oh. Right.”

“Anyways. I was hoping that you’d, maybe, like to come inside?”
He considered this. There seemed to be some context that he wasn’t picking up. He thought it might have something to do with his roommates’ mocking jeers that they didn’t expect Sans back until morning. Dinner didn’t take that long, even for a lazybones like him, so then what…?

Well, any excuse to spend more time with his two favorite humans was good in his book. “Sure. Sounds great.”

His girlfriend?? - gave a short, anxious smile that put him on edge. Was it the touch thing again? He loosened his grip on her hand. “...Frisk? You okay?”

“Hmm? Yeah, fine.”

“You don’t look fine. You look like you’re walking into MTT’s hellhole, not your own house.”

“What? Oh! Oh, no, I’m okay. Just...a little nervous. It’s been a while since I’ve...done this.”

Done...what, exactly? “Didn’t you have Tori over for tea last week?”

“I’m not dating my mother. It’s...ugh.”

“Okay, okay.”

Out of courtesy, Sans let Frisk open the door with her key. He pretended not to notice how her hands were shaking even harder, causing her to fumble. Something was really bothering her; she hadn’t reacted like this even when he took her hand near Grillby’s, so it probably wasn’t that. With no actual dating experience of his own he couldn’t tell what it was, though. Was there some secret dating ritual that he was missing? He instinctively braced himself for the worst.

What he got was a seat at Frisk’s breakfast bar and a mug of the king’s favorite tea. He sipped the tea slowly, mourning the loss of the comfortable silence from the walk over. He’d messed up somehow, he knew it. It was only a matter of time before she asked him to leave, and he’d never see her or Attie again.

...Actually…”Frisk?”

“Hmm?” She appeared to be using the hot mug to warm her hands instead of drinking the contents.

“It’s, uh, really quiet here.”

“Yeah, it’s...oh! Yeah. Attie’s over at Mom’s place for the night. Since, y’know…”

He didn’t know, and that’s what was making him twitchy. “...Okay.”

The tense silence resumed.

Then, something shifted. Out of the corner of his eye socket Sans saw Frisk raise her mug, down the contents in three huge gulps, and slam it down. She muttered something he didn’t catch and took a deep breath. “Sans?”

“Huh-hmmmmmm??”

Her lips were on his mouth. Her lips were on his mouth. It couldn’t be pleasant - he hadn’t had time to prepare for it - but she seemed to be doing alright for herself. He kissed her back as well as he could, reaching for her hand…

...But her hand wasn’t there. He was disoriented for a moment before he felt…
...Why was she putting her hand *THERE*?

“Uh, F-Frisk?”

“Hmmm?” She wasn’t deterred by him breaking the kiss; she simply moved on to doing *something* with her mouth on the vertebrae that formed his neck. It was too much touching, he wasn’t ready-

“W-what…”

Oh.

*OH.*

His roommates didn’t expect him home. Attie was out for the evening. They were *alone*. Frisk thought…

...Frisk *wanted*…?

Her hands had been *shaking*.

“W-wait, wait.  Wait.”

She pulled back. “Huh? What?”

“How *could* he explain this? He knew what sex was - intellectually, at least - but the reality of it suddenly seemed to big to even process properly.

“Oh.” Frisk retreated all the way into the kitchen. In the low light, he could see her rinsing out her mug, her back to him. “Sorry,” she called. “I thought it was… I thought you wanted that. Me.”

He didn’t need to see her to know she was blushing. “Frisk, hey, what’s-”

“…It’s my bad, I shouldn’t have assumed…” When he turned the corner into the kitchen she was bent over the drying rack, not even pretending to be busy.

Touching seemed like the last thing to do after such a dramatic twist in his evening, but Sans couldn’t just leave her to assume he thought she was...untouchable, or something. She jumped when he stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her soft stomach, but it felt more like surprise than fear. He had no experience comforting girlfriends, so he settled for what worked on Attie. “Hey, now. None of that. Shh.” The way she was trembling almost made him let go, but he recognized the way she was breathing. “’C’mon, now. It’s alright. Is that why you were so jittery once we got to your place? ‘Cause you thought I wanted...that?”

She sniffled. “Well...yeah. I mean - it’s stupid. People have sex all the time. I just…”

“It’s fine. Hey, now; it’s fine.”

“I...uh, haven’t done that. Not except for the time when...when I got pregnant with Attie.” The words seemed forced.

Standing as close to her as he was, Sans could feel her whole body tense. This...this wasn’t just a bad break-up. This was something bad enough to make Frisk - the Frisk who had saved monsters and battled politicians - afraid. Something terrible had happened the night Attie was conceived, and she’d still been willing - had been *expecting* - to put it aside for him.
It was a thought that made his soul ache. “Frisk, I...wow. I guess we’re a pair, huh? I’ve...uh.” He gulped. “I’ve never done...that. Before. Ever. Y’know, little Mr. Low HP and all, ha.”

She turned in his arms, searching his face. Whatever she found, the thin facade of composure she wore crumbled. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed openly.

Sans pulled her in, tucking her under his chin. It wasn’t easy - she was much taller than her daughter; he only had a scant two inches on her - but she was so curled in on herself that it worked. After a tense moment both her hands latched onto his hoodie. “Why?” she asked, when she’d recovered enough to speak. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

He gave the question the consideration it was due. There were so many answers that came to mind, but he pushed them all aside. This was a time for - gulp! - honesty. “You’re important to me, Frisk. You’re the best thing I’ve ever known, you ‘n Attie. I can see you’re nervous about the, uh, physical side of things; so why would I wanna to hurt you?”

“Oh, Sans, it doesn’t hurt humans. It f-feels nice, most of the time. It’s just…” She trailed off as if unsure how to explain why she was different.

“Look. Somethin’ bad happened, yeah? You don’t have to tell me, especially not tonight. If you wanna share sometime in the future, well, I’ll listen. ’Ts what I’m best at: sitting and letting someone else do all the work. Right now? You’re shaking. You’re scared. What kinda monster do ya think I am, to get off on somethin’ like that?”

Her response was to burrow deeper into his sweatshirt.

“I really care about you, okay? I’ve looked up the statistics, too-”

“Of course you have.”

He pressed a hand against the back of her head. “Quiet, you. You’re havin’ a breakdown.” A quiet, wet chuckle was his reward. “Anyways, did ya know that humans have done a lot of research on relationships? ‘Ts like you’re obsessed with ‘em. I mean, with some’ve the ads you have it’s not hard to figure out, but...wow, really.

“Anyways, there’ve been studies on what causes, uh, couples to break up. Sleeping together early in the relationship was one of ‘em. I...hell, I wasn’t gonna even bring it up on a first date.” If not longer...but Sans had no illusions that this brilliant young woman would put up with him forever. Sure, he didn’t think there could ever be another for him afterwards, but that didn’t mean she was tied down the same way.

Frisk’s head snapped up, just missing his chin, and her eyes met his. “You...weren’t? But I thought...it’s just, a lot of monsters seem so...open about such things. I’m pretty sure I walked in on the Dogi actively humping each other more than once, but it’s kinda hard to tell the difference between...that and their normal attitude around each other.”

“You hang out around Undyne and the Guard too much. Not all of us are dogs. And...yeah, they’re a special case. A real special case.” He shuddered. Most of Snowdin had probably seen them doing...that at least once. They had no shame. “Sex is a bit different for monsters. It’s...gosh, how do I explain this. It’s a total sharing of selves.”

“I got the Talk; I know that-”

“Do you really? D’ya know how vulnerable that makes a person? One wrong move, and you’re dust. Or the other person is. It takes a lotta trust, and that...that hasn’t been easy to come by in a
long, long time. Some, like the dogs, take a chance and go at it like animals, hoping somethin’ll stick, but most of us...well, there are a lot safer ways to spend an evening.”

“Huh. That makes a lot of sense. I can’t believe I never thought of it that way.”

“Well, you’re human. You’ve been tryin’ to figure out monsters for years to help us out, and you’ve improved things so, so much. Ya wonder why the birthrate is up? Folks are willing to actually take stupid risks, now. We’re starting to trust each other.”

“Still, it seems like something I should’ve known. You looked into human stuff for me and everything.”

He snorted. “After everything you’ve done for me, is it really so surprising that I’d do a little research?”

She put her head back down and wrapped her arms around him. “No. Not really. I...owe you an apology.”

“Oh?”

“I judged you badly. I thought you’d be different. That you’d, I dunno, push me. I thought I was prepared for that, but then I broke down crying, and you weren’t even going to do anything to me anyways and I feel so stupid...”

“Hey, c’mere. Shhh. I feel stupid on a regular basis, so you’re in good company, huh?” The hand that swatted the back of his head was far too gentle to do any damage. “Seriously, I’m sorry I didn’t make m’self clear. I really...well, I guess I thought you wouldn’t be into that kinda thing, especially since you were nervous about even holdin’ hands and stuff.”

A deep breath. “Okay. And thanks.”

“Pft. No thanks necessary. You deserve everything and more. Just...next time, could ya tell me instead of just stickin’ yer hands down the back of my pants?”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Her shoulders shook, and it took Sans a moment to recognize that it was silent laughter instead of silent tears. “It’s not like there’s much down there anyways.”

“Hey! I take actual offense at that!”

“I don’t know why. The first thing you told Attie about yourself was that you didn’t have an ass.”

He groaned instead of retaliating. It was a fair point.

They stood like that for a long time, until Sans’s phone beeped. “Ten already. You wanna head to bed?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted the phrasing.

It didn’t really matter. Frisk was practically asleep on her feet and merely hummed in response. He shook his head. She was clearly exhausted from work and running Attie around. How she thought she was going to engage in physical activities for any length of time that night was beyond him.

Helping her down the hallway was easy. Apparently those workouts actually did something, despite his lack of muscles. He carefully opened Frisk’s bedroom door, wiggling it gently when it
stuck, and ushered her inside.

The bedroom looked terribly out-of-place, now that he’d seen more of the house. The mattress on the floor was made neatly, and her knick-knacks and alarm clock were all carefully arranged on the old box that served as a bedside table, but there was still an air of self-neglect in the emptiness of the space. Whereas Sans passively filled his room with all the junk he could collect, Frisk seemed to purge everything unnecessary from her personal areas.

Well, almost everything. A sturdy frame beside the bed held a picture he recognized but thought he’d never see again. It was the selfie of him and Attie taken so many months before. He wanted to laugh at the half-scowl, half-smile on his face. Who would’ve imagined, back then, how different his life would become?

Strange that she’d chosen that picture, though, when there were so many happier memories from that time. He should know; he’d sent them to her.

...Except they were all of Attie alone, weren’t they? He thought back. As far as he could remember, he’d never taken a picture of himself and Attie. He’d always assumed that Frisk wouldn’t want to see his ugly mug. Her kid was definitely more photogenic, anyways.

Frisk had framed the only picture she had of him and Attie together and put it by her bed. It was sweet, in a weird way he hadn’t thought her capable of; like one of those sappy romance movies Papyrus and Undyne used to secretly indulge in once a month under the guise of ‘administrative research.’

Shaking his head, he settled the covers over her still shoulders and tiptoed out.

The urge to pass out on the couch was strong, but Sans resisted it. Yeah, Frisk was distraught, but he didn’t want her to get the wrong idea. No; he’d leave and maybe check back in the morning. He had a free pass through her barrier, after all.

It was impossible to fall asleep in his locker room despite the comfy nest. Frisk’s strange behavior kept rattling around in his skull. She hadn’t wanted to be touched in the completely neutral setting of Grillby’s, but once she got him alone in her home she’d stuck a hand down his pants. (He shuddered at the thought. He couldn’t tell if that was a good shudder or a bad one; it was too uncomfortable to examine too closely.) And yet, after she broke down, she hadn’t seemed to mind turning to him for comfort.

What did that mean? Frisk had only engaged in sexual activity once; why did she think it was expected? He knew that humans tended to treat such things a lot more casually, thanks to the fact that it usually wasn’t fatal to them, but surely even they talked about what they wanted and such, right??

And she had completely broken down after-

That was the point at which his mind connected all the dots, the little pieces of the puzzle he’d had right there in his lap for months and had never actually put together.

The complex issue of physical touch aside, Sans had only seen Frisk react so dramatically twice before. Once was when he told her that he was aware of her time-space shenanigans; the other was…

“He...he hurt me, very badly, and due to the circumstances he was never brought to justice.”

...The other was when he’d attended that weird meeting with Frisk, and she’d been so rattled by the
guy sitting across from her that she’d all but bared her soul in her office. She hadn’t gone into
details, but there was more than enough to make a skeleton curious. He’d respected her wishes at
the time, hoping to probe Undyne later, but it hadn’t come up.

He pulled out his phone.

Suspicion led to horrified confirmation. Getting started was hard, but searching through news
archives eventually got him a name - Michael Penn - and a few pictures of a man with his arm
around Frisk from monsters’ early days on the Surface. The highly sanitized personal website that
bore his name was full of self-platitudes and vague assurances that Mr. Penn wasn’t the disgusting
person Sans suspected he was.

And every single picture showed the same man: wide, friendly face, dull green eyes, brown hair.

A very familiar shade of brown.

Frisk’s hair was brown, yes, but it had red highlights that were absolutely fascinating. Highlights
Attie’s hair lacked, for all she looked like her mother in every other way as far as Sans could tell.

Of course Frisk had refused to tell him what this asshole had done to her. Of course Undyne - for
all her fierce friendliness - had been vague about what she suspected, and adamant that Frisk never
be left alone.

Because Michael Penn was Attie’s father.

All the little bits and pieces added up. Frisk didn’t have an issue with touch, like he did; she had an
issue with intimacy and control. She didn’t have a man in her life because the only one to ever try
had done something so terrible she was better off alone. Attie didn’t have a relationship with her
father because her father was only interested in one thing, and it wasn’t parental responsibility.

Sans couldn’t imagine the level of depravity necessary to create a child by force. It was bestial,
something only an animal would do. Even animalistic monsters treated their mates with more
courtesy.

She’d been so young, too. A frantic search on his phone revealed that human gestation took nine
months, and there was an old press release regarding Attie’s birth about a year and a half after the
barrier fell. As he remembered, Frisk was only seventeen at the time. A teenager, not yet an adult,
by human standards.

She was the Ambassador of Monsters, the savior of all monsterkind, and they had done nothing to
save her when she needed it.

Sans had done nothing to save her.

As much as he was afraid of her back then, as much as he was sure she hated him, he wanted to
believe that he would have taken a fatal hit before he let someone do something so disgusting to
anyone. Had he willingly overlooked something that could have prevented it? How had he missed
even the aftermath of something so terrible?

And yet...if he had intervened, then Attie wouldn’t exist. It was confusing. Attie was one of the
best parts of his life, and yet he wished she’d never been born. Or...did he? No; impossible. But as
wonderful and delicately beautiful as his budding relationship with Frisk was, he would’ve given it
up in an instant if it meant sparing her such an experience. The thought of seeing her with another
man made his chest ache, but seeing her happily married to someone who treated her right
would’ve been worth it.
Instead, Frisk had run afoul of someone who looked at the nervously friendly kid she’d been and taken advantage of her in the worst way Sans could think of.

Of course, he realized, she must have come to terms with all this years ago. Her treatment of Attie showed genuine love and care. How had she ever figured out how to look beyond the act and see the person who was a direct result of that act? How did she brush her daughter’s hair at night without seeing echoes of her daughter’s father?

Frisk was far, far stronger than he ever gave her credit for. Not physically, but somewhere deep in her soul that no magic or machinery could measure.

That should’ve been terrifying, but Sans couldn’t bring himself to feel afraid. There was something awesomely, heartbreakingly beautiful about the way she always seemed to take the most terrible and disgusting parts of life and make something glorious out of them.

Atlas Hope Dreemurr. The name of an ancient legend that held up the world, and the last remaining contents of Pandora’s Box. A fitting name, indeed.

After several hours of running all that through his head, Sans realized that sleep just wasn’t going to happen. He had a shift that evening up at his sentry station, but until then his day was free. That left plenty of time for the important things in life.

Like breakfast.

There were quite a few options, really. A glass of the juice he’d stuck in his inventory would be the easiest, but now that he was gradually working his way back up to a proper solid diet juice wasn’t as satisfying. His apartment had a kitchen...and six people who had ganged up on him less than a week prior. Going out to eat was probably the safest bet, but he really didn’t want to associate with people at the moment.

Actually...there were two people he did want to associate with, and one of them had just effectively given him a key to their house.

The sky was still dark when he made the trek from the park back to Frisk’s house, though the street lights in her neighborhood ensured that he had no trouble finding his way. He hesitated when he came to the barrier, but slowly passed his hand through. Just like it had the night before, the barrier let him pass with a feeling like a gentle, happy sigh.

It appeared that Frisk was asleep, though she had gotten up at some point. The house was still and quiet and the lights were all off, but there was a half-full glass of water sitting on the dining room table that hadn’t been there when he left. Sans felt conflicted. Had she had a nightmare? Should he have stayed?

He emptied the water glass and set it by the sink, then steeled himself to raid the fridge.

Frisk’s fridge was...almost painfully organized. The largest drawers had fruits and veggies in them, instead of random odds and ends that were stuck there out of the way to get fuzzy. And it appeared to have logical sense, with similar items laid out next to each other on shelves, instead of having everything thrown together according to color or size or the Scoville scale.

Weird, sure, but it made it easy enough to find things. He poked around in the fridge for a bit, fascinated by the meticulous preparation (did Frisk chop everything in advance? Had she done that while he was staying with her, too?), and eventually pulled out a carton of eggs and some assorted veggies. And, after a moment’s thought, some bacon as well.
A low meow at his feet interrupted his thought process. “Oh, hey, TOSS. Y’hungry?”

TOSS insisted that he hadn’t eaten in days - weeks, even! - and that despite his healthy tummy, he was absolutely starving.

There was a dish in the kitchen and a plastic container of food under the sink, so Sans made the appropriate transfer. TOSS looked insulted by the meager portion he’d been offered, but after some complaining (and quite a bit of petting) he deigned to eat anyways.

A bit of sauteing and mixing later, and Sans had a perfectly serviceable veggie-and-bacon omelette. He nodded firmly to himself; he wasn’t completely useless after all! Omelettes were just stovetop quiches-

“Are you just raiding my kitchen, or are you gonna share?”

“Uh…” How had he not noticed Frisk sneaking up on him?? Some Judge he was. “Isn’t that somethin’ you’re supposed to do? Make breakfast the morning after a date?” He’d heard that somewhere…

Her grin widened. “I’m pretty sure that only applies if you actually spend the night, but thanks all the same. It smells great.”

“Heh. Thanks.”

See, the thing about Frisk was that she didn’t look like a victim. Even early in the morning and still half-asleep, she held herself with grace and poise. Like someone who was in charge of her surroundings.

Granted, when Sans thought back to his encounters with her in the Underground, he couldn’t remember her being quite so composed. Had she changed, or was he just seeing her more clearly? Or both?

He tried not to think about it too much. Frisk - who knew her kitchen far better than he did - retrieved a pair of plates, despite TOSS doing his best to get underfoot, and the omelette was distributed and put onto the table. It was weird; Sans had lived with her for weeks while recovering from Papyrus’s treatment, but he had never actually cooked in her kitchen. He wondered what she thought of that.

They ate quietly. Sans wasn’t sure what to say, and it looked like the sleepy young woman sitting across from him was thinking hard. Still, he couldn’t deny that he was nervous. He’d obviously done something surprising; what if he’d messed up already?

“That was really good,” Frisk said, her plate empty faster than he would’ve thought. “If you want to sneak in and make breakfast more often, you’re welcome to it.”

“Heh. Thanks.”

“So. You look like a guy with a lot on his mind.”

“I...do?”

She rubbed under one of her eyes knowingly. “Didn’t get much sleep either, huh.”

It was an uncomfortable feeling, having her see through him so easily. “It’s...well, not nothing, but nothing you need to worry about.”
The eye-roll she gave him was impressive. “Oh, that’s going to be effective. Good thing you showed up in my kitchen looking like Undyne after a long shift and told me not to worry! There’s nothing that could possibly be wrong with this situation.”

“Oh, okay, okay.” Smartass. “I just...had a lot to think about, and I put some pieces together. I didn’t want you t’think it was your problem.”

“...Oh.” It took her sleep-fogged brain a few seconds to register what he’d probably stumbled upon, but the moment that realization hit her entire expression changed. She looked like a stone statue of a human, even her breathing still. Then she stood slowly, gathered her plate and his, and took them into the kitchen.

Sans waited while she stalled the conversation, washing the dishes and triple-checking that the stove wasn’t on. Eventually she couldn’t find anything else to do and retreated to the living room, gesturing for him to follow.

Frisk curled up on the couch, knees to her chest, and wrapped a thick, heavy blanket from her inventory around herself. On the surface, she looked composed: a veritable fortress of human emotion.

The way she was leaning slightly towards him told a different story.

“Alright,” she said, voice barely audible. “What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Frisk was planning to tell Sans anyways. She wasn't expecting to do so quite so early in the morning, though.

And there you have it. Many of you fine folks already figured out who Attie's dad is, but Sans needed a bit more information to make the connection.

Michael Penn comes from a melting pot background and knows several languages, including Japanese and Russian. He is also very charismatic: he knows how to put people at ease, and has a sense of humor that most people can relate to. He can read a room very well. All of this has served him well in his career as a lobbyist.

When the barrier broke, he was working with a civil rights group. He offered his services to the Kingdom of Monsters and helped secure their path to citizenship. He moved on once monsters secured their rights, and currently works as an independent consultant for various groups. He was most recently part of an economic meeting between the Kingdom of Monsters and Japan, in which he was part of a delegation from an international alliance of energy companies.

Seriously, though. Guy's an asshole.

And any resemblance to current news events is, actually, coincidental. I had this plot point settled over a year ago. Life imitates art, I guess.

Also, Frisk, maybe give a guy a warning before harassing him? He's into you, just give
him some time...

Thank you all for your patience with my sad self, and I hope you're enjoying the story so far!
In Which Burdens are Shared

Chapter Summary

...And Frisk reveals something she’s been carrying for a very long time.

Chapter Notes

Heads up! There are frank and non-graphic discussions of sexual assault here. Mind the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Frisk made a noise that sounded like laughter, but Sans couldn’t detect any amusement in it. “You want to know everything, huh. Everything. Why don’t you start with what you know? Or what you think you’ve pieced together?”

It was painful to watch her sitting there, with all the fragile strength of a cracked vase one breath away from shattering. Her face was hidden, her loose hair draped over her shoulder and shielding her face, so Sans slid off the couch and knelt down next to her. Careful to let her pull away if she wanted, he let his hands cover hers where they clutched the blanket in her lap, as if he could hold her together with that. “I think you were forced into something you didn’t want to do, something so disgusting that even monsters would hesitate at it. I think we didn’t even notice it happening. And I think Michael Penn is behind all this.”

She looked down at their hands, unable to meet his eye sockets, but didn’t turn away from him again.

He tried to think of some way to make himself clearer, to get some reaction from her, but he had no idea how to broach the subject. Maybe he should give her a way out. “Frisk? Where did Attie come from?”

There was a long moment of silence that stretched out like a mountain road.

Finally, Frisk took a deep breath. “I...I haven’t told anyone the full story. Ever. I’ve told bits and pieces, but never…”

“I was sixteen. Three months after the barrier broke, I was working on getting us some kind of legitimacy. It wasn’t easy. There’s a lot of competition among different civil rights groups, and adding another group of people to the mix wasn’t “helpful.” We got a lot of pushback. There were two routes we could have taken: either enlist the support of powerful influencers and stand out from the rest, or melt into the general pool of groups that all promote each other’s ideas.

“I wanted us to stand out. I’d seen some of the headlines, and I could not in good conscience agree with everything some of these groups came up with. It was changing so quickly, too; I didn’t want support for monsters to be buried by other ideas in a news cycle or two.
“So when I heard from Michael Penn, one of the most prominent lobbyists in the country, I was over the moon. It was our big break! He was the answer to everything I’d been looking for! He had money, influence, charisma...he was the kind of person who could get things done. He asked to meet me in private, since monsters couldn’t leave the Underground very easily at the time, and I was so excited.

“But it wasn’t anything like I thought it would be. He didn’t want to talk policy; he wanted…

“Well. I gave in, I did what he wanted. I didn’t dare refuse. I knew very well that I was a kid trying to do an adult’s job; I needed what Penn could offer. I couldn’t afford to piss him off, not if I was going to get all of us out of the Underground. And...in that moment, I was petrified. He had a lot of information on me: things I’d never told anyone, really creepy pictures, even my medical history. It went back months. He’d been able to pull up information from before I fell into the Underground.

“I got him to say that if I did...what he wanted, he would give up all rights to any child that came from it.”

Sans wanted to vomit, to scream, to hunt this man down and tear him to pieces with his bare claws. “And he agreed to that?”

“Yes. Oh, I’m sure he didn’t mean to actually keep his word, but...he underestimated his secretary. He had her blackmailed to high heaven, but she had some remnants of a spine left. He’d made an audio recording of the whole...encounter. The secretary must’ve had access to his recording devices; she passed the tape on to me with a note that it was the only copy she knew of. I assume she swapped it out for a blank tape or something since I never heard anything from either of them about it.”

Frisk retrieved one hand and gestured, opening her inventory. A moment later something that looked like a miniature cassette tape - something Sans hadn’t seen in years, since the Underground - fell into her hand. It was an old-fashioned device, and because of that was probably far more secure than anything digital; after all, how many people would have the equipment or the time to play back something like that?

“I have evidence. I made backup copies - secretly, and without anything internet-capable - and I have them stored securely in case something happens to me, but I keep the original handy. I...wanted to destroy it so many times; it’s a reminder of the worst day of my life. But if that bastard ever tries to lay claim to Atlas, this gives me a chance to fight back. He verbally agreed that he would have nothing to do with any child that came from our...encounter. The full recording shows that I was blackmailed into it. I think he’s suspected, all this time, that I might have something like this; that’s why he didn’t try to blackmail me again. I could destroy him if he tried.”

“Why not destroy him anyways?”

“For Attie’s sake, mostly. There’s a stigma against children conceived under those circumstances. Many are aborted, killed before they’re born; many others are given up for adoption. Their mothers can’t stand the sight of them. If it was known that she is one of those children, well, there are many otherwise reasonable people who would see her differently. I’ll explain everything to her when she’s older and able to understand, and she can decide whether she wants to make those details public, but I don’t want a seven-year-old to hear the foul names children like her are called. Or to think of herself that way.”

“That...makes sense.”
She sighed. “I’m such a mess. Penn...I don’t want to give him more power over me, but I look at him sometimes and it all comes rushing back. That’s why I LOADed for that meeting with the Japanese ambassador last month, the one you sat in on. He just...he was there, and I couldn’t deal with it properly. I made a fool of myself.”

“Did it go better the second time? I couldn’t, uh, understand what was going on, and I was pretty out of it…”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, it went as well as could be expected. Ambassador Himura is quite the character, but I think we’ll get along just fine. I might not have even needed to LOAD, but...better safe than sorry.”

“Well, you’d know best. Actually...this might be a weird question - I don’t know how it works - but why didn’t you use your abilities after…”

“After I...oh. Well, it’s a weird thing: I have to feel very determined for it to work. It’s perversely easy when I’m dying - I don’t want to die - but otherwise, it takes a lot of concentration to SAVE or LOAD. And I wasn’t feeling very determined after being confronted with that level of blackmail, then seeing his smug face for months on a weekly - sometimes daily - basis. Believe me, I tried to LOAD, but...nothing happened. Being assaulted really messed me up on a mental and emotional level. I’ve gotten better at placing myself into a mindset that will let me SAVE, now, but back then it was all so new.

“I thought I’d lost the ability completely for most of our first year on the surface, actually. Nothing I tried did anything. I was deliberately ignoring all the signs that I was pregnant for a good portion of that time, too, which probably didn’t help.

“Then I finally went in for an ultrasound - that’s a procedure where we use sound waves to see inside the body - and...there she was. It was the most beautiful and most terrifying thing I’d ever seen in my life, and I’d been living with monsters for months. It was grainy, and a bit hard to see because she was only about fourteen weeks along, but the ultrasound tech took this picture of her yawning and...it just made everything seem so real. She had arms and legs and she started kicking up a storm when the ultrasound tech started playing pop music. I SAVEd right there on the examination table.

“I couldn’t go back after that if I tried, not unless I wanted to do everything over again-”

“Wait, what?”

“That’s how it works; I go back to my most recent SAVE, or I go back to the first moment I entered the Underground.”

Sans felt cold, and it took effort not to clench his hand around Frisk’s. She’d said it so casually, but to lose eight years...

“I found that out the hard way, after a few SAVEs in unfortunate situations. Really early on, before I even left the Ruins; don’t look at me like that. Besides...” she shrugged ruefully, “If I did LOAD, I would still remember. I’d have all the trauma with none of the political benefits. And make no mistake, Penn did help us. We never would have made progress as quickly as we did without him and his resources. What’s one person’s peace of mind in exchange for the safety of an entire race? Not a bad trade...if you’re not the one person.”

He tried to think of some way to comfort her. A vague memory of hands rubbing his in the dark, on that terrible night of Graciela Lira’s trial, flickered behind his eye sockets. Moving slowly, so
she could shift away if she wanted to, he took the hand not clenched around the tape in both of his. Nicking her skin with his claws would ruin the effect, so he was as careful as he'd ever been with his baby brother.

It was fascinating, the way her skin wrinkled and smoothed as he worked. He could feel the bones of her hand if he pressed in certain places but he didn’t let himself linger. Frisk was a creature of blood and flesh, not just magic, and it was her muscles that would cause her pain if she tensed them too long. He wasn’t sure if he was actually helping in that regard, but the soft squishiness he could feel between bone and skin was softer and more squishy and less clenched tight.

“I’m sorry,” she said, without any warning or context.

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

Sans looked up at her, trying to figure out what she could possibly be sorry for, and the guilt and shame he read in her expression made him want to break something. But there was nothing to break, he reminded himself; nothing but Frisk, and she had already been broken enough. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“Not that again. I know I wasn’t up front when I asked if you wanted to give...this...a shot. I know I did something stupid-”

“You were trying to save us, Frisk. You did save us. And while I’d give anything if it meant you didn’t have to go through that, look at what came from it. You have the best kid in the world, regardless of how much of a complete and utter piece of shit her dad is. That’s nothin’ to apologize for.”

She looked like she wanted to protest more, but the reminder of her daughter brought a fond smile to her lips instead. “She is the best, isn’t she.”

“Damn right.”

“It’s not that I wanted to be raped; you know that, right?”

He resisted the first thing that wanted to come out of his mouth - to call her stupid for ever thinking such a thing - but his underused empathy revived itself long enough to point out that this was a situation that actually required tact. Yelling at her when she was blaming herself for being a victim…that was something Papyrus would do, wasn’t it? Sans sighed. “I know.”

“But…Attie is the best thing in my life. I struggled with it for a long time, especially when I was pregnant with her. Some people said that keeping her meant I wanted what happened to me, but that isn’t true at all. I think she and I are both victims in this. It isn’t fair, what happened to me, and it isn’t fair that Attie will grow up without a father. But we have each other.”

Their eyes met, and Sans knew what she didn’t dare say. What she wouldn’t ask of him, maybe ever. She was too self-sufficient for her own good sometimes. “Look, Frisk, even if this…whatever this is doesn’t work out, I’m not gonna abandon you ‘r Attie. If you need somethin’, call me. I…well, I was never in your position, but I raised Paps for most’ve our lives. I know how hard it can be to do that alone. And…yeah, you have a lot’ve people to help you, but if there’s anythin’ I can do…”

He was cut off when Frisk raised her hand - and his with it - to her mouth. She didn’t do anything with his fingers, really, just held them there against her mouth, then moved them to rest against her
cheek. “Thank you,” she said, and he felt the movement of her jaw as she did.

“Uh. No problem.”

They were still sitting like that when her phone rang from somewhere down the hallway. Frisk’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then she grinned. “I thought of something you can do, if you really mean it.”

“...Sure?”

“Go pick up Attie from Mom’s house for me? Please?”

“Heh. Sure thing.” He let his hand linger for a moment against her cheek, then drew back.

“Thanks. I’d better get dressed…”

She seemed as reluctant to pull away as he was, but eventually stood and stretched. Which made those neat little cracking sounds that sounded a bit like cracking bone but were actually bubbles in cartilage, so it made her sound **completely badass** without actually hurting her.

“...What?”

“Nothin’, I’m goin’.”

It took him some time to get over to Tori’s place, especially since the bus was crowded. He managed to squeeze into a spot next to a group of fidgeting humans heading to work, restless and eager for the weekend, and let himself drift on the waves of their conversation. He almost missed his stop.

The guards out by Tori’s front gate gave him their traditional greeting (that is, none at all) so he ignored them and knocked on the door. And waited.

Nothing.

He rang the doorbell.

Still nothing.

Just as he was getting ready to pick the lock (and to hell with the guards), the door opened. “Sans?” Tori said, sounding a little sleepy still. “What are you doing at my door so early? How did you convince the guards to let you through?”

Sans shrugged. “They glared at me a bit, but it all went right **over my head.**”

She looked down at him - he barely came up to her waist, standing down on the front steps - and chuckled. “Good to see you aren’t **short** on humor, despite the early hour.”

“I’ve always been able to **rise** to the occasion.”

“Indeed; I rather expected you to **fall flat.**”

“Aww, Tori! High didn’t expect you to be so cruel.”

“Only in the **small** things; only in the small things.” She shifted away from the doorway, effectively putting an end to their conversation. A guard was standing against the wall next to the door, a pained expression on her face.
Tori ignored the guard and led Sans back to her private rooms. It still felt weird being back there, even if she did leave him in her living room with a request to wait while she woke up a bit more.

Apparently, he and Frisk weren’t the only ones who’d had a rough night; after just a few minutes, the soft tapping of feet revealed a sleep-tousled Attie wobbling down the hallway. She ignored his greeting entirely in favor of collapsing onto him where he sat on the couch, her face tucked into his sweatshirt.

The action was so much like her mother’s the night before that it made him want to hold her tight and never, ever let go. Who cared where she came from? Attie was Attie.

She was still in her pyjamas, a long pink striped shirt over pink pants. Her hair was a mess and her face had little lines from where her skin had been in contact with something wrinkled for too long. In short, she was the epitome of human grace and beauty.


“She’s out here with me.”

“Ah, yes, thank...Atlas! I told you to get ready for the day!”

The kid was summarily shooed off back down the hallway to change.

“Now then. Sans, what did you need? You did not answer properly.”

“Huh, guess I didn’t. Thought I could save you a trip and take the kid off your hands.”

“Oh?” Tori clearly knew something was up. Sans tried not to sweat. “And why are you here to take Attie home?”

“Okay. I know how this looks-”

“Especially given the circumstances I found you in the morning after the Lira trial.”

“...Yeah. That was actually completely innocent, I just wanna say.”

“And this, I presume, is not?”

“No, it is. Uh. Hear me out. Frisk and I had a long chat last week, and we decided to see if we kinda wanted to-”

Tori narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you telling me that you are courting my daughter?”

“...Yes? Kind of?”

“‘Kind of?’ It is a simple question.”

“We went on one date!”

“And yet, here you are.”

“Yeah. About that.” Sans glanced down the hallway to make sure no small ears were eavesdropping. Or big ears, for that matter. “Someone told Frisk to expect certain things after a date. Now, you wouldn’t happen to know who that was, hmm?”

“I do not...”
“You’re her mom, Tori. There’s no excuse for Frisk thinking she needs to jump straight into sex on a first date when she clearly doesn’t want to.”

For a moment he thought he’d gone too far, that his friend was going to lash out at him the way he was lashing out at her. Instead, she lowered her eyes. “I...admit that while I explained the basics of monster relationships, I did not go into detail. It is not something I ever thought she needed to know. She is human, after all, and she came to us nearly full-grown-”

“But she’s still your kid. This isn’t about monsters or humans; this is about Frisk thinking she needs to do certain things to keep a relationship going. Why didn’t you ever talk to her about that?”

“She is not helpless, nor is she a child. Humans have many, many resources available to them when it comes to relationships; she is fully capable of finding information on her own.”

“And what if she found the wrong information? Humans can lie just as much as we can. Someone put this idea into her head-”

“Are you upset because Frisk is more willing than you’d like, or because you took advantage of her?”

Sans stared at his friend, her face proud and fierce and guilty all at once. “Tori...I didn’t ‘take advantage of her.’ Nothing like that happened. I’m pissed because someone I care a lot about has this idea that she needs to give up something she wants to keep to make me happy. I just...don’t know what to do.”

Which was a bit more honesty than he’d been expecting to offer.

He knew that he was blaming Tori unfairly. Frisk’s anxieties could just as easily have come from her human parents, or friends, or someone at the embassy, or the internet. Or the asshole who raped her.

But it wasn’t any of those people sitting right in front of him, hunched over with the knowledge that Frisk was hurting and she could’ve done something to prevent it.

Tori rubbed her forehead. “I agree that I could have discussed this particular aspect of relationships with Frisk in greater detail, but in my defense she never seemed to require it. She had Atlas so soon after leaving the Underground, and at such a young age even for a human; I assumed that, if anything, she knew more about such things than the average human. She never mentioned a spouse or partner, so I assumed her views on such things were not the same as ours. I did not intend to neglect her.

“That said, I am afraid I can offer little insight into what the situation actually is. You surely know how self-contained Frisk can be; if she does not wish to share her thoughts, no one can pry them from her. And she is so terribly stubborn. Once she has her mind set on something it takes quite a bit of time and effort to redirect her.”

“So...what, then? Just pretend she isn’t having this problem?”

She smiled widely. “Give her something better. A physical relationship can be satisfying, in its own way; but monster or human, many women desire stability and loyalty in long-term relationships. Frisk is typical in this regard, for all she thrives in chaos. Show her that you will not abandon her, and that such...incentives are simply not necessary.”

Ironic words from someone who once organized a rebellion in an attempt to overthrow her husband.
and was subsequently banished for a hundred years, but Sans nodded anyways.

“Of course, that is not to say that the physical side of things should be neglected-”

“‘Mready,” Attie mumbled, shuffling into the living room. Sans grinned; she was dressed, still completely in pink, but her hair was a mess. He took the brush and hair ties Tori held out to him and got to work on that.

“Atlas, would you prefer to eat here or at home?”

“Home, please. My tummy isn’t hungry yet.”

“Very well. I shall retrieve your bag.”

It only took a few minutes to get Attie ready and out the door. With the heat of the moment past Sans didn’t think he could meet Tori’s eyes, and it looked like she was feeling the same. They said their awkward goodbyes over Attie’s head.

He tried not to think too hard about their conversation, about everything he had learned and everything he’d revealed. It was easy enough when there was a warm hand in his, but he had a feeling it would haunt him once he was alone.

Well, there was no point in dwelling on it, not when he had to figure out how to corral a little girl onto a bus. Attie had been sleepy back at Tori’s place, but the walk had woken her up.

“I’ve never been on a bus before,” she said. “I see them all the time, but Mommy or Granny Ree or Undie always drives me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What’s it like?”

“Like a big car without seatbelts. You’ll see.”

“Oh. Is it dangerous? Mommy says I have to wear a seatbelt. And sit in my booster seat, even though I’m a big girl.”

“It’s not dangerous. If there’s a problem I’ll get you out.”

“Oh. Okay. But why do we have to use a bus, anyways? Can’t you do teleportation?”

“I can’t teleport until I get past all the magic protection in this area.” He kept his voice low as a pair of humans walked up to the bus stop with them.

“But-”

“Hey, what kinda bird is that?”

“Which one?”

“The red one.”

She giggled. “Oh, that’s a cardinal!”

“Really?”
“Mm-hmm.”

“What sound does it make?”

She thought this over for a moment, then puffed her cheeks out. She appeared to be attempting to blow air out her puckered lips. He almost didn’t notice the bus pull up; whatever she was doing wasn’t anything near whistling, but it was really, really funny. Even if the only noise it made was a weird wet spitting sound.

They found a pair of open seats near the front of the bus, Attie by the window and him on the aisle. A few people gave them strange looks: a skeleton in a black hoodie with an ominous red logo on the front and a little human girl dressed entirely in pink were an odd pair, but Sans ignored the gawkers. Attie pressed her little nose pressed up against the window, giggling at the people outside, and tugged on his sleeve whenever she found something especially funny.

He almost regretted having to get off the bus, for once, but he didn’t want to keep Frisk waiting. He held Attie’s hand as she jumped out onto the sidewalk - it was quite the leap and she wobbled a bit on the landing - so he didn’t notice he had an audience until a little girl ran up to Attie and said, “I love your skirt!”

“Thanks!”

Sans relaxed; the kid wasn’t going to hurt anyone. Then he looked up. Standing behind the girl was an absolutely enormous human, taller than Undyne, with bulging muscles and tattoos down the arms. It was hard to tell what all of them were, but that shape on the outside of one arm was definitely a skull. With a snake coming out of one eye socket. That...looked painful.

The man caught his eye sockets and gave him a solemn nod: a gesture of respect from one caretaker to another. “Tina, bus’s here.”

“Okay, Daddy. ‘Bye!”

Attie waved back.

When the man turned, his daughter’s hand disappearing into his giant one, Sans did a double-take. What he’d thought were backpack straps going over the man’s shoulders was actually some kind of baby carrier, and another kid was sleeping inside, looking absolutely tiny against the broad back.

Kudos to that guy.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Frisk’s tape is called a "microcassette," and you can still buy them today. As Sans mentions, most people who got ahold of such a thing a) probably wouldn't know what it was, and b) wouldn't have the technology to play it. It's pretty hack-proof.

Also, at 14 weeks Attie would've shown up relatively well on an ultrasound. At that point she would've been about the size of a peach or an apple and Frisk would have been just starting to show, but past the rocky first trimester of pregnancy. Typically
ultrasounds aren't done at 14 weeks, but Frisk had one since she was in denial through the entirety of her first trimester and the doctor wanted to make sure all was well. So when she saw the ultrasound for the first time it wasn't terribly impressive, but Attie was far enough along to look like a baby. A tiny little fuzzy peach baby.

That said, if you or anyone you love has experienced sexual assault of any kind, please don't hide it like Frisk did. Report it to the authorities and get help. There are organizations that can help - I know RAINN is one, and they have a free hotline and chat options - but please, don't let it fester. Don't let medical bills keep you from getting the help you need. The details of certain programs seem to change all the time, but there are victim compensation funds that can help with that. Usually you do have to report the incident, though, so if you're in that situation don't wait.

And on that note, I wish all of you a safe and happy week! Next chapter will be less...depressing.
In Which Sans Moves On

Chapter Summary

...Which has been long overdue, really.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk was showered and dressed on a loose green shirt and tan pants by the time Sans and Attie staggered through the door. The poor kid had been stir-crazy when they arrived at the park and wanted to race home. That was fine. The annoying part was that she’d also declared any kind of magic “cheating,” and she was surprisingly fast for someone her size.

At least she’d waited for him at the door so he didn’t embarrass himself thoroughly.

“What happened to you two?” Frisk asked, eyeing both of them.

“I challenged Mr. Sans to a race and I ran really fast and I WON!!” Attie stuck a pose that looked suspiciously like one of Undyne’s. “And now I’m REALLY hungry!”

“Oh really.”

“Yep!!”

“I guess I’d better go get you some breakfast, then. We’ve already eaten; what would you like?”

“Can I have cereal?”

“You may have cereal. With milk or without?”

“Without.”

“Alright.”

A brightly-colored box of cereal was obtained from the kitchen, and Attie began carefully pouring the contents into a bowl. TOSS decided that this deserved his full attention; he perched himself on a nearby chair and watched the process with wide, unblinking eyes.

Sans didn’t like the way that furry tail was twitching, so he picked the cat up and gave him a scratch behind the ears as an apology. The low meows of protest slowly turned to purrs as he visibly relaxed.

He really had gotten huge. As a kitten, he’d fit comfortably on Sans’s hand; a few months later, and it took both arms to hold him. The fact that he was completely limp and making rumbly sounds didn’t help.

Frisk grinned at the both of them. “I fed him already, while you were out; don’t listen to him if he complains about not having food.”

“Okay, but... I fed him this morning, too.”
“TOSS! You bad kitty!” She gently scratched him behind the ears and he turned his head into it, completely unrepentant. “I thought you didn’t sound as hungry as usual! You’re going to get fat.”

“He’s already fat.”

“We thought so too, but no; we took him to the vet, and he’s just a big boy. He’s not even finished growing. He’s a healthy weight for his size, though; a bit on the heavy side, but not enough to be a concern. Most of that is just fluff.”

“Huh.” Sans gently poked one finger into the cat’s belly, careful not to do any damage with his claw. It sure felt fat, but then again, what did he know about fur and fat and that kind of thing?

“I guess one day of extra breakfast won’t hurt him.”

“He seems happy enough.”

Frisk made a soft noise of agreement. The hand that had been petting the cat shifted and came to rest on Sans’s wrist. “Attie?”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks for staying over at Granny Ree’s house. Did you have a good time?”

“Kind of. It was a little bit boring because she doesn’t have a lot of books or even a TV. Are you gonna tell me about your secret meeting now?”

“Yep.” She took a deep breath, one finger running over the small bones. “Mr. Sans and I went on a date yesterday.”

Attie tilted her head to the side and crinkled her nose. “Okay…?”

“Okay?”

“That doesn’t seem like a very big secret. Did you kiss him?”

The way Frisk’s ears turned red was fascinating. “I...no, why do you ask?”

“Because Undie says that dating means you kiss lots and talk about getting married and making babies, but she wouldn’t tell me how except that it’s really hard so you have to try a whole bunch and she’s never made a baby so I should ask you. And you’ve wanted to kiss Mr. Sans for a really long time.”

Well now.

“Right. Okay. So you don’t mind?”

“Nope?”

“Even though it means you might have to stay with Undyne or Granny Ree while we’re on dates?”

She thought about this for a moment. “Can’t I come too?”

“On a date? Well…that’s not usually…”

Sans gave Frisk’s hand a nudge. “We can do some things together, if ya want. Dates are things grown-ups do, but maybe when you ‘n your mom have some time we can all hang out.”
Attie let out a war whoop that scared TOSS so bad he jumped over the bony shoulder he’d been resting on, and both of them ran down the hallway.

“Attie-” Frisk sighed as her daughter disappeared. “I need to head in to work soon, and Attie needs to come with me…”

“Oh, uh, that’s...I didn’t mean to volunteer you for anythin’.”

“It’s not your fault; she just gets so excited sometimes. Maybe...let me see.” She closed her eyes. Her nose developed those funny little wrinkles that Sans always found funny. How did human faces wrinkle like that? Were they just that soft? Was she ticklish? “We’re going into the busy season, but I think...Saturday we should have some time? I have meetings all that morning with some folks from Vancouver about one of our proposed building projects, but that afternoon should be free. If you don’t have work…”

“I’ll check.”

“Alright.”

“I...uh. See ya later.”

Frisk smiled. “See you later, Sans. Attie! Come say goodbye!”

“Bye, Mom!” the little voice called.

“Atlas Hope Dreemurr, come say goodbye! Mr. Sans is leaving, and we need to head out too!”

Attie reappeared, pouting. “Can I stay with Mr. Sans?”

“Not today.”

“But Mooooom…”

“Attie, no whining. Say goodbye.”

“Bye, Mr. Sans,” she mumbled.

He ruffled her hair and left, dodging an impressive ambush by TOSS. Dumb cat was after his shoelaces. He’d have to remember to tuck them in better next time.

There was a sense of unease when he arrived back at his apartment, looking for a clean change of clothes. Everything was quiet; and yet, he could feel the presence of several monsters inside.

Waiting.

_Hunting._

It was ironic, he thought, that TOSS - an ordinary animal - treated him better than his fellow monsters. The cat might pounce, but even if claws were involved there was no malice; these people he lived with would smile while they tore him apart.

He unlocked the door carefully, turning the knob but keeping the door pulled shut. Nothing. A twist of his wrist and a light kick sent the door flying open, squeaking slightly on its hinges, while he took cover against the wall outside.

Silence.
He summoned a small bone and carefully made his way into the room. Little Tim was eyeing him over the top of a newspaper, but made no move to interfere. Sans knew better than to trust that; he could still feel the intent on the air.

“Hello, Sans,” the bear said, just a bit too loudly. A signal.

“‘Sup, Little Tim.”

“Good of you to make it back here. The captain kept you out for far too long.”

“If you say so.”

Two huge brown eyes narrowed. “Hmph.” A nose twitched. “...Human.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t smell like the captain. You smell like...human.”

“...What makes you so sure?”

“I know my nose. You normally smell of woodsmoke and cleaning chemicals - and it’s impossible to identify anything over that - or the awful stench of so many sweaty bodies. Today, you smell different.”

The library and the gym, Sans realized. Of course. So that was why the library had such a distinct smell; it was masking the humans who primarily used it, offering protection to monsters who dared to step foot inside. And who would question a gym, which probably reeked equally of humans and monsters?

But he’d spent the evening and a good portion of the morning in close contact with Frisk and Attie, and - unlike the previous times he’d been around them - returned straight home.

And Little Tim knew.

“Your lady is not Captain Undyne. She is a human.”

“Heh. What of it, big guy?”

“We do not appreciate humans around here.”

It was probably true. Monsters like Little Tim and Dusty and Schreger tolerated humans; they happily took advantage of whatever kindness or empathy came their way, but it wasn’t appreciated.

But they respected Frisk. Oh, the irony.

“What’cha gonna do about it?”

“We don’t want the stink of human in this apartment. If you’ll be carrying it around with you, you must leave.”

Sans heard more than saw the bedroom doors open, first one then the other. Four more faces (and Aaron’s obscenely huge abdominal muscles) glared at him accusingly. It appeared that in Dusty’s absence, Little Tim was in charge. “And if I don’t wanna go?”

He barely dodged the huge bear paw that shot towards him, trying to grab his hoodie. “If you
refuse, we will *make* you go. Boys?"

It was a melee from that point. Sans dodged *mostly* everything, but he hadn’t been prepared for Aaron to start flexing (*flexing???) at him as an attack. Once he knew what to look for he dodged that too, but not before the seahorse got a few good hits in and brought his health dangerously low.

His fist clenched around the bone in his hand, but something kept him from attacking. Something he didn’t want to examine too closely, but which pressing against his conscience.

Frisk had seemed so appalled when he told her how many people he’d killed. He’d expected that, given how clean her own record was, but…

*You’ve done bad things in the past, but I believe that you aren’t a bad person at heart.*

But she’d given him something like forgiveness, if he could be forgiven for what he’d done.

Maybe he wasn’t worth saving, maybe he was too far gone to ever really be a good person; but if Frisk thought he was, he was *not* going to give her any reason to think otherwise. Not for these assholes. Not even in self-defense.

*Right.*

A few steps, a false stumble...and his attackers were lured out of their room. They were like a pack of dogs hunting their dinner; four of them were closing in on him from the front and Schreger was trying to flank him again. It was less effective in such an open space and against someone who’d already seen that tactic many times before.

He gave them a wide grin and a sloppy salute, wincing a little when the motion pulled awkwardly on a cracked rib. “Whelp. Lovely as this’s been, I don’t have time to play with all’a ya.”

A quick shortcut took him into his own room, next to the dimensional box he was (still) borrowing from Undyne, and which he’d packed with anything of his that remained in the apartment. It was a small one - only about a cubic foot - but it suddenly seemed heavy and awkward to carry. He dropped it once; that was enough to alert the people in the room behind him that he was still in the apartment.

Sans adjusted his grip and took a decisive step sideways just as Schreger’s striped snout poked through the doorway. A moment later, he was in his locker room.

*Well,* he thought, *I’ve done it now.*

There was no way he was going back to that apartment. Screw six months’ rent; it wasn’t worth the risk of getting dusted in his sleep. So where to go?

It was dark in the locker room, but he didn’t bother turning on any lights. Exhaustion and his injuries were catching up with him, pulling his skull down towards the nest of blankets and pillows he’d left just a few hours before. He took a swig from the bottle of magically-infused juice he kept in his inventory and passed out.

His ringing phone woke him up, but he’d already answered it and muttered something resembling a “hello” before he registered what was going on.

“-worried,” Frisk was saying. “I know...it’s stupid; I don’t want to seem clingy, but-”

“Uh, sorry; could you repeat that?”
“...Are you awake?”

“Now I am.”

There was a noise that took him a moment to place, but it sounded like a muffled laugh. “Sorry, sorry; it’s silly…”

“No, what’s wrong?”

“My mom left me a voicemail this morning. She said a problem was reported in your apartment, and Little Tim is looking for two new roommates now. After what happened with the one guy - Ripper? - I guess I was just overly worried.”

“Ripper. And nah, I’m fine. Just couldn’t stay there anymore.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Ts nothing.”

“Ah.” There was a world of emotion in that one word: deep understanding and empathy, a bit of sorrow and no small amount of worry. But Frisk would not push if he didn’t want to share.

“I...found another place to stay.”

“Oh! Good. I don’t know what’s going on with Little Tim; he doesn’t like humans, but he generally doesn’t have a problem with monsters that I know of. I haven’t heard of any complaints from anyone - human or monster - who works under him; whether he likes them or not, I’ve heard that he’s a fair supervisor. I don’t know him outside that.”

Well he wasn’t gonna tell her what was really going on then, was he? He’d look like a liar. He’d already complained against Papyrus; what did it say that he had to dig himself out of another situation like this?

“I don’t want to pry, but...where are you staying?”

“In my locker room.”

“In your what??”

“Undyne set up a private locker room at the Pumped Gym for me when I was reinstated as the Royal Judge. It’s not bad.”

“Sans, you can’t live in a locker room! That’s awful!”

“Ts not much different from living in your office, really.”

“Then come camp out in my office again. I actually just had someone donate a couple camp cots; we can borrow one while you look for another place to stay. You wouldn’t even have to use the blanket nest unless you want to.”

He squinted into the dark room around him, dimly lit by the light from his phone. He wanted to refuse; leaning too hard on others ran against every instinct he had. Already, he was more attached to Frisk than he was comfortable with. The last time he’d gotten so close to someone was when he’d made the decision to take care of Papyrus, all those years ago, and look how well that’d turned out.
But somewhere in his soul he knew he was already lost. Even the thought of her name made something in his empty chest feel tight and hot like he was about to explode. Disappoint her? It would hurt less to tear one of his own ribs off.

“...alright.”

“Wonderful! I’ll be done here at...actually, you can get through the barrier on your own. Feel free to make yourself at home.”

“Okay. Uh. Thanks.”

“No problem!”

“Want me t’do anythin’?”

“I think everything’s settled, but thanks. You can check dinner, if you want; it’s in the slow cooker on the counter. Let me know if you want something different.”

“Okay.”

“See you later!”

“Yah. See ya.”

It was embarrassing to admit, even to himself, but he was actually looking forward to it. Getting to see Attie every day? Helping Frisk around the house? Eating something that wasn’t prepackaged? He’d find some way to survive.

A few minutes of packing later, and he was blinking bright sunlight out of his eye sockets. It was - he checked his phone - just after 2:00 in the afternoon, so he’d gotten a few hours of sleep after his altercation. He probably still looked awful where Aaron had gotten him in the side of the jaw, but between the juice and some rest he was doing much better.

And if one of the neighbors gave him a strange look as he walked past, well, hopefully Frisk would know how to smooth things over.

Being able to cross through the barrier by himself was strange, almost as strange as the feeling that came from the barrier itself. It was complicated; grateful and worried, a little afraid and a little attracted. Frisk was clearly burdened by what they’d learned about each other, but the strong undertone of joy at his presence made him blush.

It made Sans believe that this thing between them - whatever it was - could actually work.

It should’ve been impossible. They were too different: human and monster, pacifist and murderer, time-traveler and failed scientist. Frisk was, despite all her flaws, pretty much what he’d aspired to be when he still believed he could aspire to something: kind and generous and fiercely protective.

And she wanted to be with him. Seemed to need him, at least a little.

When had life gotten so confusing? What happened to the days when he knew his place in the world, rough and harsh though it was?

The thought hit him that back then, he would’ve happily killed anyone (except his own brother) to live the life he’d built for himself in this strange future. How many nights had he gone without food, desperate and weak and trying to block out his brother’s sobs of hunger? How many days had
he scrounged in the dump for basic necessities, terrified and sure that someone bigger would come along and dust him at any moment?

Yes, this was complicated in ways he’d never thought possible, but he had an abundance of food and clothing and warmth and inexplicable affection. He was safe and free and employed, even if both his jobs were shitty in their own ways.

He was a survivor, always had been. He knew how to keep himself alive. Just...this was uncharted territory, and he had no idea how to navigate it. The chance to have this strange, addictive relationship with Frisk - with all its terrifying closeness - was too powerful for words, but too enticing to ignore.

He set the dimensional box down in Frisk’s office...on the floor, because apparently when no one else was around her desk disappeared under a small avalanche of paperwork. It made something feel light behind his ribs, but the only feeling he could pin to the sensation was happiness. They were very different people, but at least they had one thing in common.

The books on the shelves that lined one side of the room caught his eye. Frisk had said to make himself “at home,” hadn’t she?

Sans carefully examined the rows of bright paper bindings, starting with a selection in Monster. Most of them were from the Underground and were fairly old, dating back to a time before English reading material was readily available. He’d always thought it was strange that monsters kept their own writing system despite speaking the same language as the humans above them. Then again, he was biased; given the prevalence of reading material from the surface when he was young, he’d had to learn both scripts.

To his shock, many of the books were on the topic of humans...and given the period in which they were written, they ranged from insulting to disturbing. One of them appeared to be a theoretical cookbook; he put that one back immediately and wiped his hands on his sweatshirt.

Why would Frisk keep books like that in her home? Sure, they were up on a high shelf, but it still seemed dangerous. He figured that Attie knew at least some Monster from the books she kept in her own room. What if she’d gotten hold of one of these? What if she learned what monsters had been, back before she was born?

He shuddered and looked for something else.

There were some more recent books in Monster, including several copies of a thin blue one titled, “Beyond the Barrier: A Monster’s Guide to the Surface.” It was a book put out by the Embassy that he’d heard of but never read, so he skimmed it briefly. Inside he found a carefully written and illustrated guide to some of the basic parts of life he’d learned to take for granted, but which folks still in the Underground wouldn’t be as familiar with. Little things like local currency, common greetings, symbols that indicated transportation and hospitals and civic buildings, and a map of the area with the embassy clearly marked. A pair of single-use bus passes and a small amount of paper money were tucked into the back of the one he was holding: enough, presumably, to get an enterprising monster from Mt. Ebott to the embassy.

The books in English spanned a wider range of topics. There was a significant science section with an emphasis on time theory and magical interaction: clearly, she’d been trying to figure out how her powers worked on her own. One dog-eared book with no title on the spine had a bookmark halfway in, so he popped it open. Vague notes in pencil - questions, mostly - dotted the margins, but all Sans could tell from them was that he was missing quite a bit of context.
The rest of the books appeared to be a mix of history, political theory, geography, fiction, and - upon closer inspection - language. There were several foreign-language dictionaries, and a small selection were in a script he couldn’t read but which looked familiar. Probably one of the Asian writing systems, if he recalled correctly.

Eventually, he settled on one of the science books that looked like an introduction to theoretical physics and started thumbing through. It was mind-boggling: some of the concepts seemed familiar, but the terminology was so different from what he’d learned back in the day that it was like reading a whole ‘nother language. Searching for each new word on his phone helped, but it made for very slow going.

About fifty pages in he heard the sounds of the garage door opening and closing, and he put the book down.

“Mr. Sans!!” Attie called, breaking into a run when she saw him emerge from the office. She skidded to a stop and carefully put her arms around him, the hug no less intense for being gentle. “Mommy said you might be here, and I’m really glad you are!! Now we can read stories and you can watch me while Mommy’s at work again and we can do fun schoolwork and it’ll be-”

“Attie, calm down!” Frisk called from the garage. “Mr. Sans is here to- Sans, what happened to your face?”

He untangled himself from the kid around his middle and reached one hand up to poke at the bruise. It didn’t hurt much anymore, at least if he left it alone. “Oh. Uh. One of the guys got me on my way out.”

“That looks terrible!”

It had probably looked worse before he drank that juice.

“Attie, go get the first aid kit from the bathroom. Sans, would you like Sea Tea or that green stuff Undyne likes?”

“Sea Tea?”

“Alright.”

Sans found himself shooed onto the couch and ensconced in a nest of pillows and blankets. The Sea Tea helped a bit, and the healing cream from the first aid kit helped a bit more, but the flowery pink bandaid Attie carefully stuck to his jaw did exactly nothing. It didn’t even cover the entire bruise. Still, she looked so proud of herself that he decided not to complain about how much it hurt to have her pushing on the injury. Something was probably cracked somewhere.

Or he had gotten so used to being uninjured that he was being a baby, one of the two.

It was nice, having someone fuss over him. If someone had told him six months back that he’d enjoy the soft pillows and the low chatter and the little touches Frisk kept giving him, he would have laughed. He was far from helpless - he could take care of himself if he had to, and his injuries probably weren’t serious - but this was much more pleasant.

The next time Frisk let her fingers rest along his wrist, he shifted and took her hand in his. She jumped - had she not realized what she was doing? - but grinned at him when he tugged her a little closer.

“Thanks,” he said, with as much meaning as he could muster.
He wished he was better with words; he wished he could express the strange and complicated and utterly insane feelings she produced in him. What were words against the desire to stay right there in that moment forever, watching her smile at him as Attie giggled at TOSS somewhere behind the couch?

“Anytime, Sans.”

But maybe she understood anyways.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans hasn't realized that he's technically moved (back) in with his girlfriend. Nor has Frisk. If you want a laugh, imagine Undyne's reaction to these two pieces of news.

And Sans will be just fine. This is hardly the worst injury he's had - in this story, even - and with a little magic and some good rest he'll be as good as new.

Less plot this time, but he finally moved out of his apartment! Those guys were no good, but at least he tried. Guess he'll have to hang out with Frisk until he finds a new place to live.

Will he survive? Will the world? We'll find out next week!

(TOSS would like you all to know that he hasn't eaten in days, and would someone please fill his food bowl already??)
The Trouble With Caring

Chapter Summary

A young woman counts her blessings and finds a significant imbalance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk flexed her legs, letting her shoulders sink further into the water. She imagined the weight of the past month or two pushing her down. Diplomatic activity was picking up with the warmer weather as travel got easier, and her schedule had been incredibly full. Then there was the monumental task of keeping up with the rest of the world. Her aides were well-trained - many of them had been with her since the first treaties were signed, or shortly thereafter - but some things required her personal attention.

She hadn’t seen her daughter for more than twenty minutes at a time in at least two weeks.

Sans was a lifesaver. With both Asgore and Toriel doing their share of work as well - both administrative and diplomatically - they couldn’t watch Attie. Usually Undyne or one of the dogs took over when things got busy, but allocating a senior member of the Royal Guard to babysitting duty had a significant impact. With Sans watching Attie Undyne could focus on doing what she did best: intimidating frustrated politicians and their trigger-happy security details into behaving themselves.

And while all that was very important work, it meant that Frisk felt guilty about not spending a lot of time with her family. It happened every year: during the slow times she got used to driving with Attie to work and eating family dinners and doing homework together, then things would get hectic abruptly and they would barely see each other for weeks at a time. Sometimes they wouldn’t see each other at all, when she had to travel; she preferred to keep her daughter out of the public eye.

With one shining, golden afternoon free, she’d expected to take Attie out for dinner. Maybe just the two of them, to spend some time together. Having Sans live with them - and that still felt strange to think, even a month after he moved back in; sure, they were dating, but they weren’t living like a couple - meant that his every waking moment was dedicated to Attie. She was a great kid, but he could use a break...and honestly, Frisk wanted some one-on-one time with her daughter.

So when Sans shoved her into her bedroom with a fresh bottle of her favorite shampoo (when had she run out? Why hadn’t she noticed? And how did he know what her favorite shampoo was??) and a loofa, she hadn’t been sure what to think. Or do. Taking care of herself was something she was, honestly, pretty bad at.

A careful twist of fire magic infused the water with just the right amount of heat: enough to sting a little, not enough to be painful. The headache that had been chasing her for days was slowly easing, and she adjusted herself so the hot water hit the knot of tension in her neck.

It was...surprisingly nice, actually. A bit boring at first, at least until her brain calmed down. Some part of her still insisted that she was supposed to be doing something, and her fingers itched for a pencil or a keyboard, but she forced herself to be still. Everything was planned out. Her
phone was over there on the sink, just barely out of arm’s reach; if there was a problem, she would be notified.

The front door opened and shut, and Attie’s voice - too distant to be intelligible - shouted something before going abruptly quiet. Frisk had heard them leave soon after she got in the tub, and she appreciated the privacy, but she was glad they were home.

A lingering sense of dread had been growing in the pit of her stomach for weeks, waiting for her whenever she closed her eyes. There were rumors circulating about retaliation for the death of Graciela Lira, something involving the remnants of Equality for All. Even more ominous, Asgore had privately warned her that certain groups in the Underground were getting restless as well. Monsters who were either unable to live on the surface because of their physiology or who had been denied permission to leave had been complaining for years, but things were getting more tense.

It seemed planned, coordinated, the way everything was moving at the same time. Were they reacting to an information leak? Had they found out about her secret project? No one had tried to blackmail her, and the information hadn’t gone public. Could someone be pulling the strings? The thought sent a cold feeling up her spine, despite the heat of the water.

Frisk was incredibly grateful to have Undyne watching her back during the meetings. She trusted the Guard as a whole, she really did, but she knew first-hand how hard Undyne was to beat. Only Asgore and Sans had killed her more.

Sans.

Knowing that he was the Royal Judge had been hard to come to terms with, but she felt confident that she really had forgiven him. And who better to watch her daughter than someone who was both terrifying in battle and wrapped firmly around Attie’s little finger? If someone went after Attie, they would have to get through Sans first.

That thought brought a grin of satisfaction to her face.

Oh sure, he was still lazy. She had pictures from Attie of him sleeping on the “job” to prove it. But he only relaxed that much at home, and never around anyone who didn’t live with them. That didn’t mean he wasn’t exhausted sometimes: he’d kept Attie indoors a few times, afraid he’d fall asleep if they went to the park. It wasn’t a perfect solution but it was better than the alternative.

The smell of something savory wafted through the room, teasing her taste buds and tickling her empty stomach. Frisk wasn’t sure why she hadn’t introduced Sans to her slow cooker earlier. It was perfect for him. He was good with following directions (and insanely meticulous when it came to measuring, which brought up all kinds of questions) so putting ingredients into a pot, turning it on, and leaving it for a few hours was something he could do easily.

She’d thought, after taking care of him during his recovery, that he’d be a high-maintenance boyfriend. Sure, he liked Attie, but he seemed like the kind of person who’d get so wrapped up in playing with her that he’d forget to do anything else.

This was nothing like what she’d imagined. She hadn’t had time for a date since right after he moved in (they’d gone to see some cheap horror flick, eating popcorn in the back and mocking the bad CGI), but he’d stepped up and helped all the same. Attie was on track with her schoolwork. Dinner was waiting whenever Frisk dragged herself home...and after a few exhausted complaints about skipping lunch, leftovers had mysteriously started appearing in neat little boxes she could slip into her inventory for later. Even the dishes were washed and put away.
And now this.

She wanted to cry, honestly. How many times had she sat in her office over the years, head in her hands, wishing for someone to share her burdens with? She was only one human: a single point of failure. Even at the embassy, where she had a small army of aides and subordinates to help, her hospitalization the previous Fall had demonstrated how badly things deteriorated when she wasn’t in the picture. Her personal life had always been slipped into the cracks between her other duties, and she hated it.

Things were different, now. Attie wanted to spend time with her - just like she always did - but it wasn’t the quiet, desperate need that flared up into bouts of petulant anger and accusations of abandonment. She missed her mother, but she understood and accepted that things were busy. Part of that was probably due to her growing up (she was almost eight) but having a full-time, dedicated caretaker was working wonders on her.

“Mommy?”

Frisk - who had slid down so deep in the tub that her chin was wet - sat up a little. “Yes?”

“Dinner’s ready whenever you’re done! Mr. Sans says to take your time, but I think you should come downstairs soon.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We haven’t eaten dinner together in forever.”

It had been at least a week, and then she’d been half-preoccupied by a stack of vital and urgent paperwork. “Let me get dressed and I’ll be right down. Would you like to set the table with me?”

“Okay!”

She grinned, listening to the little feet pitter-patter back out of her bedroom and down the hallway. She’d soaked for - she checked her phone and did a double-take - almost two hours, and despite how hard it had been to relax she’d really needed it.

The clothes she slipped into were comfortable ones: loose, faded jeans and a soft shirt. The shirt had once proclaimed her life “Half Full,” with a happy little glass of water to illustrate the point, but it had been well-worn to the point that the text was barely legible. How long had it been since she wore comfortable clothes? Her days were usually so full that she went straight from pyjamas to her formal clothing and back again.

Her hair she brushed out half-heartedly, and it fell in slightly-tangled waves over her shoulders. Tamarine, her stylist, would have a conniption, but she couldn’t bring herself to care.

“Hey,” Sans said when he saw her appear from the hallway. “We’re almost ready…”

“I’ll get the silverware.”

“But…”

She grinned, stepped around him, and gathered three sets of silverware. Without knowing what he’d made she wasn’t sure what they’d need, so she put a knife, fork and spoon next to each plate Attie carefully set on the table.

Dinner was some kind of slow cooker casserole with leftover salad on the side. She chewed a bite
thoughtfully. Onion, definitely, and some sage and thyme. And...was that a hint of rosemary? Hard to tell around the other flavors, but it was good.

Sans blushed like a schoolgirl when she told him that. Had she missed so many meals that he was still surprised by compliments? He muttered something she didn’t catch, but his tone sounded self-deprecating.

“I mean it. This is good!”

“Thanks!” Attie said, bouncing in her seat. “I helped!”

“I can tell. Hmmm...yep, definitely has that Attie-helped taste.”

“You’re so silly, Mommy!”

“Oh, am I?”

“Yyyep!”

Frisk took a few bites in silence, just watching the other people at the table with her. What had she ever done to earn people like this in her life? Everything she’d accomplished, everything she was so proud of, seemed small and weak next to her precocious little girl and the boyfriend who had been cooking dinner for her every night for weeks.

That boyfriend had somehow cleaned his plate while she wasn’t looking. Good; he still struggled with textures sometimes, especially when he was nervous. “So,” he said, “We thought - well, we weren’t sure if there’d be emergencies or anything - but we found some board games in the hallway closet.”

She’d started collecting board games soon after Attie was born, when she figured out that they made adequate substitutes for the more deadly traditional puzzles from the Underground. Challenging a stubborn monster to a game was a great way to break the ice.

Even Sans wasn’t immune, it seemed.

“Sure, we can play something.”

Both his and Attie’s eyes lit up, one pair more literally than the other.

“Any idea what you-”

“SEQUENCE!”

“Atlas Dreemurr, sit back down and eat your salad!”

“But-”

“Salad, then Sequence.”

Attie pouted, but slowly started picking at her leafy greens. Sans had a huge grin on his face as he stood up, collected his dishes, and headed for the kitchen.

Attie started eating faster.

“I guess I’m gonna get Sequence out, then,” he called.
“NO!”

“Look, I’m even washin’ my own dishes.”

“I’m almost done, Mr. Sans!”

“You’d better hurry. I’m washing my silverware now.”

Attie inhaled the last of her salad, coughed, and ran to the kitchen with her dishes.

“Oh look, I’m done…”

Frisk watched, unable to keep the grin off her face, as Sans started walking down the hallway with exaggerated slowness. From the sounds of splashing and running water coming from the kitchen, she guessed that Attie wasn’t far behind.

A blur of pink and blue zoomed past him halfway down the hallway.

“Oh no,” he sighed. It was halfway believable, which was enough for Attie.

“I BEAT YOU, MR. SANS!!”

“Sure did.”

“That means I get to get Sequence out for Mommy!”

“Sure do.”

Attie swung the door open, then stopped. From her vantage point Frisk couldn’t tell what the problem was, but she had a good guess.

“Mr. Sans!!!!”

The low chuckle made Frisk’s heart skip a beat in a way that was wholly unnecessary. “Was’sa matter?”

“Why is Sequence all the way up there???”

“All the way up...oh, huh. Who put a game up on the top shelf? Weird. You must have some really tall people in this house.”

Sans was currently the tallest person in their house, beating Frisk’s 5’1 by roughly two inches.

“How did you get it up there?”

Silence; he’d probably shrugged.

“That’s amazing.”

“Thanks. So waddaya gonna do?”

“Mr. Sans, would you please help me get Sequence down with your magic?”

“Oh. Uh, sure. Let me-”

“No, lift me up! Please!”
“I, uh, don’t think your mom’d like that. It’s not...safe?”

“Pleeeeease?”

Frisk suppressed a shudder. Blue magic featured prominently in her nightmares, even after so many years. The idea that something could take control of her body away from her, send her flying straight through a wall or a window…

But this was Sans, and Sans would probably take a bullet for Attie.

“Go ahead,” she called. She tried to keep her voice even, but Sans glanced sharply her way.

She slowly finished the rest of her dinner. If she focused on how much they were enjoying themselves, she could ignore the details.

“I GOT IT!!” Sure enough, the colorful box was right there in Attie’s hands.

“Great job, Attie.”

“Mr. Sans helped me! Did you see, Mommy? He turned me blue and lifted me all the way up to the top shelf, which is where Sequence was.” She leaned in as far as she could. “I think Mr. Sans put it up there, because he likes playing pranks on people, but I didn’t even see him move it!”

“I think so too,” Frisk whispered back. “But don’t tell him we know.”

Sans must’ve taken a shortcut, because she sensed a brief flare of energy half a second before he leaned over her shoulder. “Yeah, better not let that guy know. He’d play another prank on us or somethin’.”

Attie giggled.

It was disappointing, a little, that he leaned back into place without doing anything further. It wasn’t the first time he’d passed up an opportunity to touch her, innocently or otherwise. At first Frisk thought he was simply uninterested, that he didn’t find her physically attractive. Some careful and discreet questions (and an extremely awkward conversation with her mother; Sans must’ve told her what happened on their first date, but she was too embarrassed to ask) brought up another possibility.

Monsters weren’t very...physical beings. They had physical form, sure, but they were mostly composed of magic. She’d known all that for years. What she hadn’t considered were the implications.

Because they were more magic than matter, monsters didn’t value physical contact as much as humans did. They could feel differences in texture and temperature and so on, but aside from family members they rarely touched each other.

Humans in such an environment would show signs of touch deprivation. It was a common problem in certain cultures, and one reason why Frisk made sure to hug her daughter at least once every day, unless she was out of the city altogether. But monsters? They showed no signs of being bothered by it. In fact, they got antsy if they were touched too much.

That explained some of Sans’s reactions: the way he’d shy away sometimes, the way he’d shift out of a hug if it went on for too long. It also explained why he rarely initiated contact unless she was very emotionally distressed.
She felt guilty about the way she’d treated him after their first date, she really did. After so long on the surface, most monsters behaved more or less like humans. They used the same slang, they shared the same memes, they knew the same cultural references. When she invited Sans over after dinner, she thought he knew the implications.

In hindsight, she’d worked herself up way too much. She’d spent so much time researching human relationships, trying to learn all the things she’d missed, that she’d overlooked the monster side of things. Just like Sans occasionally didn’t understand how humans worked, Frisk herself didn’t understand everything about monsters. They were learning.

It didn’t mean she didn’t cringe whenever she thought about it.

He took the seat next to her and pulled Attie into his lap to mess with her hair, separating it into the pigtails she liked so much. It made no sense for her to be jealous of Attie, of the way he seemed so at ease around her. It was different, she knew that. Attie was a child. Frisk was very much not. But...

But she was human, and touch did mean a lot to her. She needed to be hugged as much as Attie did, even when she wasn’t having a breakdown; she just wasn’t sure how to ask for it.

Maybe they could compromise. Snuggling would be nice-

She nearly jumped when two fingers - harder than human, yet softer than true bone - pressed against her arm. It was a precise, measured motion, wary and hopeful.

A glance at Sans’s face showed that he was carefully not looking at her, but all his attention seemed to be focused onto his fingers. Attie was looking up, confused; her pigtails were straightened, but she was still sitting in his lap.

Frisk placed two of her own fingers over the ones on her arm. No more, no less.

A compromise.

She could work with this. She already had so much to be grateful for; they could work through this difference together.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: I now know the meaning and use of the word "slidden," and I didn't even use it in the story. Also, Sequence is a very fun game, especially when playing with a group of extremely competitive siblings. Not that I have any personal experience with such a thing, of course.

Also also, I am so sorry for the long delay in this chapter. Between work and sickness and coworkers getting sick and internet problems, it's been...an adventure, I guess, is the most optimistic way I can put it. And I now have somewhere upwards of 6,000 words added to this story that I need to edit for fever-dreaminess. Hooray.

Hope you've all been well! This next arc of the story is...interesting, to be sure. See you next week, internet willing!
In Which Frisk is Busy

Chapter Summary

...And Sans steps up more than one would expect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sounds of happy laughter echoed through the window. Attie, for once, was amusing herself; it felt strange to Sans not to have her in his shadow, where she’d been for over a month, but it gave him time to go over scheduling with Frisk.

Frisk...who was doing that thing again. He narrowed his eye sockets, watching her hand as it inched closer. It stopped a good four inches from his arm, but he could’ve sworn he could feel it already. She kept talking steadily, describing one of her upcoming meetings and the various factors that could bring her home late or early, but he could feel her focus on him.

It had started the week after he moved back in with gentle brushes against his arm, small enough that he could dismiss them as accidental. After a week or two - just when he’d gotten used to them - they progressed into more lingering contact. It wasn’t a constant thing, but whenever she was actually around (and it seemed like she was around less each day) she would give him some small nudge or brush or - in rare instances - a strange kind of half-hug.

Maybe it was a human thing? Monsters didn’t really touch each other, even in families. Well. Except for kids. Maybe that was why he didn’t really think twice when Attie hugged him, now.

If he could get used to Attie, he could get used to Attie’s mother.

The hand next to him moved half an inch closer, and he breathed deeply. Deliberately.

Once, he’d flinched away from Frisk. He hadn’t been expecting the contact, and increasing levels of it put him on edge. The look on her face had been nothing like he expected: some surprise, yes, but also...hurt. And understanding. As with so many things, she wouldn’t have pushed.

So he did.

It took more effort than he wanted to admit. He was sure he was doing something wrong. He wished they had the time and privacy to have a proper discussion. Still…

The fingers twitched like they wanted to move again, and he sighed internally. He casually shifted, moving his own hand to rest on hers.

Once, Sans had teased Grillby well past the point of patience. He’d been asking the bartender for something - what, he didn’t remember - and instead of whatever he was asking for, Grillbz had dropped a hot coal into this hand.

At first, it had felt almost cool. Not cold like ice, but with the same tingly feeling fading into something almost numb...at least until the burning sensation set in. He’d dropped it, ignoring Grillby’s complaints about his countertop. His bones had been blackened and sore for days.
Frisk’s hand felt almost like that, but without the pain. The first few times he’d initiated contact without the impetus of some huge emotional moment it had felt almost itchy, the way most touch did, but he’d gradually pushed past the point of discomfort. To his surprise, it actually got...better. Once he got over whatever made him not like being touched, he was able to focus on the feeling of Frisk under his fingers.

Her magic burned, like that coal had, but it never hurt. She had no intention of doing him any harm. She trusted him. It was harder to decipher those things through physical touch instead of magic, but she still felt like a dragon who’d decided he was loot instead of dinner.

He turned to ask her a question, and caught traces of a half-hidden smile that made his face feel hot and his chest feel tight. Who would’ve thought that such a little thing would make her so...happy? The question dissolved like smoke.

She cleared her throat, the corner of her mouth still curled up just a little. “So. That’s my schedule for the next week.”

Sans hadn’t been paying much attention, but from the look of the crowded colored blocks on the paper calendar in front of him it looked like she was barely going to have enough time to sleep, let alone eat. “Wow. Okay. I’ll be watching Attie all week, then.”

“If you don’t mind. Honestly, this is helping all of us more than you know. Normally someone needs to sit out to watch Attie, which means we have to have extra meetings after the official meetings to get everyone on the same page. See that block of free time...next Wednesday? I can take her off your hands for the afternoon. Or we can all go out together…”

“Ts up to you, really. I. Uh. I’d like to spend some time with ya, but Attie’s your kid.”

“Sans, I don’t want you to think that you’re not important to me-”

He tapped her hand where it still lay under his. “Stop. I get it. You’re busy. I’m just...glad t’spend time with ya. And I’m happy to help.”

The red that creeped up Frisk’s ears probably mirrored the blush on his own face. He wasn’t any good with words, he really wasn’t.

“Thanks. I really, really appreciate it. Things are ramping up now because of that big international summit next month, but after that I should have some more free time. Depending on how things turn out. The advantages of being a small kingdom.”

“Good.” He glanced her over once more, taking in the shadows under her eyes and the way her head listed to the side the way it always did when she had a headache. “You haven’t been sleepin’ well.”

“...No, not really.”

“Oh.”

“Nightmares, mostly. I’ve always had nightmares when I’m stressed, and this is...stressful for me. Not much I can do but get sleep where I can.”

“Allright.” He could sympathize. He usually didn’t sleep well himself; and yet, after moving back into her office he’d gotten some of the best sleep in his life. Even if Attie woke him up sometimes with her own bad dreams. “Actually, speaking of which…”
“Oh! Are you okay? Do you have nightmares too?”

“Uh. Sometimes, but I’ve been sleepin’ pretty well lately. Do you know Attie’s been gettin’ up in the middle of the night?”

Frisk sighed, withdrawing both hands and resting her forehead in them. One thumb circled the place that always seemed to bother her, right on her temple. “She’s not much better than I am, sometimes. Less material for nightmares, thankfully, but dreams are dreams. She normally puts herself back to sleep…”

“She’s been comin’ in t’see me. I just...read to her, most times. Not really sure what else would help.”

“Well, thanks. Um. Dad passed me some golden flower tea at one of my meetings yesterday, but it’s still at the office. That might help; just don’t let her put a lot of sugar in it. I’d give her chamomile, but she doesn’t like the taste. Let’s see...oh, warm milk would probably help. Just put some milk in a mug and stick it in the microwave for a minute. Maybe a pat of butter on top. It doesn’t actually do much, biologically, but it’s soothing and she enjoys it. Honestly, reading to her is probably just as good, if not better.”

He nodded. “Okay. You’re, uh, welcome to join us. If you happen t’be up at the same time.”

“..Thanks.”

There was something still bothering her. “You, uh, look pretty tired. Wanna talk about it?”

“Yes...and no. It’s just...I don’t want to complain. There’s lots of people who have more nightmare fuel than I do.”

“And you’ve died more than most folks, too. Would you tell Attie that her nightmares aren’t worth shit because she hasn’t been through hell?”

There was something haunted in her eyes when she looked at him, something soft and vulnerable. “I’ve thought it sometimes,” she whispered. “Sometimes I’ll wake up and hear her and...and I wonder why she has nightmares. She hasn’t been through half of what I have. Or am I just such an awful mom that everyday life is a nightmare for her? Is that why she doesn’t come to me anymore when she has nightmares?”

“Hey, hey, that’s not what I meant. You know that’s not true, and I know y’don’t say any of that to her.”

“No. No, I don’t. Sorry. It’s just...been a long week…”

“I know, I get it. But when you’re thinkin’ properly you don’t dismiss her, right? You comfort her. We all have our own shit to deal with. Just because Attie didn’t have to go through what you did doesn’t mean she isn’t scared of some things. Just because you didn’t live in the Underground doesn’t mean you don’t have awful memories. I...didn’t exactly help in that area…”

She reached out and grabbed one of his hands fast enough that it made him flinch a little. “Sans, I forgive you.”

“...What?”

“I forgave you a long time ago, before I even knew who you were. And after I found out that you were the Royal Judge, I forgave you again. It doesn’t erase what happened - if it even did happen;
I haven’t figured out the technicalities of that - but I’ve moved past that. Can you forgive yourself?"

“No. I...what I did doesn’t deserve to be forgiven.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Sans. Forgiveness isn’t about what we deserve or don’t deserve; it’s about healing and not being tied to our pasts. Guilt can be a healthy thing when it tells us where we went wrong, but you’ve learned from what happened back then. It’s time to let it go.”

He bit back the nasty comment that wanted to escape, struggling to calm down. He didn’t want to let it go. He deserved something for what he’d done to Frisk, and not the affection and comfort and forgiveness she’d given him.

“Alright,” he said.

The back door slamming shut so hard it bounced made them both jump. Frisk was on her feet in an instant; Sans wasn’t much far behind her. “Attie?” There was a tone to her voice that could arguably pass for something other than fear, if he didn’t know her so well. “Attie, what’s wrong?”

“It started raining,” she said. “It’s too cold!”

“Alright, go get changed if your clothes are wet. And next time, don’t slam the door, please?”

“Okay!”

She sighed deeply, all but collapsing into her chair. As she did, Sans caught a glimpse of something he’d completely missed on the calendar. “Wait, Attie’s birthday is next Wednesday?”

“Yeah...didn’t I say? Maybe not. Sorry.”

“Ts nothin’, but aren’t birthdays important?” He tried to think back. He couldn’t remember Attie mentioning a birthday, just her age.

“That’s my fault. I’m usually pretty busy this time of year, and I try to keep Attie away from the public eye. We usually have a small gathering every month to celebrate birthdays for all the kids at the embassy, so that’s her ‘party.’ I try to do something special just for her and I on the day itself.”

So that’s why she asked if he wanted to be included. “I don’t wanna interfere with tradition…”

“You’re not! You’re my, ah, boyfriend. And you live here too. It would be awful not to invite you along.”

“But-”

“Look, we can play it by ear. I have a brunch thing that morning,” she tapped a rectangle meticulously colored in purple, “But I should be home by noon. We can do both: either we all do something together early in the afternoon and Attie and I do dinner, or vice versa. That way we do something as a...together, and still maintain family tradition. How does that sound?”

“Sounds good.” As much as he would’ve loved to spend all the time he could with Frisk, he knew first-hand how hard it was to adjust after living with only one other person for so long. And to be honest, he wouldn’t mind an hour or two to raid Frisk’s bookshelves in peace.

“What sounds good?” Attie asked. Her hair was slightly damp, and the light jacket she carried was
“Wednesday is your birthday. We were talking about plans.”

“Okay.” She sounded unconcerned, which was a bit jarring. Sans hadn’t been around humans all that long, but he’d spent enough time laughing at the card aisle of the local grocery store to know that they usually took such things very seriously.

Although...Frisk didn’t celebrate her birthday either, did she?

He asked Undyne a few days later during what she called a “wellness check.” Which basically consisted of a lot of prying questions about his relationship with Frisk punctuated with subtle innuendos when Attie was out of earshot.

“She doesn’t like to advertise her past,” Undyne said as Sans tried to catch his breath after a particularly terrible pun. “I think her birthday’s on her official ID, but she celebrates it on Barrier Day. It could be used to track down who she was before, and she doesn’t want that.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Bad family. They’re still out there, from what she told me. She doesn’t want anything to do with them. Thinks they might try to use her for publicity. Hasn’t she told you any of this?”

“She said she ran away from home.”

“Yeah. She was legally declared dead, actually. The police found a body in the woods that they thought was her at first. Turns out it was a different missing girl, but the paperwork had already gone through. Human governments move really, really slowly when it comes to correcting their mistakes; by the time that mess got sorted out, our adoption had already been finalized. She’s one of us, now.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. She kept tabs on them for a while - she had a brother - but I haven’t heard her talk about them in over a year.”

It took Sans a moment to react to that. *Frisk had a brother??* It was so strange to think of her before she fell into the Underground, but she would’ve had a normal human life with normal human relatives, wouldn’t she? “No kidding? What happened?”

“Her little brother went missing.”

“Missing?”

“Yeah. Ran away from home, too. There was some concern that he was looking for Frisk - we had a few scares down at the embassy with a kid that looked like her a little - but he never showed up.”

“Huh. So he’s...?”

“Still missing. They never even tried to have him declared dead, from what I can see.”

“Why would they even do that in the first place?”

“Insurance money, apparently. They’re deadbeats. It’s weird; they clearly have magical talent in
the family - you’ve seen how powerful Frisk is - so they should’ve been able to find a good job even without a fancy education. Magic is in huge demand up here; just look at how many countries want to work with us. Who knows what went wrong? Personally, I don’t blame the kid for getting as far away from those assholes as possible. If he’s anything like Frisk, he has enough talent to make a better life for himself somewhere.”

It was a nice thought, on the surface: a kid getting out of a bad home. But Sans knew more than Undyne did. Frisk’s magic wasn’t what monsters would consider ‘normal.’ If her known magical talents ran in the family…what about the ones she didn’t advertise?

That idea weighed on him over the next few days. He wasn’t sure how to ask her for her input. Frisk always seemed so tired when she was home, and he couldn’t bring himself to ruin her few peaceful moments with bad memories.

Still, it made him feel uneasy. His own experience with a little brother was…complicated, to say the least. He knew, intellectually, that Frisk’s brother probably wasn’t in a position to treat her the way Papyrus treated him but it still put him on edge. The thought of her going through one of Boss’s punishments hurt him somewhere deep inside, and he didn’t like it.

“You’re safe,” he told Attie later that night after the little girl had rushed into his room and thrown herself at him. Probably a nightmare, but sometimes she just wanted the comfort. “Everything’s okay. We’re all safe.”

It was true, probably. He’d overheard some of the warnings Undyne gave Frisk, something about groups in the Underground getting restless, but there was nothing that could get through Frisk’s barrier.

“I dreamed that a mean person tried to steal my soul,” she said.

“Yeah?”

She nodded. “It was really bright and I was really scared and it hurt a whole lot.”

That was guilt crawling up his spine, wasn’t it. “Well, uh, it’s really dark right now and there’s nothin’ in here scarier than me.”

“Mmm. Okay.”

“You want some milk?”

“No thanks.”

“Some of that tea your mom likes?”

“No thanks.”

“Story, then?”

“Mkay.”

A gesture turned the light on - figuring out how to use magic to turn the little pin that controlled the light had been a challenge, but easier than stumbling around in the dark - and he leaned over to the shelf that held Attie-friendly books. They’d read most of them over the past few weeks; maybe she’d like to stop by the library soon for some more reading material? He still helped out sometimes with reading to the kids or stocking books, when he had the time, and no one would
probably complain if he brought Attie along.

“New book or an old one?”

“Can you read the one about the dog and the bunny?”

“Alright.” He grabbed the appropriate book and settled himself on his cot, shifting so Attie could crawl into his lap. *Fluffy Bunny and the Big Bad Dog* was written in Monster, which she wasn’t fluent in, but she could follow along a little. It was one of the...tamer children’s stories that came out of the Underground.

At least in this particular adventure Fluffy Bunny made it out in one piece.

“It’s sad that Fluffy Bunny and Chompers couldn’t be friends,” she said once he finished. “All the dog monsters I know are really nice.”

“Well, some folks just don’t get along well.”

“Yeah, but it would still be nice.”

“But.”

“Don’t you want people to get along, Mr. Sans?”

Sure he did - at least in the same way he wanted to win the lottery - but it just wasn’t feasible. People would never stop disagreeing on all sorts of things, big and small. The best a guy like him could do was keep his head down, watch his back, and act tough if someone gave him shit.

“It’d be nice,” he said, “But look at us.” He held his hand up to hers where it rested against the crook of his elbow. “We’re all pretty different. ‘Ts not a bad thing, a lot of the time, but it means we won’t all agree. I think it’s better to disagree on things even if we don’t always get along than to have everyone think exactly the same thing.”

“So you want people to fight?”

“Ts not what I said. Look. You ‘n I like hot dogs, right?”

“Riiight…”

“But your mom likes hamburgers better.”

“Yeah…”

“It wouldn’t be nice to force your mom to like hot dogs, would it.”

“But hot dogs are better!”

“But she likes different things, and that’s okay. Even if it means we don’t agree on everything.”

She hummed, thinking this over. “Okaaaay. But hot dogs are still better.”

“You sound sleepy.”

“M not.”

“Sure.”
“‘M really not.”

“Shh.” He put his arms around her and rocked back and forth. She usually liked that.

“Mr. Sans?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“I’m glad you ‘n I like the same things most of the time.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

It didn’t take her long to drift off. She was almost unbearably warm, and her breath tickled his collarbone, but every time he shifted to try to lay her down she latched on harder. He’d have to be careful relocating her back to her own bed.

A small noise, the whisper of skin on wood, made him glance over at the doorway. He only caught the tips of Frisk’s fingers as they left the half-closed door, trailing a little as she turned and walked back down the hallway.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Frisk listened to the whole story.

I’d imagine it would be difficult for Sans to pinpoint her location, though. Not only is he holding her kid (who would feel a lot like her magically), but they’re in a location where she uses a lot of magic and inside a magical barrier of her creation. It’s like trying to find a flashlight beam on a bright day.

Sans continues to be a surprisingly good boyfriend! Wowie, I sure hope nothing bad is going to happen to upend all this!

Thanks so, so much for all your kudos and kind comments, everyone! See you next week! :-}
Chapter Summary

...And Frisk gets way too excited over a terrorist plot.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains something awful, and also time-space shenanigans. Check the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning - the morning before Attie’s birthday - was cloudy with the promise of rain. Frisk had to run early and was booked all day, since she’d have the following afternoon free, but Sans managed to drag himself out of bed early enough to start coffee and hand off the leftovers he’d packed the night before.

“Thanks,” she said. She’d made plain toast for herself while he was messing with the coffee maker, and balanced it in one hand as she leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek.

“Tch.” He ignored her when she laughed at his red face, shuffling back down the hallway to the office to get some more rest.

Attie woke him up about half an hour later, eyes bright and wild. “It’s thundering!” she whispered. “Like a real storm!”

“Looks like it.” The window in the office showed a peek at the gray sky and the light swaying of the tree that sat to the side of the house. The air felt damp and chilly in a way he didn’t remember it being earlier.

“Can we go out and jump in the puddles?”

“Not until it stops thunderin’.”

“Why?”

“Because humans get all crispy if they get struck by lightning. ‘Sides, we gotta eat breakfast.”

“Oatmeal?”

“Sure.” Frisk had picked some up the last time she went grocery shopping, and they still had a few packets left. “Go get what you want out of the cupboard ‘n I’ll be there in a sec.”

He listened to the pitter-patter of little feet as they hurried down the hall and into the kitchen, then slowly hauled himself out of bed.

They made a good team. Sans started water in the electric kettle while Attie located the oatmeal.
He got the bowls out; she found the spoons. While the water heated, they sorted out their dinosaurs. (Attie definitely deserved all the dinosaurs, in his opinion, but her sense of justice was too strong to take them all. He wound up with four: two green, a blue, and an orange.)

The weather hadn’t changed much by the time they finished breakfast, so Attie had to do her exercises inside. Undyne had set them both up with a set of “easy” stretches and warm-ups, which was always...interesting.

Sometimes, Sans cheated and just had them do jumping jacks. Attie wouldn’t let him get away with that more than two days in a row, but it was nice on slow mornings.

That particular morning was not destined to be a slow one.

Thankfully, he’d gotten used to the exercises. He wasn’t the most agile person (and the stretches in particular didn’t work the way they were supposed to with his physiology) but he didn’t collapse like he had the first few times he’d worked out with Undyne.

Homework was next. Attie was actually pretty far ahead in a most of her coursework: a result of having someone working one-on-one with her all day, probably. Still, he didn’t want her to fall behind. She was such a smart little girl. Maybe she could start working ahead if she finished third grade quickly enough? She’d have some catching up to do in Math, but otherwise she could probably finish the school year within a month or two. Would that let her graduate early?

They blazed through the day’s assignments by lunchtime. Most of it was review since she had tests coming up, but her memory was good enough that he wasn’t worried. He had flashcards to go over with her after dinner, if Frisk wasn’t home, but that could wait.

They’d just finished up lunch (sandwiches; they had leftovers, but he was saving them for Frisk) when he heard the distinct sound of the garage door opening. He and Attie looked at each other, then at the door that led into the garage.

“Go to your room,” he told her.

“But-”

“Go. Somethin’s not right.”

She frowned at him but did as he asked. He checked his phone; no texts from Frisk. So what-

The door to the garage opened with a BANG! that almost made him lose control of the bone attack he’d summoned. Which would’ve been a tragedy, because Frisk burst into the house with the biggest grin he’d ever seen on her face.

“I’m home!” she crowed, flinging her work bag onto the floor and carelessly kicking off her shoes. “I’m...oh, Sans! What’s wrong?”

He dismissed the bone attack. “Uh. Nothin’, apparently. What’re you doin’ home so early?”

Her grin grew impossibly wider. “There was a bomb threat downtown! Some asshole wants to blow up a bunch of important buildings! The Peruvian embassy is in complete lockdown! We were in the splash zone, so we were all sent home!”

“How...nice?”

“Oh, it’ll be a mess until things get straightened out, but for now…” she flopped over the side of
the loveseat, arms akimbo, letting her feet dangle off the arm. “...I have an afternoon off.”

“Heh. Hooray for terrorists, I guess?”

She hummed in agreement. “It’s being handled, of course. They’re pretty sure there’s no chance that anything will actually explode; this is just a safety precaution. I wouldn’t be this happy if people were really in danger. But until things are cleared, we’re pretty much at a standstill. Attie!”

Nothing.

*Smart kid.*

“Everythin’s fine, Attie,” he called. “Yer mom’s home early.”

“YAY!!!” Attie zoomed from her bedroom down the hallway, across the living room and straight onto the loveseat. Her mom gave a pained *oof* as she landed. “You’re home! For real!!”

“For real,” Frisk wheezed, wrapping her arms around the little bundle of energy.

“We thought there was a bad guy at the door.”

“Oh. Is that why you were in your room?”

“Yeah. Mr. Sans was going to fight the bad guy for me.”

“That’s very nice of him. You were very good to listen to him and stay in your room.”

“Thanks!”

“But you know what?”

“What?”

Frisk sat up abruptly, taking her daughter with her. “I think we should go to the park and let Mr. Sans go have a drink at Grillby’s.”

He snorted. “It’s not even two in the afternoon.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “And that would stop you because…?”

“Point taken.”

She rushed herself and Attie off to change their clothes, calling over her shoulder, “We’ll be home in an hour or so!”

Well.

*Okay, then.*

He took a shortcut to the alleyway behind Grillby’s, still reeling a little from the whirlwind schedule change. Killing an hour or so at the bar didn’t sound like a bad time, actually; he could gather any intel he’d missed over the past few weeks. And maybe after that, he could try to figure out what to get Attie for her birthday. The one downside to having Attie living in his shadow was that he rarely had a chance to surprise her.

Pele gave him a strange look when he arrived alone in the middle of the afternoon, but reluctantly
passed him his booze across the bar. “...Everything...okay?”

“Yeah, kid. Attie’s with her mom for the afternoon and she sent me here to grab a drink.” He lowered his voice, not wanting to let everyone know he’d gone soft. “Everythin’ okay with you?”

Her shy grin told him everything he needed to know. “...It is...long days, but...good. Good work.”

“Yeah, I know how that goes. Grillbz still treatin’ you fine?”

“...He is...hmm. Fair. Not...friendly, always, but. Good.”

“Heh. He can be grumpy sometimes, but he’ll treat ya right.”

She nodded, then jumped when a table of late lunchers started yelling her name. Sans kept an eye on them, but they were friendly enough...if a bit rowdy.

Conversation washed over him where he sat hunched over his drink. Idly, he picked a voice and concentrated it. A factory worker was complaining about his shift; he’d covered for someone once too many and it was coming back to bite him. Nothing important.

A few of the dogs walked in and sat at their usual table in the corner, woofing under their breaths. It was hard to figure out what they were saying - their own particular language was difficult to parse in the background noise of the bar, and they were speaking softly - but it sounded like they were discussing the bomb threat. It hadn’t been resolved yet, as far as they knew, and they were significantly more worried than Frisk was.

Then again, they didn’t have crazy time powers.

It...made sense that Frisk had reacted the way she did, actually. Even if the bomb did go off, she could turn time back to that morning and do something about it. Why shouldn’t she spend time with her daughter? If she took good memories from it, did that mean it never really happened?

Oh, well. Alcohol always made him a bit melancholy. It was probably going to be fine.

“You,” Grillby crackled, rounding the dogs’ table and heading towards Sans. He was frustrated, judging by the flickering of flames on his head, and trying to carefully tease the cap off a salt shaker. Despite the shaking, no salt seemed to be escaping. “What are you doing in my bar?”

That was a weird question. “Drinkin’.”

“How long has he been here, Pele? Cut him off.”

“Hey-”

“I do not need an angry ambassador storming in to drag you off. If you are having an argument-”

“We’re not. Stars, Grillbz; can’t a guy drink in peace?”

“I have never seen you drink alone at my bar because you’re happy.”

“Look. Frisk was sent home early ‘cuz of that bomb threat downtown. She took her kid out to have some quality time. Told me to go grab a drink. Everythin’s fine.” Well, except the way Grillby kept nagging him; that felt like someone was rubbing sandpaper along the back of his skull.

“Hmm.”
“Look. You got a problem? I can go to another bar-”

He was cut off by something vibrating in his pocket. It took a few seconds to get his fingers around his phone’s slim case, but even that suddenly seemed too long. Was something wrong? Had the bomb gone off? It vibrated again as she pulled it out.

Frisky Dreamer 2:36 PM
Sid
Sos
Sos

Shit. He didn’t remember what “SOS” stood for, but it was an emergency thing, right?

You 2:37 PM
Whats wrong
?

Frisky Dreamer 2:37 PM
Sps
Sid Ssos sod

Sans slid off his bar stool. “Grillbz, somethin’s wrong. Uh, here.” He threw some cash onto the counter. The guy knew how to find him if he came up short. “Gotta run.”

You 2:39 PM
Where?

There was no response. Crap, where had she said she was going? The park, right? He jogged back behind the bar and teleported.

The park was empty. Completely empty. It was eerie. While it wasn’t normally a busy place during the day, with most kids at work or school (or hiding somewhere a little less conspicuous), there was usually a steady trickle of older couples or dog walkers or the odd Royal Guard patrol. Food stands - mostly monster, with the occasional human thrown in when the weather was good - frequently parked on a big slab of concrete that stood closer to the treeline, with a grassy open area between it and the playground equipment. His had been the most regular, but not the only one.

There was nothing there.

Sans really wished he’d thought to bring one of the dogs. There was no way he could do much unless he somehow sensed Frisk, and none of the senses at his disposal had particularly great range.

Had she even made it to the park?? It had been almost an hour since she’d arrived at her house; had she even left?

That was probably it. She was probably sitting at home with a rambunctious Attie. He headed through the park towards her house, cutting through the playground equipment. There was nothing to worry about.

...But then, why wasn’t she texting him back?

On a whim, he decided to call her. There was nothing to lose, right? Hopefully she’d pick up and he could complain about...about something stupid that had nothing to do with what he actually wanted to say.
A small *blip* of magic brought him up short.

It was coming...from the woods? The hell? He tried calling Frisk again and listened for a moment. It was weird, but he could’ve sworn that he could *almost* hear a ringtone, just faintly in the distance. Frisk wasn’t one of those people who used music or personalized ringtones, so her phone rang the same for everyone. And it sounded suspiciously like the sound that...no, wasn’t just a figment of his imagination.

Sans approached carefully, staying behind trees and structures. The sound cut out after a few seconds, but as he moved closer he could definitely feel Frisk and the small almost-Frisk-like magical signature that was Attie. They weren’t alone. Slowly...slowly…

*There.*

A large boulder was visible through the trees, just far enough away from the park proper that few people probably knew about it. (Except delinquent teenagers, from the graffiti tags along the bottom edge.) It was tall enough to hide an adult human from view and wide enough that a group of six or seven could be standing there.

And he heard the voices. One was obviously Frisk, her tone low and angry. He tried to focus on the magic he could feel, but he was far too worked up to get a good read. Keeping his head low to the ground, he peeked around the side of the boulder.

Attie and Frisk stood closest to him, enclosed by a wavering barrier. Frisk had her phone in one hand but wasn’t looking at it. Her daughter was clinging to her other arm, putting on a brave face but obviously scared. A small scratch ran across her cheek.

Across the clearing from them was a motley group: a human man, a rock elemental, a loox, and two fire elementals. The human man standing closest to them was obviously the leader on that particular expedition - had he been the one to lure Frisk that far into the woods? She never would’ve been stupid enough to wander so far from safety, not with Attie - but one of the fire elementals was hissing in an aggressive manner that looked ominous.

How long had Frisk been holding that barrier? A long-term barrier like the ones on Mt. Ebott required time and preparation. Something had to anchor the magic to keep it from dissipating like an attack once she stopped focusing on it. Without that kind of anchor, how strong could her barrier possibly be?

One fire elemental hissed something Sans didn’t catch and lobbed a fireball over his ally’s shoulder. It exploded upon impact with the barrier, flames dissipating harmlessly, but Frisk took a half-step back from the blow.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

Making up his mind quickly, he pocketed his phone and ran full-tilt at the barrier.

As he suspected, he passed through...relatively harmlessly. The barrier did a few points of damage just from the sheer combat intent, but since it wasn’t directed at him it wasn’t nearly as effective as it would’ve been otherwise. *Thank the stars.*

“Sans!” Frisk’s eyes looked shiny, but her voice didn’t waver. She maneuvered the small hands clinging to her arm so they were reaching for him instead. “Take Attie and get out of here-”

Another fireball exploded, and the rest of her sentence ended in a slightly pained gasp. Attie screamed and buried her face in his hoodie.
He studied Frisk’s face. “Are you okay?”

“I can hold it a bit longer, but-”

Both fire elementals were attacking now, moving closer as they did, and the rock elemental was slowly sinking into the ground.

“Shit. I need t’get you both out of here. Can you drop the barrier?”

“We’ll be fried!”

“Can’t do much through the barrier.” He hoped she caught on; the elementals were closing in fast, and he didn’t want to give away all his tricks.

“We can’t-”

For one terrifying moment, Sans thought he’d been blown to pieces. The explosion sounded like a gunshot and seemed to come from everywhere at once and he was flying through the air and trying to keep a grip on Attie-

Frisk’s barrier had dissipated as soon as she lost concentration, so there was nothing to break their fall. It felt like every bone in Sans’s body cracked on impact. He could still feel Attie’s hands where they were tangled in his, but he couldn’t tell if she was alright. Sight and hearing were coming back slowly...far too slowly...

Then, Attie screamed.

His focus narrowed in an instant. He was still clinging to Attie’s hands despite being thrown around, but she was being lifted up by two enormous, muscled arms. The rock elemental towered over the human man and Attie with one hand reaching towards something he couldn’t see-

“We’ll do this the hard way, then,” the man said. He kicked Sans in the ribs hard enough to dislodge him, then turned towards the elemental with a triumphant grin. Attie’s struggles weren’t very effective, allowing him to pull something from his belt with his spare hand.

Oh stars, that was a knife-

The sound Frisk made couldn’t be described as human.

Nothing made sense, not through the constant ringing and blurry vision. Attie dropped limply to the side - what a waste; she was an effective hostage - and the man staggered forward, falling to one knee as his companions rushed towards him. Sans didn’t care. As soon as the man was incapacitated he immediately scrambled for Attie, cradling her head and trying to ignore the object sticking out of her chest. Tears trailed down her face, but her eyes looked...empty. Hollow. He vaguely sensed something very important shattering, but it was hard to tell over Frisk’s wild screams.

And then he was walking down the hallway towards the office, the smell of coffee and petrichor tickling his senses.

Exhaustion washed over him abruptly, reminding him that he’d technically woken up not twenty minutes before, but compared to the concussion and shock he’d just experienced his head felt clear. The urge to FIGHT sang through his bones, demanding that he hunt down those shits and tear them to tiny, tiny pieces-
“ATTIE!!”

Frisk knocked into him hard as she ran down the hallway and into her daughter’s room. Oh stars, *Attie*. He followed as quickly as he dared, not wanting to get between a mom and her kid, and collapsed onto his knees beside her. Relief seemed to bubble out of him, making him feel light.

“Mmmommy?” The kid was still half asleep. Good. She-

-rubbed the spot on her chest where he’d last seen a very large knife. It was probably a reflex, but... *shit.*

Frisk was babbling something impossible to decipher through her tears and kept running her fingers through her daughter’s hair. Sans didn’t blame her. Papyrus had been killed several times - by Flowey, by angry residents of Snowdin that Flowey riled up, and once by a suspiciously placed rockslide - and that had been hard enough. To actually watch the kid get stabbed...this was gonna mess her up.

“C’mon,” he said, carefully disentangling the two. “She’s fine. Let’s let her get back to sleep.”

“But-”

“The less she remembers, the better. Let ‘er think it was a dream.”

He had no idea if that was actually how things worked, but it probably made sense, right? The most other people seemed to experience was a feeling of deja vu, and going back to sleep would help disguise that. Probably. *Hopefully.*

Frisk allowed herself to be led over to her dining room table, and Sans started heating water. She mentioned that tea was soothing, right? Golden flower tea was loose-leaf, so he carefully scooped what looked like a good amount into an infuser and dropped it into her favorite mug, the one with Attie’s handprint on it.

The tea seemed to help, which was good because he was all out of ideas at that point. He had no idea what to say to someone who’d lost a kid, and that was before all the crazy time magic came into play. On the one hand Attie was - apparently - perfectly fine. At most she had some residual memories of what had happened. They could take her to a psycho-whatever-humans-called-their-head-doctors later, if she needed it. The important thing was that she was *alive.*

On the other hand, the assholes who’d attacked them were still out there. There was still the bomb threat to deal with, if it was even real and not just an excuse to clear the area. And he and Frisk now had a very clear picture of what was at stake if they messed this up.

“Okay,” Frisk said, pushing her empty mug away. Her hands were still shaking, but her voice sounded completely calm and steady. Sometimes, her sheer determination was terrifying. “We know that there’s a bomb threat. We heard about it at noon, and we were in lockdown until just after 1:00 before we were cleared for evacuation. Undyne said that the Guard was going to sweep the embassy building.”

“I saw some’f the dogs at Grillby’s, so they probably didn’t find anything. The whole thing hadn’t been figured out when I left, though.”

“Do you know what time that was? I was texting mostly blind.”

He thought back. His phone showed the timestamps for incoming messages, but he didn’t normally pay attention to them. “Uh. Sometime between 2:30 and 3? Probably?”
“Okay. Let’s make a timeline of what we know.” She pulled a pen and notebook out of her inventory. “It’s...almost 7:30 now. Shoot; I need to leave.”

“Call in sick. Or tell ‘em that Attie’s sick and you need to deal with it.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. If this messes things up you can do your LOAD thing.”

“I really don’t want to do that too many times, though...”

“Is there some kind of limit?”

“Well...not a hard one, not really. As long as I feel DETERMINED I can LOAD. But the longer this goes on, the more frustrating it becomes and the harder each LOAD is. There’s also the issue of people remembering little bits of what happened before. If one of the people who attacked us decides to change things up...”

“So...what, then?”

“I don’t know.”

They both stared at the blank page for a moment. Slowly, Sans slid the notebook and pen over to him. “Here’s an idea. What if we write down what we know, then you do your...uh, SAVE. That way we keep it. If we haveta repeat, we can add things first, then SAVE, then keep going. Does that make sense?”

She ran a hand over her eyes. “That’s actually a really smart idea. I’ll be honest; I’m a bit hesitant to do it now, since I’m going to be late to work at this rate, but we can do that if we have to LOAD again.”

“Sounds good.”

It took him only a moment to locate Undyne’s number in his phone. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to other people, but Frisk was in no condition to call.

At least it would give him something else to think about for a few minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: There’s a common misconception that “SOS” stands for “Save Our Souls” or “Save Our Ship,” but these are backronyms. “SOS” derives from the Morse Code signal for distress (...--...), which was originally one continuous string without word or letter breaks. Because the signal corresponds to the letters S (...) O (-- -) S (...) in Morse Code, it came to be known by those letters in common usage. Today it’s a very common international signal for emergency, distress, or someone in need of rescue.

Also, petrichor is the smell of rain falling on dry earth.

So everyone is fine, right? No one's really dead, right??
Oh goodness, I just killed off a kid in a story. I'll be over here in my corner of shame for a week, thinking long and hard about what I've done.
Undyne didn’t sound pleased to hear that Frisk would be out for the morning, but her concern for Attie outweighed her annoyance. She even offered to talk to Tori, which saved them a phone call.

Their timeline was rough and had more question marks than actual information, but it slowly took form. Frisk had gotten up with her alarm clock at 6, as always, and had started her morning routine. Sans was up and making coffee by 6:45. Frisk had SAVED just before 7, then left.

From there their schedules diverged. Attie had gotten Sans up during the thunderstorm, probably closer to 8. They’d eaten breakfast, exercised, and done homework. Lunch had been late and they’d just finished it up when Frisk returned home.

On Frisk’s side, she’d arrived at work with barely enough time to prepare for her morning meeting. Until 10:30 she’d been speaking with representatives from a group of local private schools regarding monster integrations in their classrooms, but she’d stayed to chat with one of the board members. A team meeting with her staff and aides began at 11:15, and had been interrupted at noon by Undyne delivering news of the lockdown and escorting Frisk to the on-site safe room.

She’d been cleared to leave an hour later and around 1:45 she was home and kicking Sans out to have a drink at the bar. By 2:15 she and Attie were on their way to the park. It hadn’t taken more than 15 minutes for them to walk there, even with Attie being squirrely. The only person present when they arrived was a man who claimed be looking for his young son. Frisk had joined his search without a second thought; once she’d been lured into the woods, the gang had ambushed them. She had held them off for at least 10 minutes before...well.

“So what do we do, then?” Sans looked over the list he’d made. He’d made an effort to be neat, but his handwriting was still pretty messy. “Can’t you just, uh, not go to the park? Did they say what they wanted?”

“It was a kidnapping attempt. The man said he was with an ‘organization’ that wanted something with me. They wanted to take me to the Underground.”

“Then why kill Attie?”

“They wanted me to go with them…”

“Killing your kid wasn’t gonna make you cooperate. Wouldn’t it have been better to take her hostage?”

“Probably, but I’d ticked them all off at that point. Maybe it wasn’t part of the plan. Either way, it did make me pretty irrational. I can’t hold a barrier if I can’t concentrate, and there’s no way I could’ve concentrated after that.” She took a shaky breath. “Sans, I never want something like...
that to happen again. I don’t care if I can go back and do things differently, I just…”

“Yeah.”

“I just… I don’t want…”

“Shh, just breathe. C’mon, she’s okay now. Any ideas on what we can do differently?”

“Well, um, we… I didn’t go in to work this morning. That means I won’t get sent home when the bomb threat hits-”

“Wouldn’t it be better to let Undyne know? About the bomb?”

“And how would I explain that I know about a bomb threat four hours early? If we knew what was going to happen maybe we could BS our way through, but I don’t even know if it’s a real bomb or not.” She put her head down on the table, pillowed by her arms. “I was so stupid. I thought it didn’t matter if I had to LOAD so I didn’t pay attention. I know better by now.”

“You were excited to spend time with yer kid-”

“And look where it got her.”

“Hey, hey, she’s fine now, remember? No, just listen. She’s real lucky to have a mom like you. She was so happy when you came home early! Remember that? And even though there were... problems... later, she has someone who cares enough to mess with time for her.”

“I mess with time for lots of people.”

“But not everyone. ‘M not sayin’ it’s a bad thing, but the fact that Attie is one of those people definitely helps her out.”

“You have a point. Wow, that’s just... another thing to feel guilty about, I guess.”

“Why do you feel guilty, Mommy?” Attie asked, shuffling into the room. She hadn’t been there long - she was still rubbing sleep out of her eyes - so hopefully she had no idea what they were talking about.

“I was afraid I’d hurt you, baby boo,” was Frisk’s explanation.

“I’m not hurt at all. I had a bad dream about a mean guy but then you and Mr. Sans rescued me. And you woke me up with all your crying.”

Sans couldn’t look at her. He’d tried, he really had, but he just hadn’t been fast enough. At least Attie wouldn’t know how much of a failure he was.

She’d been right there, her hand in his. And he hadn’t done a thing.

“Don’t you worry. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“But you said that yesterday and I got a papercut on my finger.” She held up one small pointer finger, which had a red line across the tip.

“I won’t let anything really bad happen to you, then. Want a bandaid?”

“Yeah. It didn’t hurt when I forgot about it but now it kinda does.”
“Alright. I’ll be right back.”

While Frisk ran for a bandage, Sans made himself useful starting breakfast. Coffee was still brewing; she must’ve done her determined thing before finishing her morning routine. Two pieces of toast were on the floor, one of which had a few bites missing, and he tossed them before starting oatmeal.

“C’n I help?” a little voice asked. “I can sort the dinosaur eggs.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why’re there three bowls?”

“One for you, one for me, one for your mom.”

“Oh. Okay.”

That’s right; it had been just the two of them at breakfast last time. Poor kid probably had deja vu on top of everything else.

“Is Mommy okay? She sounded kinda scared.”

“I think she had a bad dream too.”

“Oh. Is that why she was crying all over me earlier and she didn’t go to work today?”

“Yeah.”

Attie sorted the dinosaur eggs however she saw fit as Sans added hot water to the dry oatmeal. It was very strange: he could feel the echoes of the last timeline overlapping his movements, pulling him inexorably towards the same conclusion. He was helpless to fight it.

But Frisk wasn’t.

She stalked into the room like a warrior, the embodiment of courage and determination in a loose shirt and cargo pants. Her hair was pulled back away from her face, emphasizing the curves of her neck and cheeks.

Sans nearly dropped the oatmeal, absolutely captivated by her.

“Okay. Plan time: we’re going to hang out here until at least 3:00 and see what happens. Things might get dicey around 2:45, since...you know. We should turn on the TV to local news, paying close attention from noon onwards. Attie?”

“Yeah?”

“Your job is to tell me if you hear anything about terrorists or explosions. I think there might be something bad going on and I need to know what. Sans?”

“Yeah?”

“Your job is to collect all the information you can before noon or so. I’m guessing that we were followed, but it seems like you weren’t; still, be very careful. Do you have enough magic to teleport?”

He closed his eye sockets and checked his reserves. “Yeah, I’m doin’ alright.”
“Be careful. There’s no private place around here for you to teleport to or from, but I think your best bet is to go around the side of the garage instead of walking all the way to the park. I know the Grzegorzewskis can see you back there, but they’ve seen you around enough that they should know who you are, at least. We’ll stay in touch via phone as necessary.”

The last thing he wanted to do was leave her, even in such a secure location, but what other options did he have? She was right: he could reach out to some old contacts and see if he could sniff out anything. And as far as they knew, he wasn’t a target. He could move freely.

“Okay.”

“Now. Breakfast!”

They ate their oatmeal quickly: Sans and Frisk because of nerves, Attie because she wanted to keep up. Frisk collected the dishes and shooed Sans out of the house and into the rainy morning.

“I’ve got this,” she said. “I need something to keep me busy while we wait. Just let me know if you find anything.”

Since most of his contacts were probably still asleep or at work, and his usual method of collecting random information involved hiding in a corner and listening to people, Sans started at Grillby’s. It was early yet, but Pele got him some juice in lieu of anything stronger. Her flames flickered a little as she set it down in front of him. “...Everything...okay?”

“Yeah, kid. Attie’s with her mom for the morning and she sent me here to take a break.” Without really thinking about it, he asked, “Everythin’ okay with you?”

“...It is...long days, but...good. Good work.”

The deja vu felt suffocating. He knew the response, knew he shouldn’t fight against it, but some part of him still wanted to.

“Yeah, I know how that goes. Grillbz still treatin’ you fine?”

“...He is...hmm. Fair. Not...friendly, always, but. Good.”

“Heh. He can be grumpy sometimes, but he’ll treat ya right.”

“Yes. He...will not say that. But. He would not...do...what the others did. He is...hmm. Attached? Does not go away.”

“Loyal?”

“No, not the king...”

“Not ‘royal;’ loyal. Means he sticks by you even when things get tough. Never thought he’d be the type, but...I guess, deep down, he’s a big softy.”

“Oh really,” crackled Grillby from the back room. “You are one to talk about loyalty and softness, hmm?”

“Uh...”

He appeared, eyeing both of them over a box he carried. “And what are you doing in my bar so early in the morning? Alone? Pele, how many drinks has he had?”
“Nothin’ alcoholic,” Sans grumbled, waving his juice at the elementals. Keeping his eye sockets focused in their general direction, he carefully examined the magic in the room. A human in the corner and two other monsters remained, none of them close enough to hear. “An’ I’m doin’ some recon. Don’t suppose you’ve heard anythin’ weird recently?”

Grillby stared at him, almost expressionless. *Almost.* There was a hint of suspicion and a touch of worry that immediately caught his eye sockets. “Finish your drink. Leave. Teleport upstairs. It is merely a rumor, but if the ambassador suspects something…”

They both left him alone to finish his juice. He didn’t want to rush and look like he was up to something, but curiosity was eating at him. It all seemed too convenient, didn’t it? And if Grillbz knew something so important, why hadn’t he shared it sooner?

What if...it was a trap? Grillby’s attitude towards him in recent month had been friendly, and suspiciously so. What if someone had paid him off?

What if...

Sans threw some coin down on the counter and sauntered out of the bar, wincing when a raindrop slid into his nasal cavity. There was no use worrying over traps and betrayals. If something happened he’d (probably) be back soon enough. It wasn’t like he’d be the first person to die over this.

*Don’t think about that.*

It took hardly a moment to teleport up into the hallway outside Grillby’s room. The bartender was waiting, leaning up against the wall.

“There you are;” he crackled. “This way. Pele is watching the bar; we can talk in private.”

‘Private’ meant his rooms, apparently. Unlike the rest of the rooms at the bar, which consisted of a single large room with a walled-off bathroom for human sensibilities, this appeared to be a proper apartment. Grillby allowed Sans inside and gestured him into a chair, grabbing something from a locked cupboard in the kitchen before joining him.

“There has been growing displeasure in the Underground for some time; this, the Royal Guard knows, and I assume the ambassador does as well. Of all the groups that have been causing trouble, the two primary ones are the Sparks - who we both know - and a reclusive group called the ‘Cult of the Dragon Eye,’ more commonly called the ‘Cultists.’

“What no one seems to be investigating are the links both of these groups have to Equality for All.”

“Wait, wait. The human group? The one that terrorized us for over a year while we were tryin’ to settle in? Aren’t they mostly gone now? And why would they work with monsters?”

“Because their goals align more than most people think. Both the Sparks and the Cultists are based in Hotland and comprised of monsters who were either denied permission to leave the Underground or who do not wish to move at all. However, they are in the minority; as things stand, roughly 80% of the monster population is on the surface, at least part-time.

“This poses a problem for groups that prey upon others. There are fewer targets to choose from, and due to a variety of factors - lack of opportunity, high crime rate, and so on - the best and brightest monsters have moved moved up and away. Our cooperation with humans has led to a growth in wealth and quality of life impossible before, and all of that is geographically protected
“Forcing monsters back to Mount Ebott would mean easy pickings for our local gangs. They believe - and with good reason - that their falling numbers are due to the fact that it simply more profitable to get a job on the surface than to live a dangerous life of crime in an old cave. The majority of those who remain now are the lowlifes who refuse to participate in society and crave either the thrill or the independence of their current line of work, along with those they’ve coerced into assisting them. Remove the financial incentive for obeying the law, and the crime rate would go back to what it was before the ambassador freed us.”

Sans took a moment to process all that. “So...what you’re sayin’ is that the gangs are collaborating with the terrorists because everyone wants to force monsters back underground.”

“That is...a gross simplification, but yes.”

“Why’re you tellin’ me all this?”

“Because I have reason to believe that the ambassador may be targeted.” Grillby passed over the object in his hand. It was a folded-up piece of lined notebook paper. “She is a symbol of our freedom and our progress on the surface. Kill her or hold her hostage and monsters would likely comply with a terrorist’s demands, or at least suffer a blow to morale. The assassination attempt last year highlighted a distinction between the monster and human understandings of her position: we count her as one of our own, but so do humans.

“A human attacking another human was seen as a human issue, and there was significant criticism of the decision to allow the assassin to be tried in a monster court. A monster attacking another monster rarely makes the news. A monster attacking a human, however...that would be a scandal.”

Sans unfolded the piece of paper. Written there in messy Monster were a series of what appeared to be dates and locations, carefully laid out in pairs.

“People of such a persuasion occasionally come to my bar; it is one of the best places for a mixed group to meet, after all. One of them left this behind.”

“An’ you never reported them?”

“Why would I? They cause no trouble here. I have no solid proof of their activities; even this is hardly damning. Their money is worth as much as anyone else’s, they tip well, and the information I can glean from them is valuable. I have no reason to drive them away.”

Sans conceded the point. “Then you could point them out to me?”

“The group changes often, and I have not seen them in months.”

Which wasn’t a yes or a no.

“Why give me this at all, then?”

“Because you may be able to do something with it, especially if you are here looking for answers. All I know is that there was some talk of ‘fireworks’ at that particular table. As you can see, several dates have already passed with no issues. But...one of those dates is today. And if I am not mistaken, the location associated with it is downtown, very close to the embassy. I do not believe in coincidence.”

“Right. Thanks, Grillbz.” He pocketed the paper; he’d have to show it to Frisk and hope they
could memorize it between the two of them. “Whaddaya want for this?”

“I don’t know what you mean. It is a piece of trash from the floor of my bar. I don’t know why you would pick something like that up.”

Yeah, a piece of trash he was keeping in a locked cabinet.

It was hard to read between what he wasn’t saying. Was he trying to repay a debt? Earn favor with Frisk? Avoid his bar being caught in the crossfire?

Regardless, this just might help. “Well, thanks for lettin’ me pick up yer trash, then.”

Grillby hummed. “No thanks are necessary. See yourself out. You may wish to step into the hallway before you take one of your shortcuts; this room is highly protected.”

“Uh. Right.”

Sans teleported from the hallway back to Frisk’s place, badly scaring one of her neighbors. He gave a little wave as he hurried through the barrier and...found the door locked.

He rang the doorbell.

There was a small commotion as Frisk approached the door, paused, then unlocked it to let him in.

“Hey there. Found something already?”

“Yeah. Let me inside ‘n I’ll show ya.”

They huddled together on the couch with Attie and TOSS and a big bowl of popcorn, examining the note. Frisk ran one finger down the list of dates. “That’s...unnerving. This lines up with my schedule too much to be coincidence. See here? That building is right across from the West Ebott Library. I was there taking a tour of their new Monster History section. I wonder if we can confirm with Undyne; she has more knowledge of local incidents that might have been prevented by law enforcement.”

But Undyne was busy when they called, and Sans’s attempts to reach his other contacts were largely unsuccessful. The few who answered his calls had nothing actually useful to provide. That left the three of them with a few tense hours of waiting before the TV in the background let out a sound like an air siren, signaling an emergency message.

The bomb threat.

Sans looked at his phone. It was 12:15; Frisk must have gotten the news not long before the general public. An evacuation of the entire downtown area was in effect. People were being warned to stay in their homes and away from the city if possible. They watched as barricades were erected to keep everyone away from the affected area, but from what Frisk remembered they were also looking for anyone suspicious trying to leave.

Of course, barricades didn’t stop news crews from getting close to the action, to the annoyance of local law enforcement. There was some speculation over where, exactly, the bomb supposedly was, but maps of the police checkpoints put the epicenter right on a hotel building near several embassies. As the afternoon wore on, that area was watched very closely.

Frisk, who'd pulled out an actual paper map of the downtown area from somewhere and had been drawing on it, tapped a finger on an intersection. “Here: Terrace and Pine. Big building; a few
different stores with apartments on top, I believe."

"That’s...not where the news’s sayin’ it is. It’s a few blocks down, see?"

“But this is the location on your note. So either this is a staging area…”

“...Or they’re lookin’ in the wrong place.”

Attie leaned against her mother’s arm. “Mommy? I’m scared. I don’t want a bomb to explode.”

“Me neither, baby. We’re going to try-”

At that moment, a huge rumble rocked their living room. Sans grabbed onto whatever he could - Frisk’s shoulder and TOSS, who had been lounging behind her on the couch - and tried to hold them steady, instinctively closing his eyes.

It felt like an earthquake. A lot less terrifying than the ones back in the Underground - he wasn’t worried about a ceiling caving in on him - but there was no mistaking it for anything natural.

*Guess that bomb was real, then.*

3:17 PM, his phone read.

Frisk said a word under her breath that made Attie gape. “We’ve gotta go back before things get too bad, or the deja vu will be awful. Let me-”

“Wait.” There was a lot of chaos as the newscasters tried to figure out what was going on, but within a few seconds of furious searching they’d linked up to a live feed from a weather camera mounted on a building a few blocks away from the epicenter, looking over the swath of destruction that had been the downtown area. One building was just gone; at least two next to it looked like they’d sustained heavy damage. Fire was everywhere. It was impossible to pick out the the Embassy of the Kingdom of Monsters, but from that level of damage there was no way it could’ve escaped unscathed. Not at that distance. “Looks like it ain’t the hotel.” That, at least, was clearly still visible and standing.

“Shit! We were right, then!”

“But…”

“Sans, I need to do this *quickly-*”

“Fine, go; we’ll talk on the other side.”

The feeling of time turning back was only slightly less disorienting when he was expecting it. It was still jarring to go from sitting calmly to walking down the hallway - again - towards the office.

Behind him, he could hear Frisk scrambling for paper. It sounded like her toast made it onto the counter, at least.

“Okay, okay, okay-”

“You, uh, alright?”

“Shh.” She was writing furiously, but even so her handwriting was much neater than his. “Shit. Okay. Okay. The bomb actually went off at...what, 3:17?”
“Yeah.”

“Okay. There we go; that’s all we got last time, I think. Our timeline and Grillby’s note. So we have our time limit and a location.”

“Can’t we, y’know, drop this off at Undyne’s?”

“That...might work, actually. We don’t have much to lose. Let’s see...Undyne never sleeps; she’s probably in her office. I’ll copy the dates and times we got from Grillby’s note and run it over to her on the way in to work. Hopefully that’ll be enough to get her to take us seriously.”

“You’re goin’ back to work? After that?”

“Well, yes. I have a responsibility to make sure everyone gets out safely, if nothing else. And - assuming the world as we know it isn’t going to end - I do want to make sure that morning meeting goes through. It would be a great educational opportunity.”

This woman was insane. “Uh. Okay. Ya gonna…” He gestured.

“Do I have something on my face?”

“No, no. Ya gonna do that, uh, ‘save’ thing?”

“Oh, right! Actually...let me grab breakfast first. Eating the same meal more than a few times just makes me feel nauseous.”

Frisk ate the toast she’d originally prepared. Sans didn’t have the stomach (heh) to join her, but he hovered nearby as she washed her dishes and took a seat on the edge of the couch. “May as well be comfy for this part,” she said, but her smile was tremulous.

Sitting next to her, he could’ve sworn he felt the rush of magic that signaled the power she called SAVEing.

She left after that, promising to stay in touch.

The rest of the morning was deceptively quiet, as quiet as the first time around had been. The only evidence Sans had of how crazy his day had become was the notepad Frisk had left on the coffee table in the living room, covered in times and dates and locations.

...What had happened? Was the bomb really related to Frisk? Would Undyne take them seriously? Could she even do anything if she did? Were kidnappers already following them all?

The bomb was planted far enough away to give plausible deniability. The embassy was close enough to be damaged, but probably not destroyed. It made sense if the goal of all this was to get Frisk someplace she could be captured, but there had to be an easier way to accomplish that.

“Mr. Sans?” Attie was tugging on a sleeve. “I wanna go to the park.”

“Not today. ‘Ts rainin’.” And he’d rather stab himself than take her anywhere near there until he’d had a chance to personally hunt down each and every member of the group who’d hurt her. Their faces, their voices, their magical signatures were burned into his skull. If they crossed paths with him, they were dead.

“But I really want to! And I’m ahead on my schoolwork!”

“Most of it, sure. But...” He pulled a textbook out of his inventory. It was thick and heavy, and
the blue cover sported numbers and symbols in a garish orange. “...You aren’t ahead in Math, and we should go over some’f your other stuff as well.”

The groan she let out sounded painful, almost.

Sans was certain that the morning took twice as long when it was just the two of them...and yet, nothing had really changed. It was still overcast and rainy, still clammy and cold enough for Attie to need a sweater. Working out was still exhausting. Homework was still a bit boring. It was Sans himself who’d changed, constantly looking towards the TV he’d put on mute and watching for something to explode.

It didn’t, of course. The morning dragged on and on and on, uninterrupted by anything helpful to his current situation. Attie noticed - of course she did; she was a smart kid - and it took some convincing to assure her that he wasn’t mad at her.

He was mad at many things: at the assholes who decided to blow things up, at the disgusting freaks who would kill a child to kidnap her mother, at himself...but not at her.

Frisk’s text surprised him when it arrived at 12:03 to let him know that she was in her safe room and that evacuations had started at the embassy.

You 12:04 PM
U coming back?

Frisk 12:05 PM
I’m going to make sure everyone else evacuates safely. Undyne wanted to get me out first, but I think I can help here.

You 12:07 PM
B safe

Shit. Frisk wanted to be a hero?? Sure, she could turn back time; and sure, it could provide her with good information...but that didn’t make his soul ache any less at the thought of her being so close to the impending explosion.

“Mr. Sans?”

“Hmm?”

“Why’re you frowning?”

“Some bad people want to blow up the embassy. Yer mom’s not getting out right away.”

“Oh. Is she gonna help fight the bad guys?”

He glanced down at her. Her pigtails were a little crooked and there was a smudged blue line - marker, maybe? - along the edge of her chin. He rubbed the line with the side of a finger and started taking out her pigtails. “Nah. She’s just gonna make sure people’re safe before she heads home.”

“Oh. I think she’d really like fighting the bad guys, though.”

“Probably.”

“And she’s really good at it.”
“Does she fight many bad guys?”

“Mmm. Not really. She mostly hides from bad reporters ‘cause she says we’re not allowed to fight them or they’ll tell a bunch of people that we’re meanie-pants. And there was a mean lady who tried to steal her purse once, but that was mostly running.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. She chased the mean lady really far and tackled her and then Undie got really mad because Mommy could’ve been really hurt but it was all okay ‘cause Mommy got her purse back.”

“That’s...good.”

Not terribly reassuring for someone who wanted to keep her alive and safe, though. He strongly empathized with Undyne in that regard.

One hour passed, then two. Frisk still wasn’t home. Sans turned off the TV; he didn’t want Attie to see her mother being blown up on-screen if something went terribly wrong.

At 2:30, his phone rang.

“Hey…”

“Sans!” It was Frisk. “Listen. We’ve gotta try this again.”

“Okay-”

“Just listen. I gave the info to Undyne; I think that just made things worse, though. They must have an insider somewhere. She forwarded everything to the human police and there was a coordinated effort to sweep the local area.

“They found the bomb, all right, but the terrorists were prepared for them. They killed at least two policemen and took the whole building hostage. There’s a lot more of them than we thought. They’re threatening to blow up the place if I don’t go out there.”

“You’re not-”

“Of course not; we don’t negotiate with terrorists, and they’re basically threatening to blow themselves up, but this means we’re out of time. It also means...I think we have to try something else.”

“Like what?” Going to the park again? He caught himself before he said it out loud, but what options did they have?

“We’ll think of something. I’ll be right there and we can talk. I’m going to do my thing; no point waiting around for this.”

Before he could reply, they were sitting on the couch again.

Frisk scribbled down her notes, mumbling to herself, as Sans tried to make sense of everything he’d heard. “So we need to find a way to deal with two main threats: the bomb and the kidnappers. We know where the bomb is, and we know that there’s a leak in either the human police force or the Royal Guard. Or both. I’d normally suspect the police, simply because there’s more of them and I’m not familiar with their hiring standards, but who knows? It seems like everyone’s working together.
“So information transfer is a big issue. If we can subvert the bomb, we’ll be good to go. Dealing with the kidnappers is just a matter of staying away from them. They can’t get in here, after all.”

He nodded. “But if they’re all workin’ together, they may be able to change tactics.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s say...let’s say the bomb goes missing. Somehow. Well, now you’ve got a whole bunch of unknown people downtown with nothin’ to do. What’s to stop ‘em from marching over to the embassy and demanding that you surrender?”

“A pretty hefty deployment of the Royal Guard with permission to use magic and a few dozen guns. But...I get your point. I don’t want to see these people killed unless there’s absolutely no other choice. In the grander scheme of things it’s better than letting them blow up a building, but I’d rather take them peacefully into custody.”

Sans grimaced.

“What?”

“Just...why’re you so concerned about a bunch’a terrorists?”

“Well, they’re still people. I wouldn’t kill someone unless I’m up against a wall with no other way out, time magic included, so I’m not going to ask anyone else to do so on my behalf. Plus, there are some practical concerns. It would look incredibly bad for us to be just mowing down people on the steps of the embassy. And the dead generally don’t speak; maybe if we’re able to capture them we can find out more about what’s going on.”

“Oh. Well, I guess it...makes sense.”

Frisk took a deep breath and did her time magic thing.

“Okay. We have updated notes. What do you want to try this time around?”

Taking Frisk and Attie and moving to Antarctica sounded great.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Grillby was so helpful, and he won't remember a thing. Way to take all the credit, Sans and Frisk.

These aren't the brightest terrorists, let's be honest. They keep blowing their cover.

Sorry to disappoint anyone who wanted swift vengeance upon the guys from last chapter! They're safe...for now. At least until Sans can figure out how to protect Frisk and Attie from impending DOOM while making sure they're not around to witness how he handles the situation.

In the meantime, he's got a bomb and roughly one metric ton of survivor's guilt to deal with. Of the two, the bomb might actually be easier to defuse.

Thanks so, so much for all the kudos and comments! You guys make my day. Here,
have an internet cookie. Yes, you. Pass it along if you don't want it.
In Which Sans Defuses the Situation

Chapter Summary

...But no good deed goes unpunished.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans ducked behind a wall, the sound of his sneakers on the carpet almost unbearably loud.
Farther down the hallway, a man and a woman were walking - slowly, almost casually - in his direction.

Patience, he’d found, was key.

It had taken Frisk three time loops to come up with the idea for him to sneak into the building where the terrorists had planted their bomb, and another two for him to find a way in that didn’t instantly alert all kinds of guards. In the process they’d identified three moles - one in the Royal Guard and two in the police - although they both agreed that there were likely more.

There was no backup for him if he failed. Even Frisk couldn’t help him, stuck at the embassy with Attie.

His goal was to take out the bomb, then tell Frisk so she could send in the Royal Guard before everything went to shit. From previous attempts he’d found that there were explosives in strategic positions around the building, but they had no detonators of their own. Once the main bomb went off there would be quite a lot of fire. The fire would set off some of these explosives. Others, intentionally or not, were protected enough to be delayed; those took out most of the first responders in one particularly awful time loop.

He...didn’t want to repeat that, for Frisk’s sake if nothing else. She took everything so personally.

The man and woman were creeping closer. How had those idiots not been caught already? They were joking about placing their share of the explosives, not even trying to hide what they were doing. How much of the building was under their control?

The baggy hoodie he’d “borrowed” from a nearby thrift store hid his face and hands well, and the sweatpants he wore hid his legs. He carefully slipped over to a clothing display, trying to bury himself in the very boring pants it held. As long as no one recognized him, he was fine…

Both terrorists went quiet as they saw they weren’t alone, but passed him by. Sans started a mental count in his head. If he moved too quickly, the woman would start asking uncomfortable questions; if he moved too late, he’d run into another guard farther down the hall who would immediately raise the alarm.

Carefully, casually, he shuffled from the clothing display towards a hallway that led to another part of the store. It took a bit of weird maneuvering to keep his face tilted away from the security cameras, but no one stopped him.

So far, so good.
He had a dwindling list of places left to check for the main bomb. It had to be someplace the terrorists could access, but not out in the open where people would notice. It had to be near the building’s structural supports. There was no real room to run wires, not unless this had been planned much farther in advance than he suspected, so both the bomb and whatever device detonated it were probably on or near the ground floor.

One thing he’d noticed about the building was how difficult it was to get a good cell signal in there. Thick concrete and metal walls meant he had to be standing pretty near a window to communicate with Frisk. That was...okay, that was annoying, but it also lowered the possibility that someone was going to detonate the bomb remotely. In all the loops where the bomb went off, there were no embarrassing failures. They were using a reliable method to set it off.

So someone was physically triggering it. Probably in the basement.

Problem was, the basement was really, really hard to get to.

Using an elevator would be the obvious choice, but there was a key involved in enabling the basement stop. Picking that particular lock hadn’t worked for him so far. Not only was there a security camera, but the key apparently had some kind of digital component; simply using lockpicks hadn’t gotten him the results he wanted.

If he could get down there once - just once! - he could teleport there next time. He just needed enough of a look to know where he was going. And nothing he’d tried would get him close enough for that.

Frustrated, Sans loitered near the elevator for a few more minutes. The terrorists weren’t patrolling by that particular elevator, he’d found. It was primarily used by store employees. Maybe he could hitch a ride with one of them? Threaten someone into taking him to the basement?

Being a monster was both a benefit and a real problem in what he was trying to do. On the one hand, he could teleport. While he couldn’t do it indefinitely - it was far too noticeable and took too much magic - not having to walk through high-traffic areas had saved his ass quite a few times already.

On the other hand, it appeared that this particular terrorist group was entirely human. He’d found that out the hard way when he’d tried to bluff his way into a particularly well-guarded room on the third floor that seemed to be serving as a base of operations.

“Sir? Can I help you?”

Sans glanced at the young woman - probably in her late teens - who’d walked up to him, dressed in a store uniform. “Uh…”

Wait. This could actually work. He put on his best impression of Frisk in a meeting and hoped he didn’t mess up too badly.

“Ma’am, can I speak to you in private? Just over here, where people can’t hear us.”

She looked hesitant, especially when she saw that he was a skeleton, but followed him away from the main walkway. Not the sharpest tack in the box. “Sir, is there a problem?”

“I hope so. I’m an undercover agent with the Royal Guards, and I’m investigating a tip we’ve received. Have you seen any suspicious people around here?”

“Um...yes, I have, actually. One of the managers told us it was the boss’s kids, but the story
doesn’t add up. There’s too many of them, and they don’t look related…”

“Okay. Please keep calm. No, don’t look around; just act natural. We’ve received a tip that there are explosives around the building. They look like little boxes - light blue, about this long - and have a little red light on them-”

“I saw one of those! Holy shit!”

“Shh. Wait. This is nothin’. The main bomb is around here somewhere, but I haven’t been able to find it. I think it’s probably in the basement-”

“There’s nothing down there, though! It’s just a loading zone and…and storage! Like, long-term storage, for seasonal decorations and stuff!”

“So no one would be down there, normally.”

“N-no…I guess not…”

“Okay. Can you do something for me?”

“Uh. Yes?”

“Get me down into the basement; I can get myself out from there if I need to. Then get together as many people as you can who aren’t part of this shitty group and look for the explosives. Try to get them away from the building.”

“Shouldn’t we call the police?”

“Kid, I’m all the ‘police’ you’re gonna get right now. As soon as I get the big bomb removed we’re gonna call in backup.” Ideally, anyways. Frisk had briefed Undyne, but they weren’t going to make any moves until they could find a way to minimize damage. “We’re trying to keep this as quiet as possible so we don’t tip off the ter…the strange people you have walking around.”

“…Uh, alright. Let’s get you downstairs, then, I guess.”

Her hands were trembling and she fumbled her key twice, but eventually the elevator started moving. Slowly. Painfully slowly.

She turned to him. “Are you s-”

“Shh.”

“But-”

He casually gestured towards the camera that was staring at him in the corner. He had no idea if there was any way to hear over such a device, but he didn’t want to risk it when the terrorists were watching the cameras.

The instant they got to the basement his escort practically ran from the elevator. She crouched against the wall, slowly siding down until she was sitting on the cement floor of the warehouse next to a stack of nondescript brown boxes. “Shit, shit, holy shit-”

“Calm down. It’s gonna be okay.”

“It’s…it’s not-”

“O-okay.”

Her breathing was probably too quick to be healthy, but he let her be. Maybe her outburst had drawn some attention; if the bomb really was down there, it couldn’t possibly be unguarded…?

“‘Ey! Who’s there?”

He ducked behind a conveniently-placed stack of lamp boxes a brief moment before a man in rugged jeans and a leather jacket ran around a corner on the far side of the room. Good; he had a direction. Now-

The man stomped up to the girl on the floor. “What’re you doing down here?”

“I...I’m an employee! I’m having a panic attack; I was told I could take a break-”

“Not down here!”

“But my...my manager said I could!”

The man swore under his breath. “Look, lady, you’ve gotta get back upstairs.”

“Why? Do you even work here? Why are you-”

“Get back upstairs. Now. We’re, uh, moving some pretty heavy stuff. It’s not safe. If you’re not feelin’ well, ask your manager to send you home.”

“But-”

“Wouldn’t you like to take a day off? I know I would. C’mon; you don’t look so good.”

There was no response, and Sans didn’t dare peek.

“Alright. Look, I’ll help you back into the elevator, but they need me down here-”

“Can...can you come with me?”

“I…”

“Please? Just back up to the, uh, third floor. You don’t even have to get out of the elevator. Just...I...I don’t want to be alone? I’m really sorry, I know this is a lot to ask of a stranger, but…”

“Alright, alright. C’mon; let’s get you out of here.”

Sans waited until the elevator doors closed before leaving cover. Now that he was looking for it, he could see the doorway the man had come from, mostly visible by the change in lighting behind a set of shelves.

There were voices on the other side, someone muttering and asking where “Jim” had gone and another someone making crude jokes in return. (Or, at least, Sans assumed they were crude jokes; he didn’t understand the terminology they were using. They could have been terrorist jokes, in all fairness.) From the sound of it, they were probably close to the door; sneaking inside wasn’t going to be easy.
Behind him, the elevator dinged.

Holding his breath - and hoping that this wasn’t going to be another timeline in which he died - he ducked through the doorway, eye sockets straining for some sign of cover.

Along the wall to his left were three sets of shelves, neatly in rows. Not much on them. Still, that was his best bet at cover…

But that would only cover him from one angle, wouldn’t it? What about the guy coming back from the elevator?

No time to think!

He made a mad dash for the shelves.

At that precise moment, someone in the warehouse behind him knocked something over and swore loudly.

He was absolutely certain he was about to be discovered as both of the guys in the room rushed out, at least one drawing a pistol from his coat pocket. Sans was torn between the instinct to protect himself - to summon bones or something stronger and blast both of them into oblivion - and the faint hope that he could hide.

In the end, either their carelessness or his dark hoodie did the trick; neither of them even looked his way.

The sound of yelling from outside the room gave him cover to look around. The corner Sans was in was shadowed, but wouldn’t hold up to scrutiny. Only the shelves closest to the door held anything at all; either by luck or by design, the rest of the room was mostly clear of detritus. There was a desk in the far corner with a computer screen on top and a lamp off to one side. This was probably an office of some kind, on a good day.

Next to the desk was a box just a little bigger than a dimensional box. Brown, cardboard, and nondescript.

Except for the single red wire leading from one side of the tape-sealed top to something on the desk.

So.

What the hell was he supposed to do with that?? In his imagination, the bomb had been some big, elaborate thing full of switches and timers like in the movies. He hadn’t planned much beyond finding it, really, but he’d pictured some dramatic scene involving blinking lights and a mess of wires.

He pulled a pair of wire cutters from his inventory and crept closer, staying in the shadow of the shelves-

Wait.

His inventory.

He eyed the box again. It was kinda big, but…it just might work, actually. Sure, he’d discounted the idea of removing the bomb altogether when Frisk first suggested it, but circumstances were different. Undyne was ready to charge in. If he could make it look like the bomb was still intact...
The arguing outside was continuing, and from the sound of it had devolved into a small fistfight that “Jim” wasn’t winning. His time was limited.

Scanning the shelves desperately, Sans found a box about the same size as the bomb. On a bottom shelf, thank the stars. He dashed over, grabbed it, and hurried back.

And waited.

No change from outside.

Carefully - and not entirely sure if it was going to make the bomb explode anyways - Sans snipped the wire as close to the box as he could. It was harder than he expected; on closer inspection, it was actually two wires twisted around each other. Since they were both the same color, Sans just braced his wire cutters against his knee and pushed as hard as he could.

The snip! of the blades closing seemed terribly loud.

No explosion.

His hands were shaking as he concentrated on forcing the bomb into his inventory. There was a strange kind of resistance, like it wasn’t going to fit, but after a moment it disappeared with a soft pop! and he had a “Box Bomb” in his inventory. With the wire cutters, he opened a small hole in the corner of his dummy box and stuffed the wire through.

Then he disappeared, focusing on the small closet at the embassy near Frisk’s office. And collapsed, breathing hard. Had he done it? Had he actually done it?? Only time would tell…

He walked through the halls in a daze, almost going right past Frisk’s office. The door that opened as he passed barely missed his skull. Frisk pulled him inside, looking far more concerned than the situation really required, and patted him over for injuries. Understandable, given the number of times he’d been killed trying to find the bomb, but couldn't she see that he was fine?

“I got it,” he said, once he had a moment to spare. “I have the bomb.”

That was, apparently, not what Frisk had been expecting. “...What?”

“I have the bomb. It was in a box. I set up a dummy replacement thing that won’t work.”

“Oh.” That little wrinkle between her eyes appeared. “Wow. I’m impressed, don’t get me wrong, but...I’m not sure how that’s going to play out. I thought you were just going to disable it.”

“I thought so too, but it’s...smaller than I thought, and I’m not sure how to make it...not explode. I also got some of the store employees lookin’ for the other charges. Not sure how well that’s goin’ or whether they’ll find them all.”

“Okay. That’s great. Undyne’s been getting restless; I’ll fill her in. That still leaves the possibility that the terrorists will try to take the building hostage. After all, they believe they have a real bomb, and we know they have other kinds of weapons.”

Sans deflated a little. “Right. Guess I thought-”

“That you’d taken all the wind out of their sails? You did, and it’s awesome. We just need to figure out how to clean up the rest of the mess.”

“Fair enough.”
“Let’s see…”

There was a lot of mumbling after that, and a lot of tracing fingers over the rough building blueprints he’d made. Undyne had all that information, but Frisk called her up with the details of the basement and the (former) location of the bomb.

Undyne, of course, responded by screaming very loudly about protocol and danger and utter insanity, but it was mostly hot air. Frisk wasn’t in danger anymore, after all. Her team was walking in with a lot more information and safety than they’d expected.

Still. Even Sans could admit that it was a crazy plan. An ambassador and a random guy, coordinating a sneak attack on a terrorist cell? Stealing a bomb that could wipe out an entire building? The only reason he wasn’t a pile of dust somewhere was because Frisk’s time magic let them try so many times.

The two of them huddled together and watched a news livestream on her office computer. Attie was safely in the daycare, for once; they both knew how graphic things could get when they failed. Besides, it was crowded enough behind Frisk’s desk with just the two of them.

The broadcast window was split between an overhead view of downtown and a woman in a hooded rain parka speaking into the camera in front of a building Sans didn’t recognize. “…Thank you. That’s right, we are live on the scene of a developing situation in the downtown area, where a bomb threat was made against the Marquise Hotel on the corner of Terrace Street and Cherry Lane. We are now being told that the bomb is actually in the Evans Building on the corner of Terrace and Pine Avenue. An evacuation has been in progress for that entire area since 12:15 PM and that civilians are being asked to stay away from downtown…”

“Lookit that,” Sans said. The overhead view - a helicopter or a drone, possibly - had zoomed in on one of the entrances to the building he’d spent so much time in. It was hard to see through the misty rain, but it looked like a figure in familiar armor had just exited, clutching a bright blue spear.

“At...wait,” the woman paused, one finger gently touching her ear and looking off into the distance for a moment. “I’ve just received word that...that the Royal Guard of the Kingdom of Monsters has diffused the situation. In collaboration with local authorities, they infiltrated the Evans Building and worked to undermine the terrorists inside.”

The scene cut back to a human man and woman in fancy clothes sitting behind a well-lit desk. “Thank you, Theresa. Theresa, did they say anything further about how the situation was diffused?” the man asked, before the lone reporter reappeared.

“No, David, I don’t have any news on that, but we’re getting more and more information as I speak. Hang on; someone’s talking in my ear...well, David, it appears that special operatives from the Royal Guard actually replaced the bomb with a dud. I repeat; a specialized strike team from the Royal Guard went in ahead of the assembled team of guards and policemen and removed the main explosive. We have no word on where that explosive currently is, but the Royal Guard and local law enforcement are working to evacuate the building so the bomb squad can conduct a more thorough search. We will bring you more news as this develops…”

Frisk sighed and relaxed back into her chair. “I think...we actually did it.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m afraid to see where the rest of this will go, honestly. I...I really, really want to SAVE.”
More people had joined Undyne on the sidewalk outside the building. Some were obviously civilians, but many were in the uniform of the local human police. (Although “human police” was a misnomer, really; he could see at least three monsters among them.) Many of them turned to Undyne with huge smiles on their faces as they walked past her post in front of the main doors.

There was one tense moment when a man in a dark jacket tried to bolt past the guard line, but a single slash of Undyne’s spear brought him to a halt. A green shield rotated around him, easily visible from the air, but that didn’t keep police and the Royal Guard from surrounding him.

“I’m going to do it,” Frisk said.

Sans felt the familiar warmth of her magic even without physical contact, and suddenly there was a finality to the world. He’d done it. He’d done it.

He looked to Frisk and realized they both had huge, stupid grins on their faces.

“We should grab Attie and go out for ice cream,” she said. “All my afternoon meetings were cancelled, but those weren’t all that important anyways. I can reschedule them…probably not tomorrow, that’s - gosh - Attie’s birthday and I can use a day off, but later this week.”

“Not afraid of kidnappers?”

“Nah. We’ll stay in the downtown area. After we wait for everything to clear out, of course.”

“Think anythin’’ll be open?”

“Hmm…good point. On second thought, we’ll swing by the grocery store and pick up ice cream there, instead. Home is probably safer than anywhere else right now anyways. Hmmm…I’d better grab a cake mix, just in case I don’t have time to make anything from scratch. We’ll have a proper birthday party for once. Can you go get Attie? I have a bit more paperwork to file; I’ll meet you in the parking garage…”

“Sure thing.”

He left, still with that grin on his face, and headed towards the daycare room.

Attie, of course, was very happy to see him. So happy that he pushed aside the lingering feeling of dread that curled low in his ribcage. It was going to take some effort to ignore the part of him that fully expected another timeline of stress and anxiety and almost-certain death.

Especially when he sensed someone following them out to the parking garage. Another monster, by the feel of it, and with a definite bone to pick. Normally he’d teleport inside, but he’d used up most of his magic just getting around the department store earlier that afternoon. Anything he had left he was going to save for fighting. “Attie?”

“Yeah?”

“Stick close to me, okay?”

“Okay. Are there bad guys?”

“Dunno.”

She hummed in agreement.

Their follower crept closer as they moved, apparently having a better form of locomotion than a
seven-year-old human’s legs. Sans cursed internally. He could pick Attie up and run, but that would draw attention. He didn’t sense anyone else in the area, but that didn’t mean there weren’t other traps; they could be walking into an ambush of some kind. Perhaps someone else could teleport? He didn’t want to lure someone like that into the embassy...

Suddenly, between the columns of the parking garage, he had a clear shot. The other monster was directly behind him and had paused, not wanting to draw attention. A single bone would probably catch the guy off-guard, maybe do enough damage to kill with the right intention.

*But I don’t want to kill anymore.*

Sans...hesitated.

The other monster didn’t.

Whatever hit Sans in the back of his skull had enough force that he heard a dull *crack!* before the wave of agony hit. It wasn’t a magic bullet - thank the stars - but even the physical impact was enough to bring him down to two HP.

Grabbing Attie close, he prepared to teleport...and...*failed.* It was like the magic just wouldn’t connect.

How?? Why??

There was no time to figure out.

He shoved Attie behind him and looked around, backing slowly towards the door that would take them into the embassy. It was too far. *Much* too far.

Especially when a group of monsters he *still couldn’t feel* emerged from a minivan with darkened windows that had been parked right across from Frisk’s little car.

Growling, he shot a wave of bones at the guy who’d been following him and ran for the door, catching Attie around the middle as he did. Hopefully there were still guards in the embassy; there was no way he’d be able to take these guys alone *and* keep Attie out of trouble.

He barely dodged a second projectile - a metal pipe - that embedded itself into the side of a nearby car.

“No damage!” called someone behind them.

The guy was gaining far too quickly. In a split-second, utterly foolhardy decision, Sans skidded to a stop and put Attie down, turning to face his attackers. “Run, Attie.”

“But-”

“Go!”

He had no time to make sure she was safe. A gesture turned her soul blue and sent her flying towards the door far faster than he could’ve carried her. He put her down - gently, of course - but kept a faint hold on her just in case she decided to be stupid.

“Tell your mom I need backup,” he called.

The door behind him opened and shut, and then he was alone with a bunch of enemies.
The pipe he extracted from the side of the car next to him was thin protection, but he twirled it like a sharpened bone. “Well now, what brings all’a ya out here ta see me?”

The monster who’d been following them stepped out. He was a shadowy thing, almost formless and barely visible in the all-too-dim light of the parking garage, but he had glowing eyes on what appeared to be his head and a huge, beaked face on his abdomen. A Knight Knight without the traditional armor. “Take him,” he said.

The other monsters moved closer. They kept themselves close together like a bunch of nervous kids. How...odd. A battle buff of some kind? Or...

Sans put the pieces together a moment too late: the bones he’d summoned fizzled out. An anti-magic device. He couldn’t see the distinct icy blue light it gave off, but there was no other possibility. These guys had hid themselves from him by nullifying their own magic. Shit.

He ran for the door, but even as he did he knew it was no good. Alphys’s magic nullification fields could be adjusted in size; someone must’ve turned the dial up. He couldn’t teleport. He couldn’t attack. He couldn’t access his inventory. It was painfully simple for them to tackle him, tie him up, and throw a dark bag of some kind over his head.

They had him.

But at least Attie was safe.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: monsters' DEF goes down when they don't want to fight.

Also: an explosion that is set off by another explosive (instead of being directly triggered) is called a “sympathetic” explosion, which sounds a lot nicer than it actually is.

Well, I've murderousified a bunch of people and Sans died an unspecified number of times off-screen, but this looks like a pretty good timeline. Right? I mean sure, there's a tiny little bit of kidnapping, but no one's ended up stabbed (yet).

Hooray!

Thank you all for continuing to read this story. It has been a ton of fun writing it, and we'll keep going 'til the end. Everyone stay safe!
The Trouble With Rescue Missions

Chapter Summary

A young woman goes on a happy little adventure to rescue that cute guy she likes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Frisk couldn’t keep the grin off her face as she walked towards the door to the parking garage. And Saved again, just because she could. She’d probably done that five times since Sans left her office, and it felt good.

They’d done it! Actually done it! The bomb was taken care of - still in Sans’s inventory, apparently - and the terrorists were being captured. The Royal Guard could handle the kidnappers by the park whenever they were done; she’d already tipped off Undyne, who would pass it off to whoever was taking over for her when her shift was over.

And best of all, Sans was no longer in danger.

She’d never actually seen Sans die, but that hadn’t made his deaths any easier. In one of their attempts one of the terrorists had posted a picture on social media: a pile of dust and a hoodie that looked...like something he’d worn in subsequent tries. She firmly pushed that mental image aside. And Saved again. He was alive and safe. They could have a long discussion of traumas once the shock had worn off. It was ice cream time.

“MOMMY!”

“Attie??” Frisk barely caught the little girl who careened around a corner in front of her. Attie looked...perfectly fine, actually; just scared. And alone.

“Attie, what’s wrong?”

“The bad guys k-kidnapped Mr. Sans,” she sobbed.

A sudden and crippling feeling of nausea hit Frisk so hard she actually staggered into the wall. Why, why had she assumed that everything was okay?? Why had she Saved when Sans was out of her sight?

She’d gotten cocky, that’s why. She and Sans had both assumed that there was only one group of kidnappers.

How utterly, utterly foolish of them. And now, because of her arrogance, she couldn’t save Sans. He was…

...Dead? Kidnapped? Why would anyone kidnap Sans?

Oh, stars...

“Did he say anything? About where they were going, or anything like that?”
“He said...he said to tell you that he ‘needed backup.’”

Of course he did. But what to do with Attie? “Attie, baby, come with me. Tell me if you see any of the scary guys.”

“Okay.”

She picked up her daughter and ran into the parking garage, hoping she wasn’t dragging the both of them into a firefight.

It was dark, especially when contrasted with the bright lights of the embassy building. That wasn’t right. Were the lights out? Just in this area? It hadn’t always been that dark, right? Were those headlights she saw? Had she just missed them?

“Show me where Mr. Sans was.”

Attie pointed out the way they’d taken. They’d almost reached her car where it still sat, apparently untouched. A walk of only a couple minutes.

The spot where Attie noticed the “bad guys” getting out of their vehicle - right across from her car - was empty.

A shiver went down Frisk’s spine.

She tried to calm herself. Sans was...known, in certain parts of the Underground. Either he’d been kidnapped in some bizarrely-timed revenge plot or - more likely - he’d been kidnapped because of his relationship to her. Anyone could have easily found out that he spent a lot of time around her and Attie, especially if they’d been watching the park. She could only hope that they’d find him more useful alive.

Her phone rang. Her personal phone, not her work one. She knew even before she looked who the call was from. “I’m guessing you’re not actually Sans,” she said, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“Correct. I am Thresher, and I will be your contact.”

Thresher, hmm? He was someone she hadn’t heard from before.

“Our demands are simple. We want you to come to Hollow Rock in Hotland. You may bring one person - only one - to act as a guide. We have contacts in high places; I believe you know them as Equality for All. They are poised to start immediate legal proceedings against you and the Embassy of the Kingdom of Monsters if you get the police or the Royal Guard involved. You have three hours to comply.”

“Four. I need to make arrangements for my daughter.”

“Three. You are in no position to make demands.”

“I have no proof you haven’t already killed Sans.”

She heard the click of a shutter, and a moment later her phone buzzed. Thresher was silent as she pulled open her messaging app. He’d sent her a picture of a very angry Sans, tied up unnecessarily well and laid across the back seat of a vehicle of some kind. He had a dark smudge across one side of his skull, the beginnings of a bruise, but he wasn’t dust.
“Alright, he appears to be alive. May I speak with him?”

There was a bit of shifting, then a familiar voice came on the line. “Frisk, don’t follow me; it’s a trap—”

The low *thud* that cut him off made her gut ache in sympathy.

“Too bad,” Thresher sighed.

“That was unnecessary. This is *obviously* a trap; he didn’t say anything I didn’t know. If you killed him, I’m not coming.”

“Oops.”

She LOADed.

Hopefully Sans could keep his act together this time.

She ran for the door to the parking garage, scooping Attie up as she ran. “What happened?” she asked, just to keep up appearances.

Attie’s information hadn’t changed, of course.

Nor did the fact that she definitely saw headlights, but there was no way she could catch up to a moving vehicle on foot. Hopefully the security cameras caught the license plate.

When she reached her car, she buckled her daughter up in record speed and pulled out her phone. She had at least two minutes before the call, assuming the timeline stayed the same. The terrorists might be watching. Come to think of it, wasn’t there supposed to be a security guard watching the parking garage??

There was no time to think, and only one person left who she trusted to have her back without question.

*You 3:37 PM*
Sans was kidnapped
Embassy parking garage
Black van

*Undyne 3:37*
WHAT???????

Her phone rang before she finished reading the text. “Hey—”

“WHAT HAPPENED?? FIRST A BOMB THREAT, NOW THIS?? I JUST GOT OFF DUTY, DAMMIT!!!”

“I think he’s still alive. They—” Her phone rang again. “They’re calling. On Sans’s phone.”

Undyne hung up immediately.

It was Thresher, repeating his demands. Thankfully, when Sans was given the chance to speak, he just confirmed that he was fine. The way he emphasized “fine” made it sound like he hadn’t actually died the last time around, but Frisk had no regrets.

Still, she needed backup. On neutral ground.
You 3:46 PM
Hotland
Hollow rock
Three hours
Rescue party
Meet at Grillbys
NO guard

Undyne 3:48 PM
AW HELL YEAH

Hopefully Undyne could recommend someone who knew the way to this ‘Hollow Rock.’

At least Toriel didn’t protest when her daughter and granddaughter showed up on her doorstep, both looking distraught. She merely ushered Attie inside for supper and warned Frisk to be careful. Her glare said that explanations - while necessary - could wait until the crisis had passed.

Two and a half hours left.

Thoughts tumbled recklessly through Frisk’s head as she arrived at Grillby’s. It was actually pretty strange that they were giving her so much time, since it took only about an hour to get from the embassy to the Underground. Obviously they didn’t want her right on their tails…

...Or they knew that there was no way she was going to arrive alone and wanted time to prepare.

She wasn’t stupid. Both groups Grillby had mentioned to Sans - the Sparks and the Cult of the Dragon Eye - had been roaming around the Underground for years. They were entrenched in their territory. Going in alone was suicide.

Thankfully, she didn’t have to.

The door to the bar opened with a bang, which...wasn’t quite what Frisk was aiming for, but apparently someone had oiled the door hinges recently. And maybe she was a little more emotional than she wanted to admit.

Every human and monster in the bar was focused on her. There was silence for a long moment as both patrons and ambassador tried not to make any sudden moves, unsure of how to proceed. She fought the urge to analyze each and every one of them. Were there terrorists there, waiting for her? Were there terrorists there, waiting for her? Was she walking into yet another trap?

Then one of the drunk patrons sitting in a corner booth slumped, face first, onto the table with a low thud.

Everyone jumped. Frisk let the door close behind her, carefully.

Slowly, the atmosphere relaxed. A low murmur of sound rose gradually, like the lapping of waves on a rocky shore. She made her way over towards the bar, head held high, trying not to let her hands shake.

“News?” Grillby crackled from somewhere back in the kitchen. “I’m surprised to see you here in person, Ambassador...so soon after the fiasco of the afternoon.”

“So am I,” she called.

The bartender appeared, lazily messing with a bar glass. Something on her face - her expression,
maybe, or the haphazard mess of her hair she hadn’t even attempted to fix - made his flames flare in agitation. Dropping the glass almost carelessly onto the bartop, he vaulted over the bar and the stools and skidded to a stop in front of her.

His glasses scanned her face and the heat from his body seemed to grow, becoming almost unbearable. She saw a few patrons nearby starting to lean away from the rising temperatures and fought the urge to do the same.

“EVERYONE OUT!” he roared.

The room around them burst into action. Frisk didn’t dare look away from the elemental’s glasses - frames glowing a little from the heat - as patrons scrambled out into the cloudy afternoon. Someone even dragged the unconscious idiot from the booth (some kind of rabbit monster, from what she could see) out the door. Apparently she wasn’t the only one who had never seen the guy this angry.

In seconds, they were alone.

“Mr. Grillby? What…?” Pele poked her head out of the back room. She must’ve been on break.

“We are...closed,” Grillby growled.

“I...see. Why are we closed?”

Both elementals eyed Frisk. She took a deep breath and crossed her arms to better disguise the effects of adrenaline. “A group of people - monsters, it looks like - grabbed Sans as he was getting ready to leave the embassy with Attie. He convinced them to let Attie go and take him alone instead. I’m...not sure how.”

Grillby gave off a little flare, flames curling up over his bare arms and the top of his head for a moment before settling down into a more normal level of concern. “And...why was he...alone with a child during such a...dangerous time?”

“We both thought the danger was over. Under normal circumstances, if there was any problem he could simply teleport the both of them out. I didn’t expect them to be so prepared.

“I suspect they have some kind of anti-magic device; nothing else could have kept him restrained. They want me to come to Hollow Rock in Hotland. I’m allowed to bring one monster as a guide.”

“Then...why are you...here?”

“I was hoping you or Pele knew the way to Hollow Rock.”

“Why us?”

“You are friends with Sans, Grillby. I have a certain measure of trust in you because of that. I don’t have many people I can trust in this situation who would also be able to help. This group - they didn’t say who they were, but I have my suspicions - has ties to Equality for All. Some of EFA’s members claim to be connected to high-ranking politicians. The...representative of these kidnappers threatened legal action if we rally the Guard after them.”

“...Are their claims true, then?”

Of course they were. “I didn’t take the time to confirm.” Plausible deniability and all that.
Grillby nodded like he understood what she was really saying. “And I...assume you have...a lead on where he might be, then?”

“I will soon. This appears to be a coordinated effort. They were probably trying to take advantage of the earlier chaos, and...they succeeded, to an extent. They caught us off-guard.

“Humans cannot create or operate anti-magic devices, and they need that device to keep him from teleporting away. A group of monsters with anti-magic devices would stand out on the surface too much; they won’t keep him up here. Besides, there’s only one person we know of who can make a reliable device of the size and power we’re looking at here. They’re pretty finicky. That limits who could possibly have access-”

The door to the bar slammed open for the second time that night, and a tall fish woman walked in. She was dressed light - a white tank top and camo-print cargo pants - and had an entire case of water bottles tucked under one arm.

“DID HE AGREE TO THE PLAN?” Undyne screamed, hand still outstretched from where she’d thrown the door open.

“I was getting to that,” Frisk sighed.

Grillby shifted, clearly uncomfortable with the presence of law enforcement in his place of business. It made his voice waver a bit more than normal. “I thought...you said that...the Guard was not involved?”

“Undyne’s off-duty; it doesn’t count. We’re assembling a team to go after Sans. As I was saying,” she cut a look over to the captain, who relaxed a little, “I think they have him somewhere in Hotland. Both the Sparks and the Cultists have bases there, and they’re the two most likely candidates I can think of. We don’t know who got ahold of anti-magic devices, but once we figure that out we’ll have a lead.”

“Very well.” He nodded stiffly to Undyne. “Come in. We...may as well...come up with a plan.”

She shifted into the bar, holding the door open. In behind her walked Darker Dog, a loox, a pair of vulkins, a Knight Knight in full armor, and a greying human with daunting arm muscles and some of the keenest eyes Frisk had ever seen.

“He’s cool,” the captain said when she noticed the attention on her human companion. “This is Bruce Volks. He runs the old Pumped Gym over on the new side of town.”

Bruce saluted casually with one hand, looking supremely unconcerned on the presence of such a motley crew. He was dressed in clothing much like Undyne’s - sleeveless shirt and camo pants - but he had something strapped to his right leg that looked like the sheath of a large knife. The bandana tied around one arm looked worn and stained, and the combat boots he wore had mud caked onto them.

This was a man who knew how to handle himself in a fight.

Frisk could respect that in an ally.

“Alright,” she said once everyone had gathered around a table. She’d grabbed a map of Hotland from her car on a whim, thank the stars. “We don’t have much time to plan. This isn’t just about rescuing a single monster; this is about figuring out who was responsible for the bomb threat today and multiple attempts against the Kingdom of Monsters. Still, this isn’t an official investigation. I don’t blame anyone who wants to back out.”
The room was silent; everyone met her gaze squarely.

Frisk nodded her thanks. “My suggestion is that I head to Hollow Rock with someone who can show me the way, while the rest of you approach from another way and stir up the hornet’s nest.

“We have two possible targets: the Sparks headquarters in eastern Hotland somewhere near the abandoned warehouses, and the Cultist enclave in the old residential district. We don’t have exact locations and they’re far enough apart that heading in the wrong direction would be...problematic, given the time limit.

“So. Undyne, you’re going to go ahead of us and convince Alphys to tell us just who she’s been selling anti-magic devices to.”

“What?” The fish monster screeched. “C’mon, you know Alphys and I don’t get along! She’s a murdering, lying waste of dust! I don’t care if she’s brilliant and puts a lot of passion into what she does, she-”

“Undyne. This is important. She’s half-obsessed with you, for some reason, so I need you to convince her to tell us. I don’t care how. This isn’t official business; this is us rescuing a friend from a person or persons unknown.”

It took a moment for this to sink in, but when it did, Undyne’s face broke out into a wide, shark-toothed grin. “Eff’n finally! Hey, Bruce, wanna go on a field trip to hell??”

“Right behind ya, Gills.”

“All right!! I’ll shoot everyone a text when we know more!” She ran for the door, closely followed by her human friend. Frisk could clearly make out a vicious war whoop over the sound of a revving engine as the pair drove off, probably on a motorcycle of some kind.

“Okay. Now that that’s out of the way...Pele? Can you give us any information about the Sparks?”

Pele knew more than Frisk expected. It took the poor girl some time to translate her knowledge of the Underground onto a map, but soon they all had a pretty clear idea of where the Sparks’ headquarters lay and where they thought the Cultists were based. That gave the rescuers a place to start.

Assuming the kidnapping crews were all from the same gang, they were probably with the Sparks. After all, the group in the park had been mostly made up of rock and fire elementals, the backbone of that particular gang.

But Attie hadn’t gotten a good look at the monsters who had actually taken Sans. What if there were rival kidnapping groups? Or what if both groups had anti-magic devices?

She checked her phone. Only an hour and a half left.

“Sit,” Grillby crackled. “I will...get something to...soothe your nerves.”

Predictably, he brought out alcohol.

Frisk could drink - she’d built up her tolerance under careful supervision to avoid being caught off-guard at a formal event - but it wasn’t her favorite thing in the world. She didn’t like the taste. Bitter things never sat well with her, and most types of alcohol she’d tried were far too bitter for her taste buds.
The golden liquid Grillby poured into her glass was nothing like what she expected. The flavors were light and sweet, but held a nuance to them that she couldn’t figure out. It was...good. He hadn’t given her much, just about an inch in the bottom of a wine glass, but it was taking her mind off her boyfriend and the impending doom that awaited them both.

“Better?” the bartender crackled.

Frisk opened her eyes - when had she closed them? - and smiled. “Yes, thank you.”

He nodded.

Once everyone had a drink, she shifted her attention back to the map. “I’m not sure how we’ll all get into the Underground unnoticed. I assume they’ll have someone watching the entrances. I can take one with me, but I don’t know all the secret pathways the Royal Guard uses…”

“No problem,” one of the vulkins warbled. “We know how to get in and out of the mountain.”

“Oh. Alright. Who wants to go with me to Hollow Rock, then? I strongly suspect they plan to kill or kidnap whoever comes with me…”

After some discussion among Undyne’s group, the Knight Knight spoke up. “I will,” he said. “I know the way.”

Grillby crackled ominously. “No. I...will take her.”

“But-”

“I will take the ambassador.”

It was hard to read a Knight Knight’s expression. The ones she knew tended to emote with their hands; the strange nature of their bodies meant that they didn’t show emotion in ways humans could easily pick up on.

This one, though, seemed...agitated. A mole, perhaps? She hated suspecting people, but living the same day a dozen times or so had put her on edge. “Thanks, Grillby. Are you sure you’ll be alright?”

“Pele can...run the bar...if I am killed.”

“That’s...not what I asked.” The elemental didn’t even flinch. “Okay, well, let’s all do what we can to get out of this in one piece, alright?”

The rest of the group agreed.

They had two cars, Frisk’s and the Knight Knight’s. Grillby lowered himself carefully into her front seat and buckled in. Across the parking lot, Frisk could see the other monsters loading into a large van.

A dark van.

She was being paranoid.

Right?

“I don’t like this,” she muttered.
“Understandable,” Grillby said.

She’d forgotten he was there for a moment.

“That looks too much like the description of the van that took Sans.”

“The captain...would not have brought...people she did not trust, correct?”

“You’re right. I’m being paranoid, I know.”

“It is...good to be cautious, given the...situation. We will...both need to be...on our guard.”

They were quiet most of the way up the mountain. Grillby shuddered a little when they passed through each barrier, but said nothing.

Why had he even agreed to come? He was an independent, enigmatic person; he bowed to no one if it didn’t suit his purposes. Why would someone like that agree to such a dangerous undertaking?

Frisk parked in the small lot just down the mountain from the entrance, under the watchful eye of a guard. He did a double-take upon seeing Grillby, but waved them through anyways.

Seeing her dad would have been a comfort but she couldn’t risk any more delays. She’d been too busy to visit for at least a month, after all, and Asgore’s temper was legendary.

They took the side entrance, away from the palace.

“Stay...behind me,” Grillby crackled as they entered New Home. Frisk let him pass in front of her. “Do not...try to...be a hero.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The glance he threw at her spoke volumes about his lack of confidence in her ‘best.’ “You...are extraordinary, but...reckless. Sometimes. Follow. Quietly.”

She nodded and checked her phone.

Undyne 5:22 PM
ALPHYS SOLD THE STUFF TO THE SPARKS
EVERYONE HEAD THERE
MEET BY THE OLD METTATON WAREHOUSE

It was a group message, so Frisk responded to everyone on the list.

You 5:43 PM
We’re in the Underground, heading to Hollow Rock.
Be careful, everyone.

Grillby stuck to the open, touristy areas for the most part. That made sense; the more witnesses were around, the less likely they were to be ambushed. A steady trickle of monsters passed them, on their way to home or work or whatever meager entertainment remained in the Underground, and some stopped to talk to her briefly when they recognized her.

Frisk’s heart broke for all of them. She took regular trips to the Underground, trying to show the people there that they weren’t forgotten, but that didn’t mean she could magically fix everything that was wrong with the place. After so long in their specialized climate zones, many monsters had forgotten whatever magic or skills had allowed them to live comfortably on the surface. Fire-based
Monsters had it particularly rough. Less than half the population of Hotland had moved to the surface, the lowest percentage of monsters from any region. And many of those who had left still spent the winter months in the Underground to avoid rain and snow.

And then, there were the criminals.

Like the ones they were going to meet.

Monsters had to pass strict guidelines to be allowed to move to the surface. Petty crimes warranted an extended supervisory period, requiring monsters to check in daily for a few weeks to ensure that they were adapting well, then weekly for several months. People with rebellious personalities didn’t...work well with such a system. Those with gang affiliation rarely even applied; they just stewed in their resentment.

Not for the first time, Frisk wondered what made a person choose to live a life of crime. Habit? Skills? Loyalty? So many monsters were desperately trying to find a way to live on the surface, and some of those who could threw away the opportunity for...what?

“Here,” Grillby said, jumping a railing onto a side path.

Frisk followed.

She needed to stay alert.

Their path led them down a winding trail near the lava pools, the heat growing almost unbearable. She grabbed a water bottle from her inventory and guzzled nearly the whole thing in one go. Her guide tensed while she drank, but only a little.

She couldn’t put it back. Her inventory just...wasn’t working. “Grillby?”

“They’re here.”

Right. The magic blockers. Grillby seemed to be holding up just fine, actually. He’d been more concerned about the water than about not being able to use magic. He wasn’t carrying any obvious weapons; how was he so confident? Was it a bluff?

Around a tight corner stood a cavern Frisk had never seen before. An enormous stalagmite filled most of it with a large hole carved through the center to allow passage to the tunnels beyond.

Oh. ‘Hollow Rock.’ Asgore had probably named the place.

That thought made her feel inexplicably better.

A fire elemental was waiting for them as they approached the stalagmite. “You’re here,” he said. His English was surprisingly good, much better than any other elemental Frisk knew.

Grillby seemed taken aback as well.

“Well, you can leave the package here, buddy. I’m surprised you showed up at all.”

“...No.”

Frisk put a hand out between the two elementals, trusting that one of them - at least - wouldn’t burn her to a crisp. “Enough. I’ll go, as promised.”

Undyne would meet the rest of the group and lead them to the Sparks’ base together. There was no
need for Grillby to risk his life without backup. Or whatever it was he was trying to do.

He stepped out of the way reluctantly.

“Thanks, pal. I was supposed to take out the ‘guide’ at the first sign of trouble, but I can’t dust a fellow elemental.”

Grillby nodded stiffly - to Frisk, not to the gangster - and slowly turned to walk away.

“Now. Let’s get you settled, hmm?”

‘Settled’ meant closing a pair of heavy metal manacles around her wrists and carefully disposing of the water bottle. From the ambient air temperature alone Frisk expected the cuffs to be hot, but they were lined with something soft that protected her skin from the heat and any chafing from the cuffs. How...odd.

She didn’t have much time to think on it; the elemental picked up a device about the size of a basketball and dragged her off through a series of dark tunnels. The telltale blue glow didn’t help the lighting situation much. If her escort hadn’t been made out of fire, she would’ve tripped a few times.

“This is nothing against you,” the elemental said as he helped her over a particularly uneven patch of rock, “We just need you to cooperate with us for a bit. Then everything will be better.”

She said nothing.

“Hey, are you mad at me? I’m treating you nice. Doesn’t that deserve a ‘thank you?’”

There was something aggressive in his voice, so she said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Awfully polite of you.”

If he was fishing for conversation, she wasn’t going to give it to him.

“Quiet again? Well, that’s alright. Here; your next set of guards.”

The ‘set’ was just one monster, another fire elemental.

“Hey, where’s your partner?”

“Not here yet,” the other elemental responded. The voice sounded...female. And the shape of her flames looked very familiar.

“Well, I’m not waiting. You take her. I have better things to do.” He stomped away.

Frisk looked the other elemental over. She was green, as opposed to Pele’s maroon, but the curve of her flaming chin and cheeks was almost identical. Elementals came in all shapes and sizes; surely, it couldn’t be coincidence? “You...are you Fuku?”

The girl jerked like she’d been stabbed, then whipped around and planted one burning fist right in Frisk’s unprotected gut.

Frisk decided to count that as a tentative “yes.”

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact of the chapter: the very first version of the scene in Grillby's bar was written just because I wanted Grillby to vault over something. I'm really glad I was able to incorporate it into the final story.

Also, someone should probably tell Frisk that some people just want to watch the world burn.

In all seriousness, it's very interesting to talk to people who choose lives of crime. Many of them either don't think they've done anything wrong or believe they had no choice. From an outside perspective their excuses break down pretty quickly, but we can justify some pretty messed up things to ourselves.

So! A rescue mission! I hope it's living up to expectations so far. Last we heard from Sans he was alive. Will Frisk's plan to demolish the gang hideout from the inside work? Will someone recognize Undyne as a guard? Is this strange elemental really Fuku?

Find out next week!
The Trouble With Assassination Plots

Chapter Summary

A young woman expresses frustration on the unnecessary complexity of a plan to end her life.

Chapter Notes

Please be advised that Frisk has a genuine scare in this chapter. Nothing explicit happens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fuku - and Frisk was pretty sure this was Fuku - let her fall to the ground in a limp heap. The girl’s punch hadn’t done much, just knocked the breath out of her, but Frisk didn’t get back up. Maybe if she pretended it had done some serious damage...

That same hand reached out and grabbed the front of her shirt, lifting her up a little. “Where did you hear that name?” Fuku whispered. “How did you know my name?”

“I know your sister.”

Fuku’s fire swirled erratically, but she didn’t make any aggressive moves. “You...you know my baby sister? She’s alive?”

“Pele lives with Grillby on the surface.”

“You helped her?”

“A bit. Sans - the guy you captured - saved her from the Lab.” A thought came to mind. “I think that might be part of the reason why he was targeted: someone wants revenge.”

*That* got a bit more of a reaction, but Fuku was very obviously trying to control it. She carefully shifted something around her neck, exposing a small device on a chain. It glowed the same eerie blue of every anti-magic device Frisk had ever seen. “I can’t let you go. My patrol partner will be here any minute; he’d catch both of us. But if there’s anything I can do…”

Frisk had a split second to decide whether to trust this girl or not. Fuku’s reactions seemed genuine enough, but were they really? Could she take that risk?

Her gut instinct told her that she could. “Undyne is headed this way with a small team. They’re gathering near Mettaton’s old warehouse.”

Fuku nodded, cocked her head, and punched her in the stomach again.

For one wild moment, Frisk felt *extremely* betrayed.
“Hey, hey, hey! Lay off! You know she’s supposed to be undamaged!”

“Go to hell, you ice cube!”

Something long and thin wrapped around Frisk’s shoulders and hauled her to her feet. Fuku’s patrol partner was apparently a pyrope, with a wide grin and fashionable shoes and another blue device threaded through his coils. “You know I’d like that, but we have a job to do. If ya can’t keep your cool…”

“Shut up!”

“…I’m takin’ her from here. You just sit there and cool off a bit.”

“You used that one already!”

“I’ll tell the bosses you’re too fired up right now!” The pyrope laughed and dragged Frisk down another tunnel. Once they were out of earshot of Fuku, he pulled out a dark bandana that smelled like smoke and tied it carefully around her eyes. “Sorry, lady,” he said. “Nothing personal. Just tryin’ to make the world a better place.”

He did sound a bit sorry, actually.

Frisk didn’t know how far they walked. They were obviously using a roundabout route, even backtracking a few times; her mental map was incredibly messed up. All she knew was that they went down, down, down...almost to lava level, it seemed.

“Here we go,” the pyrope said, finally, removing the blindfold. They were in a small room at the bottom of that last set of stairs. A brilliant blue fire elemental was seated at a messy table, glaring at her like she was about to escape. There didn’t appear to be anywhere to go except the stairs and a door on the far wall. The door was made of metal and reinforced: a proper jail door, with bars on the window and everything. “We don’t have much farther, but you won’t be needing that blindfold anymore.”

How ominous.

On the other side of the door was a long, wide hallway lined with doors. Her escort was a bit rough as he dragged her past the doors and another pyrope standing guard, but he wasn’t actually hurting her.

In fact, all of her captors had been very careful not to hurt her, Fuku aside. It was...weirdly considerate of them. She wanted to believe the best of them - that they really were trying to make the world a better place, that they didn’t want to live this life of crime and conspiracy - but experience had taught her better.

They were probably trying to lull her into complacency.

The pair came to a stop just in front of a solid metal door with a peephole and a blue, glowing anti-magic device above it. The pyrope pulled out his keychain and fiddled with the lock, giving Frisk a scant few seconds of freedom.

She could see guards on either end of the hallway: a rock elemental on the far end, and that pyrope they’d passed on their way in. Even if she did escape, she wouldn’t get far.

Her attempt to call up a barrier resulted in only the slightest tingle on her fingertips and a jolt to her soul. That meant no chance of being drawn into an encounter, sure, but monsters could use knives
and other physical weapons just the same as any human. Frisk’s biggest concern was that it left her unable to access her inventory. Even her phone was useless to her. They were too deep underground to use the human cell network, and the monster one relied on magic. That explained why they hadn’t bothered to search her for weapons.

She half-expected the pyrope to toss her inside the cell, but instead he motioned over her shoulder to someone behind her. The blue fire elemental she’d seen earlier stepped around them and slowly - cautiously - made his way into the locked room.

It was impossible to make out what was going on, but she could hear a voice. No, two voices. Her heart skipped a beat; that deeper voice...could that be Sans? Hah! If these idiots were locking her up with Sans, they were stupider than she expected! Just because he couldn’t use magic didn’t mean he would be helpless. She’d seen him pick the lock on her front door with the ease of practice, and she was willing to bet that wasn’t his only...unorthodox talent. The only reason they’d caught him in the first place was because he’d been looking out for Attie.

The door opened after a moment, revealing the elemental wearing a wide and disconcerting grin. Oh stars, what had he done to Sans?

Her expression must have betrayed her; he grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. Like the pyrope he took care not to burn her, which was worrying Frisk at that point. It was unusual for such a group to be so careful around a captive.

“Here is how this is gonna work, Princess,” he growled in surprisingly solid English. “We don’t wanna hurt you. You’re our guest! Problem is, there’s only one private room available in this establishment, and it’s already got someone inside. So you’ve gotta try to get along, okay?

“Not that it’ll matter. See, I just gave your buddy here a double-dose of Deliria. Got it off your friend in the lab, on the condition that we used some on him. Guy really has his enemies, that’s for sure. Do you know what Deliria does to a monster, lady?”

She was passingly familiar with it - anyone who studied the problems in the Underground had to be - but she needed time. “Enlighten me.”

He chuckled. “Makes a monster go mad. It’s...intoxicating. There’s no fear, no pain, no...hesitation. Just you and your prey. Course, with the amount we gave him it’s not like he’ll have much control, either. I don’t know what he’ll do first - gut ya or screw ya - but either way, it’ll be fun to watch.”

So that was their angle. They’d drugged Sans to turn him into a mindless creature driven by base instinct, and they were going to throw her to the wolves, so to speak. They’d made sure he would kill her without a second thought. The Sparks were going to keep their hands clean of the whole affair and pin the whole thing on him.

Their plan was better than even they knew. She’d found out a few years back - quite by accident - that her ability to SAVE didn’t work inside a magic nullification field. LOADing was probably the same. If she died, she was...gone.

As for Sans? If he got out he wouldn’t survive her father’s justice, regardless of extenuating circumstances. Asgore wasn’t known for his mercy. The Sparks would dispose of both Ambassador and Judge in a single blow, and probably get their conflict with the humans to boot.

On the other hand, her entire rescue team knew where she was, and Fuku was (probably) sympathetic. If she could hold out long enough for them to find her, then maybe - maybe - she had
a chance to survive this.

The pyrope was removing her shackles. She cursed the fact that they were lined, after all; metal would have burned her, but it would have left a mark. If she was going to die, she needed some way to prove that this wasn’t Sans’s fault-

“Good luck,” the elemental crackled, grabbing her arm and tossing her inside.

The door slammed closed, and she heard footsteps walking away. So. Despite their bravado, they weren’t even actually going to watch. Typical villain behavior: monologuing, then not watching to make sure the heroes actually die. Although...she scanned the corners of the room, and her heart sank when she saw a telltale red light. Of course they had cameras. Maybe they were recording?

“Well, Sans, I think we’ve got a-

“Stop.”

His voice sounded so strange it actually made her jump. She blinked a few times, trying to get her eyes to adjust to the dim light.

His skull was the first thing she saw, on account of the fact that it was white. It was hard to tell - his hoodie and pants were too dark - but it looked like he was curled in on himself, huddled against the far wall. Lines of something that reflected light trailed from the wall on either side of him onto the floor, stopping just shy of his legs. Shackles, she realized. Had he been chained up in this cell the entire time? Guilt tugged at her conscience.

“Sans, we need to-

“Ngh. Frisk. Stop talking.”

“Why?”

“Trying. To focus.”

She could hear, now that she was listening, the sound of labored breathing. She wasn’t sure if a skeleton technically needed to breathe, but Sans did anyways. It was usually a good indicator of his mood. The drugs hadn’t taken full effect then: good. Those assholes must have wanted Sans to know what was happening. Which...was horrifying, yes, but it meant they had time.

“Does...anyone know you’re here?” he said, finally.

“Yes.” She didn’t dare elaborate, not with people probably listening in.

He nodded, but the motion looked strange and jerky like a bad horror film.

The minutes dragged by. They sat in silence, Sans’s heavy breaths the only noise in the room. Every so often a guard would pass by outside, pause outside the door, and continue on. It was maddening to have only that frame of reference for the passing of time.

Twenty-one guard-passes into her incarceration, Sans’s breathing changed. It became harsher, more uneven. He began to make small noises - of fear, pain, or hunger, she couldn’t tell - that were interspersed with low growls.

“Fight it, Sans,” she whispered.

He didn’t respond.

Two more passes later, he just...stopped. His breathing evened out into a slow, even rhythm, barely
audible. The tension she could faintly see across his shoulders melted away. He flexed his fingers - first one hand, then the other - like he was seeing his body for the first time.

Frisk thought she was being exceptionally still and quiet, but she must have made some noise because he abruptly turned his entire focus on her. He stared, growling lowly, before unfurling. She froze in place, holding her breath and not looking directly at him. The hot metal of the door at her back taunted her, begging her to shift to a more comfortable position, but she didn’t dare. Everything she’d ever learned about dealing with the dog pack and other, more feral monsters raced through her head at the speed of light. Maybe if she didn’t move, he’d hesitate? From everything she’d heard Deliria sent monsters into a frenzy, but Sans wasn’t acting aggressive...yet. Had they lied? What had they given him?

He began crawling towards her, maintaining a defensive stance low to the ground as he moved. One hand reached out - an attempt to use blue magic? - but only got a jolt from the magic blocker for his trouble.

The elemental’s words came back to her. Sans wouldn’t...would he? He wouldn’t do...that...to her. They were friends, before anything else. Despite his current state, he wouldn’t-

But this wasn’t Sans in charge, now was it? This was Deliria, driving Sans’s body with ruthless aggression. And she wasn’t blind to the way he looked at her, sometimes.

Please, she prayed to whatever God was listening, If this is it, please let him just kill me. Please don’t let him...do that. Not him. I can’t...I can’t take it. Not again. Please-

A shuffle made her open her eyes. Sans was right in front of her, eye sockets empty and lifeless. His usual grin had never looked more sinister than it did right then in the dim, warm light of their cell.

He looked like a dead thing in a hoodie, moving his head in strange, stuttering motions from side to side. She knew better than to hope he was still fighting for control, but...what was he doing? Trying to figure out how best to kill her, or worse?

His skull leaned in very, very slowly, and Frisk felt tears pool in her eyes. Oh. So this...this was it, then. This was how things were going to be. The moment she was sure, she’d fight back and hope he killed her first. She just...prayed it would be quick, if nothing else.

She felt his unnecessary breath on her neck, right above her carotid artery. Was he going to kill her, after all? Bleeding out was a horrific death, she knew, but it wasn’t anything she hadn’t endured before. The panic was the worst part, really, and she hadn’t panicked over her own death in years.

Attie...I’m sorry.

He stayed like that for a long time, long enough that Frisk started getting a little bored. Really, what was he doing?? He didn’t seem like he was doing much of anything, but she didn’t want to push her luck.

Except that the suspense was becoming unbearable.

“Sans?” she whispered.

There was a hand on her lower throat before she even got the word out in its entirety. She was getting tired of her life flashing before her eyes, really. The hand wasn’t even putting any pressure, just...resting there. It was the only fine tips of his sharpened claws that made the gesture even
remotely menacing; in any other circumstance, she would’ve called it intimate.

After a moment of silence, he made a low growl and nudged the side of her neck with his skull. It was an oddly familiar maneuver, actually; TOSS did that to her pretty much every morning during his routine dance of feline hunger. The comparison nearly made her laugh.

“Sans,” she said again a little louder.

The fingers at her neck pressed down a little, not enough to choke but enough to feel uncomfortable. He nudged her again.

“...Sans?”

He made a strange, low growl and bumped his skull into her yet again.

*Oh.* He was feeling the vibrations of her voice through her neck! That was...weird, to say the least, especially given how he normally reacted to touching her.

“Sans. Sans, what are you doing?” She spoke slowly, carefully, the way she spoke to Attie early in the morning. “Sans, you’re being a little silly right now. What are you doing, Sans?”

He snuggled a little closer to her. The hand not on her neck clutched at the front of her vest.

“You’re not such a big, bad monster after all, are you? They said you’d attack me, but that’s not what you’re doing at all, is it? Now why would that be? Are you trying to get me to put my guard down, or is there something else...?”

It hit her like a ton of bricks. Of *course* a violent gang of monsters thought Deliria was some kind of killing-machine-drug, because that was what they used it for. Monsters were creatures of kindness, somewhere underneath all the anger and violence; it was one of the reasons family was so crucial to them. A drug that removed inhibitions and conscience probably made it a lot easier for them to gain EXP...and as the elemental had said, it apparently felt *really* good.

But for someone like Sans, who cooked for her and cleaned for her and went out of his way to make her life easier every day? Who had fought so hard to stay himself for as long as possible? Removing *his* inhibitions just relaxed whatever caused him to be so wary of touching her. It made him...cuddly.

If this was what Sans was like deep down inside, Frisk was *never* going to let him go. It was too adorable; she called dibs.

Slowly, she brought her arms up to wrap around him, enjoying the freedom of cuddling while she could. He stiffened a little, but settled down very quickly once she started talking again. It was absolutely hilarious that he was trying to keep her talking; maybe it was the vibrations or something in her voice, but this...well. This was *very* telling.

Once she was supporting his weight, Sans just kind of...drooped over. The hand at her throat dropped to her neckline and hung there, loosely, a few fingers hooked inside the collar of her bulletproof vest. His legs shifted, curling up a little. He didn’t *quite* manage to climb completely into her lap - he was a few inches taller than she was, after all; his legs were splayed awkwardly off to the side - but he made a valiant effort.

And he just...sat there. She could feel the eye socket that rested on her shoulder starting to drift closes. Apparently, he was...comfy? She shifted away from the hot door a little, keeping a hold on him, but he was too far gone to care much.
So. This was Sans’s ‘base nature,’ then. Take away all the bluster and the confidence, remove the masks and tear down the walls, smooth over the deep scars he hid behind; and this was who Sans was. A soft little skeleton with a weird thing for voices or vibrations (and/or human necks??) who just wanted someone to hold him. Who just wanted to feel safe.

That thought struck her as incredibly tragic, given how tense he always seemed to be.

The warmth of the wall at her back and the heavy skeleton wrapped around her were both strangely soporific, especially compared to her earlier panic. She knew she was still in danger, knew she had to be on the lookout for the arrival of Undyne and the others, but she’d had a long day, several times over. She couldn’t help but close her eyes, just for a moment…

Frisk awoke to a rush of adrenaline that seemed to fill her from her head to her toes. The entire building was shaking, and she could hear guards racing back and forth outside the cell door.

She made a mental note to have a talk with Undyne about explosives. Specifically, a reminder about moderation in the use of such.

Moving into a more defensible position was necessary, much to Sans’s consternation. Frisk guessed they hadn’t been asleep long; he chuffed at her a little and growled when she shifted to carry him piggyback, but didn’t respond to her questions at all. It was an awkward hold - he was two inches taller than she was - but at least he was light enough to carry. And limp. He must still be under the effects of the drugs, then. He had better be, or she was going to drop him off with a trigger-happy Undyne; the neck-sniffing thing was beginning to tickle a little more than she was comfortable with.

It didn’t click until she was upright that the adrenaline rush that had woken her up was actually something to be concerned with. Hesitantly, she tried accessing her inventory...and succeeded.

*Bingo!*

Something about the explosion must have disrupted the anti-magic devices! She pulled out a helmet she’d stashed on a whim and settled it awkwardly over her head. She would’ve put it on Sans, but since he was clinging to her back like the world’s pokiest koala there was no way she could get it positioned properly. She also grabbed her hunting knife and her handgun. Getting both holsters onto her belt took much longer than she would’ve liked, and Sans whined in protest the entire time, but she was not going to walk into hostile territory unarmed. (Again.)

As it turned out, her caution was not really necessary.

The door burst open in a wave of unbearable heat and too-bright lights to reveal Undyne, soaked with sweat and panting. She noticed Frisk immediately and gave a wicked grin. “HEYA, PUNKS! YOU NEARLY MISSED THE PARTY! What are you...WHAT THE HELL???” She was forced to put up a green shield when a beam of far-too-bright light fired towards her, but the shield shattered after a few seconds and she had to dodge.

Frisk could see, in her peripheral vision, one of those horrifying skull-like things she remembered from her fight with the Judge.

Sans was clearly awake now. His grip on her shoulders and waist had tightened, and she could feel the magic radiating off him. “Wait!”

“No, what the-Sans! STOP!!”

Another shot fired, forcing Undyne back out into the hallway.
“Undyne, please relax. Stop walking towards us.”

“If he’s attacking—”

“He was drugged, Undyne! He’s not himself! Please, just give me a minute!”

She looked over the both of them with obvious suspicion, but stood down.

“Hey, Sans,” Frisk said in the same tone she’d used earlier. She could feel her bestie’s skeptical eyebrow from across the room but pointedly ignored it. “Sans, you need to calm down and stop trying to fry Undyne. Remember Undyne? She’s a friend. She’s gonna get us out of here.”

It took precious minutes, but eventually Sans relaxed to the point where he didn’t feel like a bomb waiting to go off. The skull-thing wavered a little, then faded.

“Now,” Undyne said in a remarkably even voice, “Explain what is going on, and why I shouldn’t hang that bag of bones out to dry.”

“Alright. But can we walk and talk?”

“Nah. Grillby’s still taking care of things outside. It’s cooler in here.” She grabbed a huge water bottle from her inventory, poured half of it over her head, and chugged more than Frisk would’ve thought possible in one go. “That girl - Fuku - she led us right here. Good kid. Made things a ton easier.”

“Oh, good. So...the Sparks injected Sans with something; they thought it would turn him crazy. They planned to put us in here together and, well.”

“Murder by angry skeleton, huh. They’d need something strong to, I dunno, remove his consciousness. D’ya know what they gave him?”

Frisk knew she couldn’t lie to Undyne, but telling the truth…

“Look, if he needs a detox or somethin’ I need to know.”

“Alright. But please stay calm. The elemental who did the injection said he gave him a double-dose of Deliria.”

Undyne’s reaction was immediate. Every muscle in her body locked up and her eyes flickered to Sans with a rare intensity, even for her. “That makes sense,” she said, sounding a little choked.

“Really? I was surprised when he didn’t attack me.”

“Yeah. Happens sometimes, ‘specially with the kids. No, forget I said that; you don’t want to know. Point is, I’m tempted to leave the both of you in here until it wears off.”

“...Oh?”

“He’s clearly alright with having you there. If he hasn’t attacked you, he’s probably not gonna. But the rest of us? I just took a few steps towards you and he started firing off superpowered attacks. Those were warning shots. We both know...a little of what he’s capable of if he’s really trying. If you can keep him calm in that state he must trust you.”

That was certainly flattering. “Well...alright. I can stay in here. Do you know how long it takes to wear off?”
Undyne snorted. “For a normal monster? Anywhere from four to twelve hours, depending on size and diet and all that crap. We usually let ‘em detox for a full 24. This guy, though...he doesn’t have a proper circulatory system. I don’t know how they got it into him, but with monsters like him it can take a lot longer to get nasty stuff out of their systems. On top of that, I’m not sure what they considered a ‘double dose’ but I’m surprised he hasn’t dusted. NGAH!” She punched a nearby wall, ignoring the bone attack that bounced off her shoulder. “Stars, what a MESS!”

As much as she wanted to get out of the cell, Frisk knew her bestie had a point. “Look. We’ll be fine in here. Do you think someone can sit outside and keep an eye out just in case? If you manage to clear the building maybe we can move somewhere more secure, but I’m no help with this guy on my back.”

“PFT, do you think I’d really just LEAVE YOU HERE ALONE?? Of course I’ll leave someone! And your phone’s working now, yeah?”

Frisk checked. It was, indeed, working.

“Great. I’m gonna leave you here with Bruce and Darker Dog; that should cover all bases. DD’s got a good nose and a talent for magic and Bruce can probably dust anything that comes by in one hit. They’re good folks, but if anything goes wrong, you just call. Alright?”

Frisk saluted as best she could with a boyfriend on her back. “Roger that, Captain.”

“Pft! See you in a bit, princess.”

Once Undyne left and the door was carefully propped open, Frisk resettled herself. Sans gratefully crawled back into her lap, settling himself like he was Attie or TOSS. If he started purring, she was never going to let him live it down.

He didn’t purr, that she heard, but he did sleep. Probably the best thing for him, in that state.

She lost track of time, but an alert tone from her phone made her glance down at it. Midnight.

“Attie’s Birthday!!” a pop-up reminded her.

Somewhere in all the craziness, she’d forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: the reason why Sans didn't outright murder Undyne at the end there for being loud and obnoxious was because he was comfy and sleepy. Drugged or not, he's still Sans; it would've been too much effort.

And now we know why Attie doesn't have normal birthday parties. Poor kid.

Underfell logic is a bit odd. The Sparks wanted to pin Frisk's death completely on Sans, so they wanted to leave as little magical and physical evidence as possible. Magical residue is eliminated by magic blockers. Physical indicators are trickier to hide, but that's why they were being very careful with her and sent out several people who genuinely respected her to bring her to their hideout. They wanted the only marks on Frisk’s body to be from whatever Sans did.
And that's why Fuku was taken off escort duty for punching Frisk. It just so happened to leave her some time to go and do whatever she wanted.

Anyways, thank you all for the lovely comments and kudos, as always! You guys are fantastic. I'm sorry for not getting a chapter out last week...I was in the middle of posting it and I just wasn't happy with the flow of the chapter, so I wound up completely rewriting portions of it. Which took time. If only time magic were real...
In Which an Epic Escape is Attempted

Chapter Summary

...Which is good, because we were due for a break

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Every breath Sans took was agony. His ribs ached, his shoulder and hip joints ached, one of his knees felt wobbly, and he could feel little lines of fire around his wrists and ankles that meant restraints.

He let out a small sob, just one, and began pulling himself back together.

He was lying upright, propped up on something soft. Frisk, his mind insisted, but he didn’t have the energy to care. Breathing alone was painful enough; trying to move his arms and legs made his vision spotty. Nausea bubbled up from somewhere in his middle, threatening to overcome him. He tried to hold it back, but...

With a lurch, he dislodged himself and rolled onto the floor, jarring his bad knee. Nothing came up when he heaved - when had he last eaten? - but the action sent shudders down his spine. Which, in turn, felt like small knives carving into the spaces between vertebrae. Which made him even more nauseated.

“...Sans?”

A hand on his back made him flinch and gag again, and it retreated.

“Sorry! Sans, are you alright? Are you...back?”

Back?

Something had happened, then. He gave her a weak thumbs-up, not willing to move from his awkward crouch. His forearms ached where he rested his skull against them, but trying to adjust would probably set him off again.

“Oh, good. Sans, you were drugged. I-”

“What-” What happened, was what he was trying to say. Stars, his voice sounded awful.

“You were drugged. One of the Sparks said he gave you a double-dose of Deliria, but we aren’t sure what that means. That was...eight or nine hours ago. About two hours ago you started...um, sweating? I guess? Pretty heavily? I didn’t have anything to clean you off with.”

As soon as she said that, Sans registered the smell. Stars, he smelled like one of those gang-run drug dens in Hotland. He pitied Frisk for being locked in with him.

Deliria, though...that was a low blow. No wonder he felt sore and fuzzy. Nearly a quarter of the killing sprees in the Underground were due to that particular drug, officially, and according to his
sources that was a low estimate. It was a small miracle that he hadn’t hurt Frisk in that state.

The last thing he really remembered was a guard throwing Frisk into the cell with him accompanied by the sickening realization that whatever he’d been dosed with was going to make him dangerous. He vaguely recalled curling up against the far wall of the cell, putting as much pressure on his ribs as he dared, hoping that the pain could keep him cogent. It didn’t work. There was no fighting against the seductive pull of the thick, slimy magic that had mixed with his own.

He could still feel remnants of it lingering in his bones, giving a soft, hazy quality to his perception.

“‘Salright,” he mumbled, trying to gauge how much he could move at a time before the pain became unbearable. It wasn’t much. The gangsters had worked him over pretty professionally before tossing him in there. The only reason he was conscious was because the drug was taking the sharp edge of pain off, turning everything into one big ache.

Lucky, lucky him.

“You can’t stand, can you.”

He considered giving it a try - imagined pushing himself upright, adjusting his balance, grabbing the wall for support - but he wasn’t stupid enough to follow through. “Nope.” Not without healing or time. He’d gotten used to sleep being a healing activity, giving a little buffer to his HP, but drugged sleep apparently didn’t have the same effect. His HP was at a big four: not the lowest he’d ever been, but too low for comfort.

“Allright. We’re on our own for now; Darker Dog and Bruce were outside overnight, but they had to head upstairs to help take care of something about an hour ago. I haven’t heard anyone down here since. Let me text Undyne to let her know you’re up…”

Undyne? What the hell could Undyne do? And he knew Darker Dog, but who was Bruce? And what were they doing? And the way she was talking...they could just leave? And she’d stayed with him?!

Stars. How many people had Frisk rounded up to rescue his sorry ass? If she’d pulled the Guard in...

“Allright, we’re set. I haven’t heard any explosions in a while, so hopefully things have calmed down.”

“Explosions?” The question didn’t sound as nonchalant out loud as it did in his head.

“Undyne got in by blowing a hole in a side wall. She’s going to blame it on the illegal munitions depot next door, which will give her an excuse to raid it when she’s back on duty.”

“Some people...have all the fun.”

She laughed. “Well, I doubt they’ll find much here. Most of the guys we found are either dusted or being left for the Guard. The, uh, on-duty Guard. There wasn’t much trouble, surprisingly enough. I think someone tipped them off that we had something planned; there was only a bare minimum of people here by the time Undyne started blowing things up.”

“...Okay.”

“I’ll give you all the juicy details when you’re feeling better.”
He nodded. Her hand was still hovering near his back, close enough to touch if she reached out, but she didn’t move. “‘Sokay, y’know.”

“What?”

“It...uh. You can...put your hand...uh, there.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Won’t hurt.” She was being far too careful to do damage. “Jus’ surprised me th’first time.” Ugh. He sounded high.

“Well, if you’re sure…”

A careful hand rested on the center of his back, between his shoulder blades. He held his breath. There was definitely a cracked rib just barely to the right of her hand, and he didn’t want to jostle it.

It was strange, actually. In some way, Frisk was a steadying force. Her hand didn’t compress him as he tried to breathe, rising and falling in time with his back, and it was reassuring to feel another person there with him. He couldn’t even feel her properly - not when she wasn’t touching him directly; physical contact was a frustratingly poor conduit in that regard - but just knowing that she was there warmed his bones.

Or maybe that was just the lovely Hotland atmosphere.

“Thanks,” she said, for no apparent reason. As he settled into a more comfortable position, her hand began moving in small circles.

“What for?”

“I know you don’t like being touched…”

The hand hesitated.

“‘Sfine.”

“Sans…”

“It’s...weird. Not bad.” He struggled to find the words, especially when speaking was such a chore. “‘S not itchy.”

“Itchy?”

“Usually, if someone…” he gestured over his shoulder towards her hand. Slowly. It didn’t hurt as much to move...or maybe he was getting used to the pain. “It feels itchy.”

“Oh. Interesting.”

“Is it...different? For humans?”

“Sometimes. I didn’t realize it until we started dating, but monsters don’t really interact in the same way humans do. It depends on culture for us, I guess. There are places where a typical greeting is a bow and sometimes a handshake. And I’ve been in places where the appropriate greeting is a straight-up enthusiastic kiss. On the cheek, sure, but it can be jarring if you’re not expecting it. I guess I get what you mean about ‘itchiness,’” though. I’m not sure if it’s the same
sensation I feel, but when someone’s in my personal space it can be...uncomfortable.”

Sans hummed in agreement.

“...You’re still okay with my hand there?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. Let me know if it gets to be too much.”

“It’s...okay, really. Do you...?” He couldn’t think clearly enough to figure out what he wanted to say.

“Hmm?”

“Why do you want your hand there?”

“Oh. Well, we’re dating. I like you. It makes me feel connected to you. You’ve been completely out of it for hours; this helps reassure me that you’re okay. I guess. I can move if you want, but...if you don’t mind, I’d really like to just...stay like this for a bit. This whole thing has scared me pretty badly.”

“Okay.”

And they did. The repetitive motion of Frisk’s hand down his spine and across his shoulder blades had a soporific effect. Sans let himself drift on the pleasant cloud of drug-induced fog and general exhaustion, still in too much pain to sleep properly, but at least detached enough that he couldn’t feel his bones much unless he had to shift.

He was sweating so much that his bones felt sticky, but the woman beside him didn’t seem to mind. Or she hadn’t noticed through his hoodie.

The big problem was that he was effectively sweating out the drugs he’d been given. Sure, it helped clear his head, but it only made him realize all the more how damaged he was. He really needed to eat something. If he could keep it down.

Eventually, even Frisk’s gentle touch was sending shudders of agony through his back and ribs, and he had to wave her off.

“Sans? What’s...stars, Sans, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“Drug kinda wore off,” he managed to gasp. He wasn’t sure if he was actually intelligible, but Frisk got the general idea.

“Okay. Okay. You really need to replenish your magic. Can you eat something?”

He shook his head. It felt like his skull was going to snap clean off his spine.

“Drink something, at least. I have water, and...aha! Sea Tea!”

Sea Tea would speed up his metabolism, which was the last thing he needed. He needed to get the Deliria out of his system, but purging it too quickly would send him straight into withdrawal as his magic tried to compensate. Hopefully he could avoid that, if he let it wear off naturally.

“No? Okay...um...I have...my coffee from yesterday? That won’t help. Stars, why didn’t I pack something useful?”
Sans made a slow motion with one hand and opened his inventory. The bottle of juice he kept in there fell onto the floor, wobbled and tipped over. At least he’d remembered to put the cap back on.

“Oh! There you go. Do you want a hand…”

No, but he needed one. He braced himself against her knee and sat up, letting her help him balance so he didn’t flop over onto the floor.

It took a few false starts and an embarrassing amount of mess (and for a guy like him, that was saying something), but together they got enough of the juice into him that he could feel his injuries starting to heal. He’d probably be able to stand upright in a few minutes. B…Papyrus had done far worse to him.

Of course, he didn’t usually have to plan dangerous escapes out of gang territory after one of his brother’s punishments.

Sans wanted to give up. Every ounce of magic in his being strained to just lay back down and ignore the world until he felt better. Maybe longer.

But then he remembered something.

“Attie,” he said. Gasped, really. “Is she…?”

“She’s fine. After you were grabbed she ran straight inside and found me. Mom - Toriel - has her right now.”

“You sound…” Worried, terrified, depressed, exhausted...

“Well after what happened to you, I’m very concerned right now. I told Toriel what happened. She should be safe. She has the Queen’s Guard looking out for her.”

But after the number of Royal Guards and policemen they’d found with terrorist affiliations, having a guard was somewhat less than reassuring.

“Then let’s go get her.” Pressing both hands to the floor, he heaved himself upright.

He didn’t actually tip over, but it was a close thing. He wobbled badly, crashing into the wall next to him so hard that his bones ratted.

“Sans! You should’ve let me help…”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Well. Can you…walk…?”

They both knew he couldn’t. Sans let her pull one of his arms over her shoulders and leaned on her heavily, not bothering to protest when the helmet she’d been fiddling with settled over his skull. The whole situation was embarrassing and awkward. His radius tingled pleasantly where his sleeve rode up and it brushed against bare skin.

He could feel her in those tiny touches, all worry and determination. She had been so desperately afraid for him - and of him, though she was trying not to admit it even to herself - and there was something dark lingering in the back of her mind like a half-remembered nightmare. And yet…she had made up her mind that she was going to get both of them out, and nothing in the universe could
convince her otherwise.

“Have you done the...uh...save thing?”

“I’m afraid to SAVE, to be honest. There’s too many variables.”

“So the last time was…”

“At the embassy. Right...right after they grabbed you. Sans, I’m so, so sorry-”

“Ts fine. You didn’t know anything was goin’ on with us.”

“I’ll SAVE as soon as we get out of here and get to Mom’s place, I promise. As soon as I know Attie’s safe.”

Ah.

They shuffled carefully out of the room. At the doorway Frisk paused and fumbled with something at her hip for a moment, then pulled a black gun the size of her forearm out of its holster. It took a bit of coordination to disengage the safety with one hand wrapped around him.

“I have a knife as well,” she said, not looking him in the eye. “Do you want it?”

“Don’t think I could do much with it, not like this.”

“Alright. Let me know if you change your mind.”

He considered being surprised that Frisk - Frisk - had weapons on her, but after rolling the idea around in his head he dismissed it. She was a smart lady. She clearly knew how to handle that gun. Hopefully that competence would be enough to make even a gangster hesitate, which would buy them enough time to either get away or look for other options.

Sans vowed to himself that she wouldn’t have to fire that gun. If they had to kill someone to escape, to get home to Attie, he would do it. He’d find a way. There was no reason for Frisk to dirty her hands.

“Are you okay? You look...are you in pain again?”

“No. Well, not more’n I was.”

“Alright. If we can get upstairs, we can meet up with Undyne. She’ll be able to patch you up a bit better.”

Getting up the stairs, though, was an experience Sans would happily erase from his memories. His bad knee was too weak to support him properly, and apparently handrails would’ve ruined the aesthetic of a secret underground torture dungeon, so Frisk had to physically drag him up every step. She never complained about how heavy he was or how his bones dug into her shoulders, but he could feel it each time he brushed against her.

They paused several times on their journey, listening to the rumbles and shakes above them and letting Frisk subtly catch her breath. Despite the lack of explosives something was definitely going on up there. The dungeons were too far down to be in the way of any evacuation efforts, but the farther up they climbed the more likely they’d be to run into someone hostile.

Luck was with them, though. They managed to get up to the building’s main level - not the entrance inside the old warehouse, but the main level used by the Sparks - before they found
someone. And then it was just an angry pyrope who was promptly tackled into submission by Darker Dog.

“Great job, DD!” an absolutely ripped human guy said, running up behind her swinging a pair of manacles with disturbing cheerfulness. “Let’s get this guy. Oh, hey again, Frisk. Sans, glad to see you up and lookin’ better.”

“Uh, yeah,” Sans said. The guy looked familiar...wait, wasn’t that Undyne’s friend? The guy who ran the gym? How had he gotten mixed up in a rescue operation??

“Great. Let’s drop off this wimp and we’ll walk you two to Undyne.”

Some of the tension bled out of Frisk, and she sighed. “Thanks, Bruce.”

*Darker Dog and Smelly Human Bruce have been watching the doorway! We are good dogs! No one got past us!*

“You’re a very good girl, Darker Dog.” She reached over and patted the gray, furry head. “Thanks for coming with us.”

Sans eyed the dust that had been swept into the corners of the room. Some of it looked...fresh. And that one pile definitely had a pair of shoes in it. He elected not to point it out to his girlfriend.

Their path through the corridors required a few detours, thanks to the results of Undyne’s explosives. There were more signs of struggle - burn marks, broken bits of defunct anti-magic devices and scattered piles dust - but Frisk appeared to ignore all of it. They dropped their prisoner off in a large room patrolled by a pair of mean-looking vulkins that Frisk seemed familiar with, then Bruce and DD led them up another flight of stairs.

“Undyne was up here, last we saw her,” Bruce said. He was taking point, with Frisk and Sans behind him and DD watching for ambushes. “She’s been busy.”

*Darker Dog does not smell Fish-Captain,* came a bark from behind them. *Careful!*

“There should be a guard at the top of the stairs anyways. We should be able to get information.”

A loox stood at the top of the stairs, shuffling nervously. “Nothing, no, no,” he said when they asked about Undyne. “Gone. Trouble. Trouble at the barrier. Called away. EmERgency!”

“Er, yes,” Frisk said. “Thank you.”

“Trouble! Trouble! No one to follow. No one to lead.”

“Has the Guard been called?”

“Hmm. Yes. Yes. Called by the Sparks.” His grin was sharp and toothy. “Someone broke into their home, yes. How sad.”

“We’d better get out of here, then. The Guard isn’t going to take kindly to humans being in this part of town; we’re supposed to stay to the pathways.”

“Good. Good. Get out! Away! To safety! Hurry, hurry, Miss Angel!”

He pushed them ineffectually towards a nearby door.

“But—}
“Let’s go,” Sans said, echoed by Bruce. “Let ‘im do his job.”

The loox gave him a nasty glare, but Sans just grinned. He remembered this guy’s face, even if he couldn’t put a name to it right then. A former bodyguard for one of the big drug runners in Waterfall turned Royal Guard informant. Notoriously vicious in a fight. Aggressively loyal to Undyne, now, if rumors were to be believed.

Frisk allowed herself to be coaxed into a hallway that, after a number of twists and turns, led into a wide, empty warehouse. The main entrance, Sans assumed. Many of the newer warehouses had large doors to accommodate vehicles, now that they were readily imported from the surface, but this one lacked those.

“The area should be clear,” Bruce said under his breath. “Lil’ shits keep crawlin’ out of the woodwork, though. Stay alert.”

There was something grim in the man’s tone that made Sans do a double-take. He hoped he never had a reason to take a look at the guy’s LV. Undyne would be pissed if he took out her favorite gym’s owner.

Speaking of which...

Sans tapped Frisk on the shoulder. “Wait. Someone’s out there. Outside the door.”

Bruce groaned. “Ugh, of course. Lemme go first.” Sans, Frisk, and DD backed themselves up against the wall and out of the way while he crouched, one hand on the door, and gently tugged it open a crack-

“INTRUDER!” screeched a high voice. “INTRUDER!”

Bruce flung the door open and growled - literally growled - at the monster. “I’m not an intruder, you idiot. I’m leaving.”

“O-oh. Well...TAKE THA- hrk!”

Hand still on Frisk’s shoulder, Sans could feel her shudder as the sound (and magic) died out.

“All clear?” asked the human, ducking back inside.

“I feel nothin’.”

*Darker Dog doesn’t smell anything!*  

“Alright. Let’s go.”

Bruce led the way from the warehouse towards the city center, skirting close to Mettaton’s old warehouse. It was remarkable as a landmark because the stupid robot’s faces - both rectangular and humanoid - were plastered across the outside in a thick layer like wallpaper, and a model of his usual form stood atop a pedestal on the roof. The place hadn’t actually been used since the area became a haven for gangs and druggies, but the low electrical hum was proof that the traps were still operational and drawing power.

“Allright. DD? Exit?”

*This way!*

They followed the dog through the winding streets of Hotland. Frisk’s initiatives to improve the
safety of the area hadn’t reached this far; even the wide, well-lit walkways she’d championed were thin lines of darkness and light in the distance. They needed a way up.

The best way up, according to DD, was through an extremely dark and sketchy tunnel.

*Darker Dog knows the way!* she barked, looking supremely offended that the rest of the group didn’t want to follow her into the gloom. *This is a good path! Follow Darker Dog!*

Sans found himself leaning more and more on Frisk as they climbed. He wished he could walk on his own, but the juice hadn’t done much for his knee quite yet. Every injury on his ribs and spine stung with sweat, little lines and splotches of fire that made movement almost as painful as it had been when he first woke up. The traces of Deliria lingering in his system weren’t helping at all.

The only thing keeping him upright and moving forward was the memory of Attie, so many time loops ago, with that knife in her chest. He wanted - he needed - to get back home, to make sure she was safe. Something primal stirred deep in his psyche, urging him to make sure his people were together and protected. Just because he wasn’t an effective guardian at the moment didn’t mean he didn’t desperately need to be.

“Hold up.” Bruce brought the group to a halt just inside the exit to their tunnel. A motley group of monsters was loitering in the cavern beyond. They could have been there for the smattering of shops that lined the cavern walls...or they could have been there for an ambush.

Upon closer inspection, it looked too organized to be a random gathering. Sans could see a few stragglers, ostensibly viewing the booths, but paying more attention to their surroundings than the wares they were supposedly perusing. There was something strange about them, too; whereas he expected a group of fighters, it looked like only about half were actually prepared for combat.

His suspicions were confirmed when a small child escaped the confines of his mother’s cloak, only to be dragged back into the center of the huddle by at least four adults.

“They’re not lookin’ for us,” he whispered to the others. “They’re runnin’ from something.”

“Can we help them?” That was Frisk, ever the bleeding heart.

No one answered her.

Bruce sheathed his knife with a soft *click* and walked casually out of the tunnel towards the gathered monsters. Despite blending in about as well as a stone in soup, he showed no sign of concern.

After a moment’s hesitation, Frisk followed. Darker Dog hovered over Sans’ other side. An instinct to protect the vulnerabilities of their group, probably.

Sans concentrated. He could probably fire a blaster once, but it would *hurt.* There would be no second shot.

“Stop right there!” one of the fighters said. He was a short little madjik, crystal balls flashing over his head like he was about to drag the strange human into an encounter, but his expression said he didn’t want trouble.

“It’s alright. We’re just passing through.”

“Humans! Are not allowed!!”
“Yeah? And what about ambassadors?” Bruce gestured over his shoulder at Frisk.

There was a brief huddle, then the madjik straightened. “Miss Angel and her allies may pass!!”

And if Sans was capable of making Frisk hurry up, that would’ve been the end of it. They needed to get out, not worry about the rest of the world’s problems!

But she slowed, then stopped. “You look like you’re in some trouble. Is everything alright? We’re headed for the palace...”

“Please help us!” a woman’s voice cried. It was a small whimsun, clutching what looked like a larval baby wrapped in a blanket. Another kid - old enough to have its wings - clutched at the back of her shirt. “Take us with you!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Mettaton’s recruiters have been spotted up ahead! It’s not safe for the children!”

Well...shit.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans hasn't had a chance to question anything at this point. He's just along for the ride.

And yes, the Sparks did try to get Undyne in trouble by calling the Royal Guard on her. The Guard wouldn't have been allowed to search their completely innocent warehouse, and thus wouldn't have found Frisk. In theory. They severely overestimated their ability to hold off an angry fish long enough for a Guard contingent to arrive.

But what of their allies on the surface? And where are Grillby and Fuku? And what is the incident at the barrier that Undyne went to investigate?

Find out next time!

(And thank you so, so much to everyone who's left kudos and comments on this story! I feel like I don't thank you enough. You are all amazing and delightful and I hope you have a wonderful week!)
In Which a Robot Makes a Power Play

Chapter Summary

...And it's at least halfway convincing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mettaton.

Of course.

Sans growled at a whimsun kid who was hovering a bit too close for comfort.

Frisk glared at him, clearly unhappy with how grouchy he was, but...well, to be brutally honest, this was her fault. A group of four could probably sneak past a bunch of kidnappers. A group of thirty-four could not.

They were going to get caught and probably have to participate in one of Mettaton’s sadistic games. Oh, officially no one had died since the barrier broke - it was one of the conditions of allowing him to continue operations - but Sans personally knew people who had gone “missing” near the arena in the past few years. The bucket of bolts hadn’t reformed that much, especially since his applications to move to the surface were always denied.

If anyone had a grudge against Frisk…

The whimsun kid decided to tempt fate and landed on Sans’s shoulder. He briefly considered snapping at it, but...well, Frisk looked like she was one straw away from just dropping him. He let the kid stay.

They were slowly making their way up the incline of a much larger tunnel, which curved around itself and exited almost directly above where they’d entered. A ledge there would take them around the curve of one of the Underground’s main caverns, skirting the border with Waterfall, and eventually spit them out onto one of the main walkways through Hotland.

In theory, they’d be safe if they made it that far. In practice, it was likely that Mettaton’s ‘recruiters’ were waiting along the paths and more than willing to pick off any stragglers.

Shit, why couldn’t they have just sent a guard patrol to help the group through? They were all gonna get killed.

“How contact?” Frisk asked Bruce, who was checking his phone.

“No, not yet.”

“Great.”

Neither asked where Undyne was. She’d catch up with them...eventually. Hopefully before Mettaton did.
The caves got darker as they made their way upwards. Sans was familiar enough with the area to direct Frisk away from the rough patches of ground, but aside from the flashlights on their cell phones they didn’t have any way to light the ground. And with people hunting them, using those would be unwise.

Soon, they were in total darkness.

The monsters around them - all the mothers and fathers, children and warriors - were a mess of clattering, whispering, shuffling sounds. Nowhere near as quiet as they needed to be to avoid Mettaton’s goons. There was no way to tell if they were being followed; neither Darker Dog’s nose nor Sans’s abilities could reliably differentiate between members of their group and suspicious followers, not as unfamiliar as they all were.

Frisk’s grip on his arm grew tighter, his grumpiness apparently forgiven. She was looking for comfort as much as answers. “Sans? Anything?”

“Nah.”

They only made it a few more steps before they were surrounded by light.

A voice boomed out, nearly knocking them off their feet. “Welcome, fierce warriors! You have been selected-”

“RUN!” someone yelled.

The entire group pushed towards the tunnel’s exit, a mass of frantic magic and desperate energy. They broke through the ring of lights - he couldn’t see what happened to the lackeys who had probably been guarding the tunnel - and rushed onwards towards safety. He put his free hand over the tiny whimsun and hobbled along as fast as he could.

It wasn’t nearly fast enough.

“Leave me,” he growled to Frisk.

“What? No!!”

“We’re both gonna be caught. No sense-”

“Sans, I called in too many favors to get your sad butt out of here; I’m not leaving without you!”

He couldn’t see her face, but he could feel her resolve. It wasn’t just her normal levels of stubbornness, either: it was pure DETERMINATION.

“Did you just…”

“Yes, dammit, I just SAVEd.”

Oops.

There was no way they were going to get out. The booming voices were getting closer. Up ahead, the last of the trailing monsters disappeared around a curve of the tunnel. Sans gently slipped the whimsun into his jacket pocket, not wanting the kid to get caught in the crossfire. “We can’t-”

“Then help me figure out what we can do.”

It was just like her, to refuse to give up in the face of impossible odds. But if she wanted his
help…well. “Slow down. Act tired. Let them catch us.”

“What?”

“Injured folks aren’t entertaining.” There was so very little time to communicate without being overheard by the recruiters who were gaining on them with every step. “They’ll heal us.”

“Oh! Magic-”

And they were surrounded. Hopefully these idiots were working alone, and there wasn’t another ambush further down the tunnel.

The guys who’d captured them had a series of unpleasant revelations. First, they had only captured two people out of a group of over thirty: not good odds. Next, they had captured Frisk. Craven lackeys they may have been, but Frisk Dreemurr was still the closest thing they had to a goddess. Finally, Sans couldn’t walk on his own. Well. He probably could at that point, at least for a short distance, but he toppled over dramatically when he was ordered to try (to the sounds of Frisk’s worried yelling) and did everything he could to convince the recruiters of his complete and utter uselessness.

They wound up letting her help him along like she had been. It slowed them down, but what else could they do? She refused to leave him behind, and returning to Mettaton empty-handed was a notoriously bad idea. Sans played up his difficulties, stumbling every few steps, trying to cover for Frisk as she updated Undyne on the situation one-handed. Her hands were shaking. It wasn’t nerves; she’d faced tougher situations within the past few hours. So what…?

Oh, right. Attie. She’d SAVED while she didn’t know Attie’s status.

“Text yer mom,” he whispered.

“What?”

“Text yer mom. Make sure-”

One of the guards poked him in the ribs with a pointy stick of some kind, dangerously close to the whimsun kid, so he went quiet. Frisk’s phone disappeared under the hem of her military vest, at least until their captors went back to trying to push each other off the ledge. After a few minutes of texting her shoulders relaxed.

“She’s fine,” she whispered, slipping the phone into a pocket. “Everything’s okay.”

The guards looked twitchy but didn’t make a move to stop her from talking. Shit. Save an entire race just once, and suddenly people don’t beat you up during a kidnapping.

It probably helped that she’d picked up on his plan and was limping a little herself. If they convinced the production crew that they were seriously injured, Mettaton would order someone to give them magic. A one-sided fight wasn’t what people paid to see, after all.

And if Sans had magic, he could teleport.

Mettaton didn’t know that.

The question was, would the old bucket of bolts take the risk of actually using Frisk in his arena?
The king wouldn’t take kindly to his daughter being forced to fight - and possibly kill - for ratings. Mettaton wouldn’t be insane enough to make a bid for total control of the Underground, would he? He was an entertainer, at least in his own mind. He wasn’t a ruler. He’d be horrible at it. He’d probably wind up murdering people for not watching his show or something. But…

But Alphys had his back. The two didn’t get along, not really, but he provided her with test subjects and she maintained his body. They were codependent. If Alphys managed to drag the Sparks and/or the Cultists into supporting a change of regime, even just in the Underground, there would definitely be dust on the ground.

Their dust. Asgore had ruled for so long for a reason.

Mettaton’s arena stood in a cave near the border between Hotland and New Home, giving easy access to the two most populated areas of the Underground. Mettaton Boulevard (name chosen by the guy himself) had long been a street in Hotland lined with Mettaton-themed shops and attractions designed to lure potential customers in the direction of the main event. In the years since the barrier fell, he’d clearly taken advantage of the mass exodus of monsters from New Home to expand in that direction as well. The whole area looked like its own town; from what Sans could see of it, it was bigger than Snowdin and likely had twice the population.

The recruiters kept them away from the general bustle and led them through a series of tunnels fitted with locked doors. Sans tried to pretend he didn’t know the way, that he hadn’t snuck in and out of Mettaton’s employee entrances often enough to know exactly where he was. They were probably being taken to the West Stables, a long, narrow cavern where fighting captives were kept and ‘trained.’ It took effort not to shudder at the thought of Frisk being locked up there; it was neither comfortable nor safe, and Sans was lucky he’d never had a reason to spend too much time there.

“This way,” one of the monsters said to Frisk as they passed through the western entrance to the arena complex. He held up a hand as she tried to maneuver Sans as well. “Not him; just you.”

“We’re a unit.”

“I need to take you to Mettaton-”

“I will not leave him. He’s mine.”

Both Sans and the monster - a particularly bug-eyed variety of bird monster - stared at her. Sans was definitely not blushing.

Hers?? Did she - she was human, but - did she know the way that sounded?

“A-alright; if you are...if you, uh, can, like, come this way…??”

“Thank you. May I ask where we’re going?”

“M-Mettaton’s office.”

Oh, hell no.

Frisk either didn’t share his concern or was confident enough not to care, because she didn’t hesitate as she followed the bird monster through the winding halls of the arena’s backstage to an appropriately flamboyant door. It had been literally coated in glitter, probably more than once; a nervous little mouse monster was stationed nearby with a broom and dustpan, but sparkles shone from the cracks in the floor and the angle where the wall and floor met. It gave an air of cheap
frivolity to the otherwise drab stone-lined hallway.

One of the monsters who’d ‘escorted’ them that far, a whimsalot hardly bigger than a whimsun, nervously knocked.

“What is it?” came a sing-song, synthesized voice from the other side of the door.

“Team Sparkle-Sparkle-Glitter returning with captives.”

“Hmm...Devos is on your team, yes?”

“N-no, sir, that’s team Sparkle-Sparkle-Fabulous.”

“Correct answer! Come in!” The door swung open and a metallic hand yanked the monster inside. “And one of you idiots go find Devos for me!”

The door slammed shut.

Sans couldn’t pick out the low, mumbled conversation, but when the door opened again Mettaton was lounging on a couch in his humanoid form and grinning as widely as his manufactured face would allow. “Why hello, my little sweetlings! How marvelous to see you back here! And who is this you’ve brought?” The gasp was both insincere and overacted. “Is that Frisk Dreemurr, legendary Ambassador Princess of the Kingdom of Monsters? Savior of all monsterkind? Hero of the Underground? And...Sans.”

“‘Sup.” Sans gave a small wave with his free hand.

“Mmm-hmm. Frisk, darling - may I call you Frisk? - why don’t we ditch this riffraff and go have a conversation somewhere...better suited to our refined tastes? Just the two of us? My hotel is serving chicken cordon bleu tonight, and it is absolutely to...die...for.” Hard to tell if the robot was leering over the food or the woman in front of him. Not that it mattered; he couldn’t have either.

Frisk’s smile was polite, but tense. “I’m afraid I’ll have to decline. I’m a bit attached to this ‘riffraff.’ No offense, honey.” She bumped her hip against Sans’ and winked at him.

*Dammit*, his face was going to be permanently red…

He winked back, trying to look flirtatious and not mildly panicked. “Aww, but I’m your riffraff, sweetheart.”

“UGH!” Mettaton flung an arm out, knocking a lamp with an extravagantly beaded shade off the table next to his couch. Immediately, one minion began cleaning up the mess while another extracted a new lamp from his inventory and plugged it in. It looked exactly like the broken one. “You two are disgustingly attached to each other! Fine! We will do our business here. I can’t be seen out with...” he gestured to Sans, still in ‘borrowed’ sweatpants and a hoodie that had definitely seen better days, “...That.”

“Alright,” Frisk said, still smiling.

“Frisk, you have my sincere apologies for the terrible ordeal you must have endured! I can’t begin to imagine what those stupid employees of mine were thinking when they captured you.”

Said employees shuffled their feet awkwardly.

“I assure you, they will be...educated properly. This will *not* happen again.”
“Please don’t go to any trouble on my account. I’m afraid we stumbled into one of your recruiting spots. They were just doing their job.” Smile.

Mettaton’s smile twitched. “I am certain that they...misunderstood their orders. It is against company policy to abduct members of the royal household, and especially members of the royal family! Dusky-”

“Musty,” the whimsalot muttered.

“Dusky, haven’t I warned you time and time again not to interfere with royal business?”

The little guy must have been new, because he actually shook his head.

“Do you mean to tell me that you haven’t read your employee handbook?? You...you incompetent fool!” One arm snaked under the table and extracted a book nearly twice the size of the aforementioned fool, letting it fall onto the nearby desk with a thump that Sans could feel through his shoes. “You will sit there - in silence - until you find me the exact section and line that clearly spells out what you did wrong. And then you will memorize it.”

‘Dusky’ shuffled over, hoisted himself onto the chair, and opened the enormous book with shaking arms. Whether they were shaking from the effort or from fear, it was difficult to tell.

“For my edification,” Frisk said, still smiling, “Would you tell me the section and line you’re referring to?”

“Now, Frisk darling, that’s not necessary-”

“Of course not. As I said,” she pulled out her phone, thumb at the ready, “It’s just for my edification.”

“...And what is that for?”

“Your business documentation - like everyone’s documentation - is on file. I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding; if you give me the information now I can clear it up right away, and we’ll be out of your...hair.”

Mettaton appeared to be caught between preening and fuming, his facial expressions stuttering, but he didn’t move. “Then...you doubt my word, do you?”

“It’s not a matter of doubt, it’s a matter of certainty. I’m certain you don’t want any legal trouble. I’m trying to clear you and preserve the good name of your business. Now, that would be section...?”

“Section 1675.” His voice was clipped, robotic. “Paragraph 30. Line 2.”

“...Line...2. Alright. My staff will pull it up shortly and confirm that everything’s in order. If we need to talk with you further, shall we reach out to your HR office or contact you directly?”

“Oh, darling,” the robot purred, “That will really not be necessary.”

A red light that flickered briefly was all the warning Sans had before a trap door opened beneath his feet. He and Frisk - and the bug-eyed bird, who’d been standing too close to them - were sent careening down a long chute.

To her credit, Frisk didn’t scream. She merely clung to him like he could do anything to stop their
It was a good call, actually.

He wrapped both of his arms around her, anchoring himself, and turned her soul blue. There was one terrifying moment when they were falling faster, thanks to the usual effects of blue magic, but he quickly began reversing that. It was a delicate equation. He couldn’t just stop them in midair; it would be like slamming Frisk into a solid wall soul-first. At the same time, if they hit the ground too fast then this would all be in vain.

The chute wasn’t nearly long enough.

Frisk grunted as Sans was forced to slow them a bit more aggressively than he would’ve liked, but they managed a comfortable, floaty descent about ten yards above the dimly-lit floor.

The bird fell past them, screaming, his wings useless in the confined space...and poofed into a cloud of dust upon impact. It took a little bit of maneuvering not to put them down right on the guy’s remains, but they found a (relatively) safe spot.

As soon as it was safe to release Frisk, he stuck one hand into his hoodie pocket to check on the whimsun kid he’d nearly forgotten about. The twerp was clearly terrified out of its tiny little mind, but stayed still and quiet except to grab one of his fingers in response.

The room they found themselves in looked like a jail cell, stone walls on three sides and iron bars on the fourth. A gate provided a possible exit. There were cameras in the walls - this was Mettaton’s hideout, after all - but it wasn’t the worst one they’d been in that day. If Frisk could give him some cover he could get out his lockpicks and-

Frisk was bent over a dusty jacket. “Oh dear…”

“Leave it. He was a scumbag anyways.”

“Sans! He was a person, just like you or I-”

“I don’t wanna be compared to someone who was tryin’ ta capture kids and have them fight to the death.”

Frisk scoffed. “Sans, fights to the death don’t happen anymore.”

He looked pointedly at the dust on the ground. There was definitely more than one pile, even if most of it had migrated to the corners of the cell. At least a dozen ID cards littered the spaces between, a gruesome legacy of lost souls.

“...Alright, alright. Still. I feel bad for him; I don’t want to see anyone die. Rest in peace…” she scrambled around, wincing a little when she had to brush dust off the monster’s ID card.

“...Sanders.”

If she heard Sans’s muttered “In pieces,” she didn’t react.

He couldn’t find it in him to be mad at her, though. Frisk was Frisk, and he wouldn’t have her any other way. Even if her softness was inconvenient sometimes. Like when she decided to collect ID cards instead of helping him try to escape. As a peace offering, he combed through the dust on one half of the cell and retrieved whatever cards he could find there. The robot had a hefty death toll, it appeared.
“Oh,” Frisk gasped when he handed the cards to her, adding them to her own stack, “Tracey...my office has been trying to find her. She was reported missing a couple months back. She lived on the surface, though; what was she doing down here?”

“Who knows?”

“And...oh.”

He peered over her shoulder. The ID card depicted a small elemental, her maroon flames erratic. For one horrible moment he thought it was Pele...but the name was wrong.

“I’ve heard about her as well. Sagra. She’s Attie’s age; I remember when her parents came in trying to find her...”

“Tch. Poor kid...hey, hey, don’t cry...!”

The worst thing was that she was obviously trying to pull herself together, but she couldn’t seem to manage it. It wasn’t just the kid, though that’s what had set her off; he’d been feeling the tension building in her for hours, compounded by the horrific events of the day(s??) before and the stress she’d been carrying for weeks. She was strong, stronger than anyone else he knew, but even she had a breaking point.

“Okay, okay. Uh...” He wrapped an arm around his girlfriend, pulling all the cards from her fingers. There was still a pack of hair ties in his inventory; he extracted it, bound the cards together, and stuck the “ID Bundle” back in there.

And did a double-take. He’d forgotten about the bomb.

He didn’t think Frisk would let him just drop the it in a conveniently-placed lava pit and blow up the whole arena, but...the robot loved explosions. Maybe it would come in handy? Thing had a huge blast radius, but...

*Later.*

Distraught girlfriend came first.

They huddled together, Frisk half-buried in Sans' hoodie, until he heard the rattling of a door somewhere nearby. He tapped her on the head and motioned in the direction of the sound.

She nodded back, using the edge of one of his sleeves to dry the last remnants of her tears as they stood.

“...course they didn’t survive; it’s...oh, hello, sweetlings!”

The shiny robot himself wheeled into view in his rectangular form. Asshole probably thought there wasn’t anyone to impress. He was right, if Frisk’s expression was anything to go by.

“Oh, my! What an awful fall you’ve had! Goodness, how could that have happened?”

Frisk, no longer in a mood to play politics, radiated pure DETERMINATION. The kind that melted folks. Sans leaned himself and the whimsun away...just in case. “Cut the crap, Mettaton. What do you want?”

“That’s not my judgement call to make. Your application was rejected by a panel of monster and human.”

“Yes, yes, bureaucracy, paperwork, blah, blah, blah. You’re the ambassador. You know how to make things happen. And if you were to, say, sponsor my application the way you did for certain other monsters…”

“No.”

They were going to die.

“No? Frisk, darling, I don’t think you’re in a position to refuse.”

“Oh? What are you going to do, kill me? There are witnesses. I was traveling with a group. They know very well who took me and, by simple deduction, where I am.”

“Oh, you adorable, naive little girl. I’m not trying to hide you.” Behind the idiot robot, what Sans had thought was a wall began to creak… and move. “Why do you think I’ve been allowing you to text all this time? The whole world will know where you are. They just won’t be able to save you.”

As the massive door opened, the roar of a crowd became audible. There was a show going on, two monsters fighting each other. Light glinted off some kind of metal. Weapons? Not unusual, but he couldn’t see any signs of magic being used in the fight. How… bizarre.

“You won’t get away with this, Mettaton.”

“My dear… I already have.”

There was a dramatic puff of smoke that did little to hide the robot wheeling himself back down the hallway.

“There’s, uh, some food here,” a minion said, setting a tray down awkwardly on the ground. He unlocked the gate to their cell and shuffled away after his boss.

Sans sighed, eyeing the arena. “If you’re done playing movie heroes…”

“I meant it literally, you know.”

“Sure, but there are better ways to tell a guy he’s screwed that don’t make you sound like a damsel in distress.”

Frisk huffed, but her cheek twitched like she was hiding a smile. “If you say so. Here; looks like they left us Glamburgers. It’s something, I guess. Now, I haven’t paid much attention to Mettaton’s career lately. What do you know?”

“He tries to provide round-the-clock entertainment.” Sans took a bite. Mostly glitter, but he’d eaten worse. At least it was technically edible: he could feel his wounds closing and magic trickling back to him. He pinched off a chunk and slipped it into the pocket of his hoodie for tiny hands to grab. “Most of it’s fighting, either one-on-one or in groups. He ain’t stupid enough to ask us to fight each other, unfortunately, so there’ll be a real enemy. Possibly more than one.”

“Only monsters?”

“Yeah, from what I know. Hasn’t tried wild animals since that one time when you got on his case
about the bear. And the last human to appear on the show was...well, you, probably.”

“Oh.”

“Uh...there’ll probably be a weapon rack inside the arena itself, near the door. ‘Nless the asshole
moved it. No armor, just weapons. What do you like?” Her gun and knife could be useful, but if
Mettaton hadn’t noticed them he didn’t want to give away the surprise.

“If it comes to it, I’d rather fight with a wooden pole or spear, if possible. I’ve trained with
Undyne more than anyone else; I’m used to her spears.”

“Oh.”

“Okay. If there’s nothin’ like that, I’ll make ya a bone staff.”

The doors opened fully with a resounding metallic clang. On the other side, one monster had the
other pinned to the ground.

Mettaton’s voice projected itself over the arena. “An excellent showing from two fan favorites,
Drucis and Melbourne! Let’s hear it for our two brave fighters!!”

Another cheer that seemed to go on for entirely too long.

“Next up, a very special guest returns to our show for the first time in years! You know her, you
love her, and now, you’ll cheer her on! Please welcome...Frisk Dreemurr!”

There was some scattered applause, but the attitude in the arena had changed. This wasn’t the
same crowd that had screamed and shouted for her death years before, during her trip through the
Underground. Mettaton was right to say that they loved her.

She limped out into the blinding lights of the arena, leaning on Sans almost as much as he was
leaning on her. The whispers intensified. Despite the limp her head was held high, shoulders back,
and she was glaring daggers straight at the announcer’s booth on the other side of the stadium.
The old bucket of bolts must have flown - literally - to make it over there so fast. Damn Alphys.

“And facing off with her today, a surprise we’ve been waiting for weeks to show off! Straight
from the dark, dark bowels of the Hotland Lab, your contender is...Goopy!”

Sans took one look at ‘Goopy’ and nearly lost his Glamburger. Alphys could just go straight to
hell.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Section 1674, Paragraph 30, Line 2 of Mettaton's Fabulous
Employee Handbook reads: "Mettaton is always right." Most of the handbook is
comprised of "Mettaton is always right" and variations thereof. There's nothing in
there that explicitly tells employees not to attack/kidnap/rebel against royalty...you
know, just in case it becomes necessary. The show must go on!

Also, Mettaton brings out the melodrama in Frisk. And poor Sans is a little grumpy.
Oh, it's not that he wanted to abandon a bunch of random strangers, just...if it comes to
a choice between random strangers and Frisk, he'd rather save Frisk. She, on the other
hand, wants to save everybody. Go figure.
Sans is, incidentally, spot on when he describes a possible future under Mettaton. Undertale's Mettaton ending involves the robot declaring himself king of the Underground in the absence of anyone more qualified, with Sans and Papyrus basically acting as his enforcers. Sans mentions that people who don't like Mettaton's shows do, indeed, mysteriously go missing. Undertale can be incredibly dark sometimes, even without the Underfell twist.

So...anyone wanna guess what Goopy is? Three guesses, first two don't count. Mysterious monsters from the depths of the Hotland lab? Sans attempting to damn Alphys to a fiery fate? Could be anything, really.

Sorry for the late chapter! This past week was...very strange. Every time I tried to get this posted something interrupted. We'll have another chapter later this week, don't worry.
...Not the heroes Frisk and Sans want, but the heroes they need.

Sans kept a tight hold on Frisk as they walked forward, trying to ignore the muttering of the crowd. The harsh light of the arena was almost unbearable after the dim gloom of their cage, but the image of their opponent burned itself into his eye sockets.

Of all the creatures Mettaton could have had them fight, he’d picked an *amalgamate.*

It was impossible to tell what ‘Goopy’ had originally been. There was something that looked like a beak poking out of its middle, something vaguely scaled over its sides and belly, and the impression of an amorphous tail. It was dripping with DETERMINATION (literally) and with every shuffling step it seemed to change shape. Sans couldn’t even tell if it had four legs or six. Or more.

He glanced over to Frisk, trying to read her reaction. She looked...terrified. A gentle brush of his thumb across her shoulder revealed that she knew what this was...and believed they couldn’t fight it.

She wasn’t wrong.

“Frisk?”

“Sans.” She leaned close, trying to disguise the movement of her mouth. “What’s keeping us from just...leaving?”

“Cameras.”

“Right.”

“If it gets too bad, I’ll—”

A dramatic fanfare interrupted him, so loud he could feel the sandy floor shaking. “LET THE BATTLE BEGIN!” Mettaton crowed. “AUDIENCE, ARE YOU READY??”

The response was decidedly half-hearted.

“I SAID: AUDIENCE, ARE! YOU! READY??”

A smattering of applause.

Shit. Where was Undyne? Frisk had been texting her, but hadn’t gotten a response. Had Mettaton blocked her phone signal? Or had Undyne run into some kind of trouble?

The dumb robot said he was trying to publicize this, right?? Plenty of monsters watched
Mettaton’s shows, even those who’d left the Underground. Someone would alert the Royal Guard…

Above them, Mettaton - back in his humanoid form - had broken out into an actual song and dance number in an attempt to re-engage his audience. It didn’t appear to be working. Monsters weren’t stupid enough to think Frisk would willingly show up in Mettaton’s arena, where they came to engage in their more violent behaviors. Behaviors she had taken pains to reign in. It was like claiming that a parent had shown up at a rowdy teenager’s party asking where the beer was.

“I think it’s not interested in us,” Frisk said, ever the optimist.

“Doesn’t matter. It’ll attack anything that gets close.” He hadn’t been involved in the amalgamate experiments, but he’d gotten ahold of some of Alphys’ notes.

Amalgamates were groups of monsters melted into a single body with DETERMINATION. A complex formula dictated exactly how many monsters would fuse together before the amalgamate was stable, but there were too many factors - size, age, general health, power, amount of DETERMINATION - for Sans to calculate on the fly. Hopefully the thing wouldn’t try to absorb him; he was enough of a mess as an individual.

The things were also effectively insane, being driven by the minds of each component monster and - from what he could tell - in constant agony. They could recognize family and friends, but there was no guarantee that any one monster would have any measure of control of the shared body. One monster’s best friend was another monster’s worst enemy, after all.

“I’m going to try to talk to it.”


“C’mon.”

“No! Stop! You’re gonna get yourself killed!”

“I’ll leave you back there against the wall, then.”

“Ugh...no, dammit, fine. Let’s do this. But if we die and have to go through Mettaton’s stupid theatrics again I’m gonna be pissed.”

Actually...Frisk’s power ran on DETERMINATION, right? What would happen if a short little skeleton monster was absorbed into a big puddle of DETERMINATION? Would her time magic even work on such a creature?

...Hopefully he wouldn’t get the opportunity to test that.

Stars, that was one nasty mess of a monster. As they approached, a lump on it’s all-too-wiggly neck unfurled, revealing a mess of teeth and drool and...were those tongues or tentacles? Shit, he’d been exposed to too much of Undyne’s freaky anime for this situation. (Or, possibly, not enough. Any information would’ve been helpful, regardless of the source.)

Frisk eyed the thing. “Ooookay. Any ideas?”

“Thought ya wanted to talk to it.”

“I...I’m not sure it can talk.”
“Ya think?”

“With that mouth-”

“Frisk, it’s a crazy goop monster that’ll try to kill us all the minute we get too close. Now can ya please take us back over by the doorway so we can avoid provoking it ‘n work on gettin’ out?”

“We’ll have to deal with it sometime…”

“There’s no way to deal with somethin’ like that, not without special equipment.” And stars, he hoped he never had to. It was a gruesome process. “We...uh...shit. Stall. Stall for time.”

“You have a plan?”

One was forming, but it would be overplaying his hand. If he could take out enough cameras and duck back through the doorway...there might still be people who could see him teleport, but there wouldn’t be proof. Hopefully. Maybe. “Nothin’ concrete. But if Undyne knows where ya are…”

“Let me-”

“Shit, don’t check yer phone right now!” He dug his heels in, trying to shuffle them out of the way of the advancing amalgamate.

“Right, sorry. Let’s get out of the way.”

This woman was going to be the death of him.

They skirted the edge of the arena pit, but the amalgamate had figured out that it had company. It kept lurching after them, drips falling onto the sand with each heavy footfall. Now if they could just kite it in a circle around the edge of the arena, they could probably stay away from it indefinitely.

To that end, they adjusted the way they were supporting each other. Frisk faced forwards, steering them, and Sans kept an eye on the amalgamate. It was a bit awkward to be clinging to her with his arm now across her chest (and her arm across his), but they managed to keep a good distance away from the creature chasing them. Not too far away, not too close.

Then Frisk’s phone started ringing. Eyeing Sans, she held it to her ear. “Hello?”

“FRISK!!” He could hear Undyne’s shriek clearly. “WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?”

“Glad to hear you’re okay-”

“I’M OKAY?? YOU ARE GROUNDED! YOU WON’T BE ABLE TO STEP OUTSIDE YOUR FRONT DOOR WITHOUT AN ARMED ESCORT FOR MONTHS!!!!”

“Kinda...kinda busy here, Undyne.”

“JUST HANG ON, OKAY? WE’RE ON OUR WAY!”

“Who’s ‘we’?” Sans asked, but all he heard was a dial tone.

After a complete circuit of the arena, Frisk relaxed a little. “This isn’t so bad, actually.”

“Frisk, don’t taunt the crazy robot.”
“I’m not—”

“He can hear you. He can hear everything. Microphones.”

“Oh. I mean...how horrible it is, walking in circles, being chased by a very slow deadly creature. Whatever will I do.”

“Oh my!” That was Mettaton, sounding...awfully close. A mini-Mettaton hovered nearby, body mostly composed of a speaker exaggerated the point of looking comical. “It looks like this show could use some...action! Danger! Drama!”

There was a terrible noise, one that made Sans’s skull feel like it was about to split in half. He could feel a fluttering near his ribcage, like the little whimsun was trying to escape…

And Goopy...sped up.

“Shit.” He pulled the whimsun out of his pocket. “Kid, head up. Frisk, hang on.”

He grabbed Frisk’s soul and lifted them up into the air, hopefully out of reach.

The amalgamate splattered against the arena wall where they’d been standing, sending bits and drops of itself flying. A splash hit one of Sans’s sneakers, and he watched as the rubber and canvas just...melted away. It wasn’t enough to affect anything else, not even his sock, but…

“Sh-shit. Shit. Frisk, you okay?”

“...Yes? This isn’t comfortable, but—”

“Don’t get close to that thing. It’s...caustic, somehow? Shit. It wasn’t affecting the sand! This thing isn’t normal…”

“It’s a crazy goop monster that will try to kill us all the minute we get too close.” Her tone was mocking. “I’m pretty sure that no, it’s not normal.”

Sans rolled his eyes at her sass and redirected them, touching down on the other side of the arena.

“Hang onto me; I’ll get us out if it tries t’corner us again.” But where could they go?

There was a commotion in the stands, he noticed. The audience was clearing out, frightened or disgusted by the new developments. Smart choice. Especially-

The amalgamate turned, shaking its head like an irritated dog, and came charging straight for them.

Sans readied his magic, ready to send them flying again...but he didn’t have the chance. A dark mass in a red plaid shirt and oversized jeans leaped through the glass that separated the audience from the arena, landing between the human-monster tangle and the amalgamate. For one horrifying moment he thought the new monster would be absorbed or ignored, but there must have been something still horrifyingly solid in the goop. Its charge was stopped by two enormous, furry arms, barely managing to move the hulking monster back at all.

“Get out of here,” came the all-too-familiar voice of Little Tim. The bear monster glanced over his shoulder at them for just a moment, then returned his attention to the actual threat. “Grab your girl and run.”

“...Right.”
Sans lifted Frisk gently and sent them towards the huge bear-shaped hole in the glass. Little Tim really was massive; both of them fit through with only minimal maneuvering. The whimsun zipped after them, landing on his shoulder.

Now to find an exit…

*BONE FRIEND!*

He whipped around and nearly threw a bone at the white, sinuous thing snaking its way through the air towards him. Thankfully, he recognized Lesser Dog’s ugly mug before he did any damage. “LD! Hey, bud!”

*Darker Dog did not invite Lesser Dog to the rescue party,* growled the head. *Not fair!*

“Well, we’re plenty glad t’see you. Did DD get out alright? We lost her in an ambush…”

*Lesser Dog passed Darker Dog and a smelly human by the cave entrance! It is Lesser Dog’s turn to fetch Bone Friend and Momma Puppy! And…tiny new friend?!??* He sniffed the whimsun with no regard for personal space until Sans tucked the poor, trembling kid back into his hoodie pocket.

A roar behind them was echoed by a wet-sounding gurgle.

“...Let’s get out of here. Are ya with a team? How’d you guys get past Mettaton?”

*Lesser Dog came with friends, yes! All good boys! Friends bought tickets! This way, hurry!*

Tickets. Of course. Mettaton would let a Royal Guard assault team through his gates as long as they bought tickets.

“I’m glad Undyne’s alright,” Frisk said as they jogged up the steps towards one of the main walkways, Lesser Dog’s head retracting in front of them as they ran. “I was worried when she didn’t answer my texts earlier.”

But...Sans sensed someone, and it wasn’t Undyne. The magical signature was familiar. Too familiar. It couldn’t be, right? He was confused; there were so many monsters around, it was almost impossible to pick out a single one...

Somewhere deep down he knew who was standing there before he and Frisk rounded the corner, but it was still a shock.

“LESSER DOG, DID YOU FIND THEM?”

*Yes, Bone Captain!* barked Lesser Dog.

“GOOD BOY. GO HELP THE OTHERS.”

Papyrus, dressed in his full suit of metal armor, turned to look at them. Sans met his brother’s eye sockets. It wasn’t confidence, he just didn’t care at the moment. Nothing could’ve prepared him for that meeting. He hadn’t seen Papyrus in...gosh, months, not since the emancipation hearing. The last time they’d been so close to each other was...was the basement, but somehow the basement seemed far away and unimportant after the events of the past 48 hours.

Frisk’s arm tightened around his shoulders and he glanced over at her. He was going for a reassuring grin, but from the small wrinkle that appeared between her eyes he didn’t think he’d managed it.
“WELL.” Papyrus seemed to be at a loss, too. “AMBASSADOR DREAMURR, THE GREAT AND TERRIBLE PAPYRUS WILL BE YOUR ESCORT BACK TO THE ENTRANCE TO THE UNDERGROUND!”

“Thanks, Papyrus. We might be a bit slow.”

Sans grinned a little. His brother’s expression clearly said that he wanted to leave the excess baggage behind, but he didn’t want to acknowledge Sans’ presence. It was probably a good idea all the same. “I’d better stay here.”

Frisk glared at him. “Sans…”

“That...thing back there won’t go down easy. There’s a machine in the lab that can destroy it. I...know how’ta operate it.”

“I’m not leaving without you.”

“C’mon, Frisk. No point in both of us gettin’ stuck-”

“AHEM!” They both looked at Papyrus, who was trying very hard to disguise his interest as complete boredom. “IF YOU ARE REFERRING TO THE AMALGAMATE, MY TEAM IS PREPARED TO HANDLE IT. METTATON HELPFULLY PROVIDED A CONTAINER THAT WILL HOLD IT.”

So much for heroic self-sacrifice.

“Thanks, Papyrus.” Frisk’s smile was tense, but genuine. “We’ll follow you, then.”

She didn’t stop squeezing his shoulders as they made their way to the arena’s main entrance. Most of the audience had cleared out, but those who remained took extreme care to avoid the peeved skeleton monster in heavy armor.

It occurred to Sans that he should’ve felt something upon seeing his brother again, especially given what had happened the last time they’d seen been in the same room, but mostly he was just relieved. Whatever issues they had, Papyrus had always been an...efficient member of the Royal Guard. Frisk’s presence would (hopefully) prevent any issues. He knew that the two of them had seen each other in an official capacity several times, and they hadn’t exploded.

He refused to acknowledge that his hands were shaking, and that Frisk could definitely feel it.

As they approached the open lobby just inside the arena’s ticket booths, Papyrus suddenly dropped into a defensive stance. “I THOUGHT YOU WERE RESTRAINED, METTATON.”

“Oh, Papyrus, darling, it’s impossible to keep me down.”

Papyrus dodged a magical bullet that went flying past his skull too fast for Sans to make out the shape. Whatever it was, the intent was more than enough to be dangerous.

“STAY BACK,” he ordered, before...jumping straight into the fray. Of course.

And it was a fray. Even hidden in the hallway Sans could see multiple armed fighters in black armor. Mercenaries, perhaps? Some of the arena fighters? He could hear some kind of catchy battle music, but he couldn’t see Mettaton.

“We can’t let him do this alone,” Frisk said.
“He’s a big guy. Let ‘im have his fight.” She was right, of course; working with Papyrus was their best way out, but Sans was just a tiny bit biased.

The look he got told him that she wasn’t buying his nonsense.

“Fine. Let’s see what he’s gotten his bony ass into.”

They crept close enough to peer around the corner. Papyrus was actually doing a pretty good job of keeping the guards’ attention and dealing with Mettaton besides. The robot was kicking and manipulating small drones in time to some kind of battle music being blasted from his speakers, but it didn’t look like an actual encounter. That meant there was no limit to the number of monsters who could attack at once.

Frisk winced in sympathy. “Think we can do anything?”

“...Sneak by ‘em and high-tail it out?”

“Sans.”

“A’right. Don’t have enough magic to...” teleport “...Uh, do anything too fancy. But see that spot along the wall? No one’s paying attention. If we move slowly, we can head towards the exit.”

“I’m not abandoning your brother in the middle of enemy territory, Sans, even if he is a violent and abusive asshole.”

“...I wasn’t done. We sneak around and attack ‘em from another angle. They’re focused on the big guy; they won’t see us coming.”

“And if things go south, we’ll be close to the exit.”

“...Well, sure, and we’ll be in a position t’help clear a way out.”

“Alright, let’s do it.”

“‘Kay. Move slowly. Follow me.”

Sans hunched over and began half-crawling along the wall. Everyone in the melee was tall; unless they decided to examine their shoes, they probably wouldn’t notice him. He just had to avoid sudden moves, not draw attention…

...and they were right next to the exit. Prime escape positioning.

Frisk stood up, immediately catching the eyes of four guards. Two dismissed her, deciding that Papyrus posed the bigger threat; the other two charged.

And were immediately surrounded by a waist-high fence of bones. Both, foolishly, hesitated long enough for Sans to send blue bones up through their feet.

He wasn’t good at creating blue bones. They tended to come out half-formed, misshapen, and dissipated all too easily. These monsters didn’t know that, though; they just knew that blue meant stop.

“I-help!” one of them said, starting to struggle. He struggled even harder when he realized that the blue attacks didn’t do much damage.

“Don’t kill them,” Frisk whispered. “They’re not worth it.”
“Fine. Just for you.”

The struggling monster didn’t appreciate his MERCY; the idiot sent a glaive-like weapon straight at Frisk-

But before Sans could intercept it, it bounced off her barrier with a *clang*.

She walked casually over to where it fell and, ignoring the trembling monsters, stabbed it into a gap in the floor between two stones. The handle burst into flames as she released it. “Gentlemen,” she said, in her best not-buying-your-shit voice, “I don’t know why you felt you had to attack me, but I *assure* you that I am *not* in the mood.”

“Y-yes, ma’am,” said one of the trapped monsters.

“Now, why are you fighting us? We meant you no harm.”

“We were ordered by...by Mr. Mettaton to stop the, uh, escapees…”

“The ‘escapees’ who were captured on *his* orders?”

“Yes…?”

“I see. And why would Mettaton do something so *utterly stupid*?”

The monsters exchanged glances and shrugged. They were wearing full helmets that hid their expressions, but the gesture looked sheepish.

“Then-”

*Something* crashed through the wall, sending monsters screaming out of the way. Goopy had escaped.

Thankfully, it looked more entranced by the fire than by any of the monsters. It opened its mouth and sent a tongue-tentacle-thing to pull the burning glaive into its mouth, handle-first.

“NYAAAAAH!” Papyrus screamed, leaping at the amalgamate. It bent unnaturally out of the way, then immediately reformed. “FIGHT ME, YOU FIENDISH CREATURE!!”

It’s only reaction was to spit out the glaive blade, now bare of wood, forcing Frisk to sidestep as the sharp metal went spinning past her feet.

Sans stopped it with his sneaker. Something in the metal blade had resisted whatever the creature was secreting...and from the way Boss was thwacking it with a sharpened bone magic wasn’t affected either. They needed to get *out*, away from Mettaton (who was pouting about being upstaged and would probably turn violent within seconds) and the amalgamate that was unpredictable at best and deadly at worst.

But...Frisk needed a weapon. Something she was comfortable with. Something with more reach than her knife and more control than her gun.

Forming bone around an existing object took a lot of concentration, so Sans was forced to release the blue bones as he slowly forced his magic around the tang of the glaive. It took precious seconds to manipulate the bone into a long handle, seconds he didn’t have. Seconds *Frisk* didn’t have.

Because the amalgamate had focused on her.
“Run!” he said, dragging her towards the exit. “We’ve gotta go!”

“Sans, we’re not-”

“We’re not abandoning anyone. It’s following us. We’re leadin’ it away.”

Thankfully, Frisk found a scrap of self-preservation somewhere and jogged along beside him.

“Here,” he said, shoving the handle of the glaive into her free hand. “This should let ya poke it without melting. We...I dunno, it seems to like fire; maybe we can lure it into a lava pit.”

“Will that destroy it?”

“...Dunno.”

“Great. Also, this is awesome!!”

“...Thanks.” He ignored the heat on his cheekbones. “D’ya still have your phone on ya? If we let LD know where we are…”

They’d never make it to the Lab, not without exposing hundreds - maybe thousands - of monsters to the amalgamate.

“I’m on it. I’ll copy Papyrus on it; hopefully he hasn’t blocked me. Where should we tell them to meet us with the cage?”

Shit. Nearest pool of lava...was the one that sat under the arena itself. No; too crowded. There was plenty of lava along the escape route, but that was out of the question for the same reason. But...there was one place that might work. No one should be over there, not with the Underground so empty. “Tell ’em we’re headed towards the old water tower. They’ll know that that means.” Papyrus would, at least. “If they can get there before us, we’ll try t’trap it; if not, we’ll go with the lava plan.”

Thankfully, the amalgamate slowed down considerably once they were out of range of...whatever that noise was that had agitated it so much. Sans led them on a winding route through a rocky outcropping, giving them a good vantage point from which to watch their pursuer.

Then Frisk got a text telling her that LD had them in sight.

“Let’s circle back,” she said. “We may as well lead Goopy into a trap.”

Easier said than done. The route they’d used to get up to their ledge was steep and narrow, and Goopy was blocking the way.

And Sans could feel the limits to his magic. “I don’t think I can lift us both, not all the way down...”

“Let’s lure it a bit closer and jump over it.”

“Are you crazy?”

“There! Hurry, go! Before it gets closer!”

He put a steadying hand on the whimsun and jumped. It was...farther than he really wanted to fall, but a touch of blue magic let him land without breaking anything. He turned around to see-
The amalgamate was ignoring him, focused on its prey with hungry intensity. It was pawing at the rocks in that haphazard way all amalgamates moved, less coordination than willpower, but it was making progress. It was getting close, far too close.

Above him, Frisk readied her gun.

“Wait, don’t-”

A shot rang out. Instead of going right through the amalgamate, it seemed to catch the bullet and...was it juggling it? At least it had stopped. Which was good, because the two scenarios Sans had envisioned - that the attack would enrage the creature or, less likely, kill it - were unacceptable.

Before he could do anything more than give a small sigh of relief Frisk had leapt from the ledge, glaive braced against her side and pointed straight at the thing’s exposed back.

It sunk in...partially. Far too easily for it to have been true flesh, magical or otherwise. Frisk’s feet, which she’d tried to tuck under herself, slipped awkwardly off the goopy mess. She had no traction. She fell - still gripping her glaive, which slid out with a sickening *slorch* - towards the rocky ground.

“Shit,” Sans hissed. The way she was falling, she’d hit something important on her way down. He almost didn’t catch her; his magic connected with her precious soul and negated her momentum a fraction of a second before she would’ve bounced sickeningly off a very large rock. As soon as he knew he had her, he started running back towards the arena and the approaching guards.

“Sans, what- Sans! Put me down!”

He ducked behind a boulder and let her down gently, but her legs gave out anyways. She used her glaive to guide herself into an undignified sprawl next to him, panting almost as heavily as he was.

Next time he’d just lift them down with blue magic. *Stars.* That was terrifying.

“Hey, Sans?”

“Hmm?”

She glanced over at him, eyes bright and grin devious. “If they ever make a movie of my life, tell ‘em I stuck that landing, okay?”

He stared at her a moment, then they both burst out laughing. It wasn’t even that funny, but just the fact that Frisk was *alive* and able to joke about it made him feel giddy with relief.

“AND WHAT IS THIS NONSENSE?”

Papyrus towered above them, tapping one foot like he’d caught them doing something embarrassing. Behind him, Lesser Dog and a few other guards were maneuvering a glass case into position.

Sans just closed his eyes. Frisk was safe and he was officially out of energy to care.

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact of the chapter: Goopy isn't an amalgamate from the Undertale game. Alphys has been busy. This one is attracted to heat. While originally designed as a failsafe in case she lost control of an amalgamate, this 'feature' allowed Goopy to track Frisk through walls. Monsters just don't generate as much body heat as humans, as it turns out.

Also, a glaive is a weapon with a long handle and a sharp blade on one end. It has a larger blade than a spear, but it's very similar. Frisk, who regularly spars with Undyne, is comfortable enough with such weapons to use one.

My most sincere apologies for going AWOL for almost a month. This may seem a bit random, but please, if you're feeling exhausted or believe you can't get out of bed, if you're having financial trouble or are struggling with substance abuse, please get help. It's hard, I know, but at the end of all the struggle it's worth it. And maybe, if friends or family cross the country to meet with and help you, it might mean that those people don't hate you.

...Sorry. Family stuff.

I might have to disappear once more, but hopefully I'll have some prior warning and can let you fine folks know before it happens. In the meantime, we should be resuming weekly chapters! Thanks for reading, and I promise I'll get caught up on comment replies soon!
Chapter Summary

A young woman reflects on awesome weaponry and abominations against the laws of nature.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk rolled the glaive in her hands as the guards cornered Goopy; she hadn’t had a chance to really examine it before, what with running for her life and all. The blade was battle-worn but its curved edge was sharp. One finger followed the ridges on the spine, likely more decorative than functional. The blade itself was longer than a spearhead, but it had a nice balance when she swung it. The handle, though, felt...odd. Where had Sans found it? It was light in color, long and slightly curved...was it bone? Had Sans really made a bone glaive just for her??

It looked awesome. Undyne was going to be incredibly jealous.

“Is this permanent?”

Maybe not the best question to ask one’s boyfriend after scaring him so badly, but Sans appeared to be in a good mood. Possibly because the amalgamate was proving to be no match for the guards that were cornering it into what looked like a giant fish tank. “Semi-permanent. It’ll last as long as I focus on it. Uh, Papyrus can make permanent bones, but…” he waved a hand in a vague motion.

“I’ll take semi-permanent.” And if she got the chance, she was going to save the blade for future use.

A smooth skull found its way onto her shoulder and she rubbed it gently. Poor guy; he’d been kidnapped, drugged, dragged halfway through Hotland, kidnapped again, dropped into a fighting pit, then chased by a horrifying melted creation of science gone wrong. He deserved a nap.

Papyrus, it seemed, did not agree. “IS THAT LAZYBONES ASLEEP ALREADY?”

“Shh. He’s had a rough day.”

“HAH! HE WOULD NOT KNOW A ROUGH DAY IF IT STARTED GNAWING ON HIS FEMUR! NYEHEHE!”

“Papyrus, I really appreciate you coming to rescue us, but I do not want to discuss Sans with you.”

His face lost all its good humor and he stared down at her with a strange intensity. “I WILL BE TAKING HIM HOME AFTER THIS.”

“No, you won’t.”

“OH? I AM SURE YOU HAVE FAR BETTER THINGS TO DO THAN LOOK AFTER HIM. YOU HAVE DONE ENOUGH. I WILL TAKE HIM HOME.”
“Not a chance. *I’ll* be taking him home.”

“...YOU SAY THAT LIKE ‘HOME’ MEANS SOMETHING DIFFERENT.”

“It does. He lives with me.”

“HOME REQUIRES FAMILY.”

“Legally, he doesn’t have any family.”

He huffed. “I DO NOT CARE WHAT A SINGLE JUDGE SAYS; FAMILY CANNOT BE SEPARATED SO CASUALLY. THIS...IS STILL FAMILY.”

“No. Sans is mine.”

If there was any doubt in her mind that monsters interpreted that phrase strangely, the way Papyrus froze up and *glared* at her erased it. “A DECLARATION OF INTENT??”

Her mind spun. *Ah.* That’s why people were acting weird when she said that. Sure, she and Sans were dating, but for monsters a formal declaration of intent involved approval from both families and was a significant step forward in a relationship. More like an engagement, in human terms. It was a statement to the community that they had made promises to each other.

Frisk didn’t feel comfortable making that kind of decision, not without discussing it with him...and despite her little nudges, he was apparently dead to the world. Carefully, she arranged her boyfriend against a rock (his spine would be completely out of whack in a few hours if it wasn’t already, poor guy) and readied the epic weapon he’d made for her. “I’ll fight you for him.”

Not quite what she’d been planning on, but she had an awesome bone glaive and an excuse to beat up Papyrus. That was enough to brighten anyone’s day!

“OH? YOU, WHO INSISTS THAT WE ARE ALL INDIVIDUALS ENTITLED TO OUR OWN CHOICES?” He scoffed. “HOW...HYPOCRITICAL OF YOU, TO FIGHT ME FOR A CLAIM TO SANS.”

“Nope. I’m going to kick your ass so you leave Sans alone. He can make his own choices after that.” Part of her wanted to wax eloquent about how much Sans meant to her, about all he’d done to improve her life, about how he’d somehow wound his way far deeper into her heart than she thought possible...but another part of her didn’t want Papyrus to know any of those things. Not only was he a giant abusive ass, he was also someone who valued strength. She didn’t want to bare her soul to someone who would just scoff at it.

The other guards had secured their quarry and were starting to gather around, much to Papyrus’ annoyance. “ALL OF YOU, TAKE THE CREATURE BACK TO THE WEST OUTPOST AND SECURE IT IN A CELL. DO NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO OPEN ITS ENCLOSURE. GET MOVING! THAT’S AN ORDER!”

Slowly, begrudgingly, they did as they were told. The whimsun Sans had been sheltering in his hoodie fluttered after them, accepting a ride one of the dogs’ shoulders. Frisk made a mental note to follow up later to make sure the kid got home alright. Lesser Dog trailed behind a little, but after Papyrus snapped at him he disappeared around the side of the boulder with the rest of the group.

“Doesn’t this usually require witnesses?”

“THIS IS A CONCESSION! I DO NOT WISH YOU TO LOSE FACE AFTER BEING
Frisk breathed deeply. She didn’t know if she could beat Papyrus. She hadn’t faced him in battle since that horrible fight in Snowdin, and she certainly hadn’t gotten through that on the first try. **SAVEing** was the right thing to do in her situation.

That didn’t mean she wasn’t terrified at the very thought.

But last she’d heard everything was fine with Attie, and surely her mom would’ve told her otherwise? Right??

*The sound of your boyfriend snoring fills you with DETERMINATION.*

*SAVE  CONTINUE*

She was not going to lose.

“What...is going on?”

Both she and Papyrus turned. A very familiar fire elemental stood at the curve in the road, watching them both. He looked surprisingly put-together despite the scuffs and tears in his normally pristine clothing.

The skeleton made the mistake of posturing first before opening his mouth, giving Frisk a chance to cut in with, “Papyrus said he was going to take Sans, so I’m challenging him.”

“I...see.” Grillby switched into Elemental and crackled something too rapidly for her to catch, but his tone sounded positively scathing.

“IT IS NONE OF YOUR CONCERN!”

More crackling.

“FINE, IF YOU INSIST, YOU MAY BE A WITNESS.”

“...Good.”

“THEN WE MAY BEGIN! HUMAN FRISK, PREPARE FOR-”

“Hey, did we miss the big fight?” Bruce asked, jogging around the side of the rock pile. Darker Dog was a few steps behind him. “Hey, Frisk! Glad you’re in one piece!”

“Yeah, me too. How did you know where we were?”

DD glanced away with a very suspicious expression on her face, but Bruce didn’t even glance her way. “Oh, we heard through the grapevine. As soon as that broadcast started of you guys in the arena, we knew where you’d ended up.”

Not even Papyrus was buying that explanation, but he let it slide. “NOW, CAN WE FINALLY-”

“HEY, NERDS!”

*Of course* Undyne chose *that* moment to show up.

“CAPTAIN, WE ARE TRYING TO ENGAGE IN A CHALLENGE-”

“Yeah, I heard. Even though Sans is legally emancipated and is officially NONE OF YOUR
“BUSINESS.  Pretty lame, really.”

“IT...IT IS NOT!  WE ARE GOING TO-”

“...Fight over Sans like he’s some kind of princess, yeah, I heard.  ‘Cept Frisk wants to date his ass and you want to beat the crap out of it.”

Bruce eyed them with renewed interest at that comment.  “Oh, is that’s what’s going on? I thought this was just a good old-fashioned smackdown.”

“It’s BOTH!  Vice Captain Papyrus is an abusive asshole.  Frisk ‘n I rescued Sans from his basement. Guy was nearly dust.”

“Woah.  Hey, Frisk, want some help?”

Frisk grinned at the angry squawk from her opponent.  “Thanks, but I’ve got this. Undyne, I challenged Papyrus.  Someone needs to beat some sense into his thick skull.”

“NOW??  MAY WE BEGIN??”  Papyrus screamed, throwing his arms up in a Mettaton-esque fashion.

There were a few murmurs of agreement and the impromptu audience settled themselves in.

The sensation of being drawn into an encounter never failed to be a bit disconcerting.  The closest thing Frisk had to compare it to was the very beginnings of a panic attack, a rush of adrenaline and narrowed focus.  Her vision darkened until the only thing she could see clearly was Papyrus, bones blindingly bright in comparison to his dark armor.

She breathed deeply.  It would be just like fighting Undyne.  Just like fighting Undyne-

He blocked the swing of her glaive with a long bone pulled out of thin air, not even bothering to shift his stance.

“IS THAT ALL YOU’VE GOT, AMBASSADOR?”

* The Great and Terrible Papyrus is biding his time.

“Oh, Papyrus...you really don’t know what I’m capable of.”

She swung again, watching the way he moved.  He was a strong monster, nearly (but not quite) as strong as Undyne.  What made him stand out was his control.  According to everything she’d heard and seen, he could dictate the amount of damage he inflicted down to the last point of HP.

She’d been impressed by that...until he used that control to torture his brother to the brink of death.

“SWINGING RECKLESSLY?  SURELY, YOU DON’T THINK THAT WILL ACTUALLY WORK?”

* The Great and Terrible Papyrus is taunting you.

“Says the guy who isn’t bothering to attack at all.”

“NYEH!  I SUPPOSE THAT EXPECTING YOU TO UNDERSTAND THE FINER POINTS OF BATTLE TACTICS WOULD BE TOO MUCH.”

* The Great and Terrible Papyrus is preparing a bone attack.
Perfect. She adjusted her stance, making sure her feet were squarely under her. Papyrus would probably try to turn her blue before beginning his attack pattern; it was his signature move. A few months ago the very idea would’ve had her panicking, but Sans had - probably unknowingly - helped her overcome that fear.

“Battle tactics, you say? I suppose giving up could be considered a tactic…”

“DOES THIS LOOK LIKE GIVING UP?!? NYEHEHE!”

Sure enough, Frisk felt a familiar weight.

“YOU’RE BLUE NOW!”

His beginning attack pattern was simple, just a few bones to sidestep. Hardly a challenge, even with the magic dragging her down.

* The Great and Terrible Papyrus flexes his muscles.

“Yeah, that looks a lot like giving up. I expected more from the Vice Captain of the Royal Guard.”

She thought she heard something but couldn’t make it out. It didn’t matter, anyways; battle magic ensured that they were isolated from whatever was happening out there. Maybe Papyrus heard it too...that would explain why he only half-blocked her swing, forcing him to sidestep as the edge of her blade nicked his armor. The screech of metal on metal was terrible and a little disorienting, but the attack itself did no damage.

“I AM TRYING TO GO EASY ON YOU! BECAUSE YOU ARE SO WIMPY AND PATHETIC!”

Another wave of bones swept by, this one actually easier than the last. Not just because she’d seen his attack patterns before, either: she literally had to shuffle two inches to the left and avoided the whole thing.

* Smells like bones.

“...You aren’t even trying. Come on, didn’t you want to take your brother from me? You were all gung-ho about it earlier!”

How was she going to kick his ass when he was acting like this?!? It was like kicking a puppy. A giant, skeletal puppy. She attacked again anyways and winced when her blade hit bone. *His* bone, she realized after whirled back around to face him; her swing had put the glaive right into the spot where his armor had been weakened by her previous strike. 45 damage.

She could feel the blood draining from her face.

“HAH! THAT WAS PATHETIC!”

*His* attack wasn’t much better. The bones were a bit taller and a bit harder to dodge, now that he was starting to take her seriously, but not nearly up to his usual standards.

By the look on his face, he knew it.

* The Great and Terrible Papyrus is preparing a special attack.

That was...worrying. Frisk had never seen Papyrus’ special attack: he’d tried to use it on her the last time they’d fought, but getting it ready had taken so much time that she’d been able to escape
him entirely. She’d gone back later and apologized, which had led to his declaration of ‘FRENEMY-SHIP,’ which had led to him introducing her to Undyne...and the rest was history.

She braced herself, trying to raise her DEF by positioning the glaive across her body and thinking really hard about not taking damage. Magic worked on intent, after all. There was no way she could hit him again in good conscience, not if he wasn’t going to fight back. She wasn’t, well, him.

“IF YOU CAN SURVIVE THIS, I WILL CONSIDER YOU THE VICTOR! NYEHEHE!”

...Because they’d done so much damage to each other.


Bones rose slowly, dramatically out of the ground, following Papyrus’s hand as he raised it. They were huge, taller than she was and as big around as her waist; definitely not the wimpy attacks he’d been throwing at her before. Something was making his cape billow even though they were deep underground and far away from any wind.

The grin on his face was borderline feral and his eyes glowed with a strange light.

So...8/10 on theatrics. She deducted points for the fact that - while admittedly cool-looking - this “attack” wasn’t actually doing anything to her. And he was an abusive ass, which merited a point deduction on principle.

“ARE YOU PREPARED, AMBASSADOR?”

* The Great and Terrible Papyrus is preparing a SPECIAL ATTACK!!!

“Papyrus...I’ve been waiting for you to do something - anything - to get this fight started. If you didn’t want to fight, you should’ve just said so.”

He gave a battle roar and sent all the bones flying towards her where she stood, still held by blue magic.

Except...all the bones turned blue as they approached and passed right through her. She didn’t feel anything more than a light tingly sensation. Exactly one bone looked like it was actually going to hit her, and it bounced off her glaive instead. It cracked the bone handle a little, which was really unfortunate, but that part wasn’t permanent anyways.

“Well,” she said as last of the bones dissolved, “That was...anticlimactic.”

“NYEHEHE! AMBASSADOR DREEMURR, YOU HAVE SURVIVED MY SPECIAL ATTACK!!”

“...Yes, yes I did.”

“YOU ARE THE VICTOR OF THIS FIGHT!”

“I’m not sure we can count this as a fight.”

“IF YOU TRULY WISH TO PLACE A CLAIM ON MY PATHETIC BROTHER, THEN I CANNOT STOP YOU!”

The battle magic faded, letting the real world filter back in. Most of her audience was standing, from what she could see in her peripheral vision, but she didn’t dare take her eyes off Papyrus to
check.

...Wait. His words hit her.

“Is that what this was about? You wanted to - I don’t know - posture about my relationship with Sans?”

“IT IS A FAMILY’S DUTY TO-

“You are not his family, and now is not the time. You gave up any right to be a part of his life when you beat him nearly to death. And if you ever try something like this again, stars help me, I will make what you did to him in that basement look like a pleasant pet on the head.”

Frisk couldn’t look at him anymore. She didn’t want to see his ugly face. Rage built up inside her, demanding that she thwack him once more just for good measure...but she deliberately relaxed. Lashing out in anger was not the way to solve this. It was something Papyrus would do, and she was not going to stoop to his level.

She turned...and met Sans’s eye sockets. His open, awake eye sockets, eye level with her because he was on his feet. Aww, shit...how much had he heard? Did he think she was some kind of violent human??

“Here,” he said quietly, shuffling up to her and putting one hand on the back of her glaive’s blade. The cracked bone handle dissolved in her grasp, leaving him with a bare blade that disappeared into his inventory with a gentle pop. “No sense carryin’ that around with ya.”

Undyne grumbled something about bones and awesome, but Frisk didn’t care enough to catch it.

Her boyfriend kept looking her over like he was trying to find an injury. “You, uh, okay?”

She closed her eyes. She...had been better, certainly, but she was still in one piece. “I’ll be glad when today is over, but...yeah, I’m fine.”

“Good. Not sayin’ you didn’t look awesome back there, but-”

He cut out, staring at something over her shoulder, and she turned to see Papyrus stomping towards them.

Undyne intercepted him with a spear, saving her second-in-command from being strangled to death by an infuriated diplomat. “Nuh-uh.”

“What??”

“You’re gonna go catch up with the rest of your team and relieve the folks I left at the Sparks’ hideout. You’ll be getting reinforcements within the hour.”

“How dare you-”

“That’s an order, guardsman! Don’t push me on this!”

They both went silent for a long moment. Frisk couldn’t see the look on her bestie’s face, but from Papyrus’s expression it wasn’t pleasant. Those two...they’d been through so much together. They’d survived the Underground and the surface, all while managing to keep ahold of the reigns of power. It struck her as odd that this was the line in the sand that was driving them apart; there had to be some nuance there that she couldn’t read.
Papyrus looked away first, scoffing and grumbling. He stalked off without another word.

“ALRIGHT! I’m gonna escort you nerds back up to the entrance, then I’ve gotta go back up that asshole. LET’S GET MOVING!”

No one questioned whether sending backup for Papyrus was the right thing to do, not even Bruce; that guy definitely had some military history. Most civilians would complain about working with someone like that, but in a war...well. They all did what they had to do.

At least the publicity from Mettaton’s show gave them some measure of protection: although they passed several sketchy-looking groups lurking in shadows, no one stopped them. Which was good, because Sans - walking next to her but carefully not touching her - absolutely deserved the full force of her attention.

“Hey,” she murmured in his general direction, “Are you alright?”

“Not now.”

Did that mean he wasn’t alright, or he didn’t want to talk about it? Or both??

“Did you have a good nap, at least?”

“He was never asleep,” Undyne cackled.

“Wait, what?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? I thought the fact that his bone-staff-thing stayed intact made it obvious. You mean that wasn’t some kind of super-couple-power-play??”

...Well, shit. That meant Sans had at least heard everything.

He wasn’t making eye contact with her.

Was he angry? She...well, she’d kind of picked a fight with his brother, but that was because he was trying to take Sans away, and that was something she would never allow. Did he...did he feel the same way about her? Or...

One boney hand bumped hers, and she did her best to ignore it. She was going to give him his space. She was-

It bumped into her hand again, lingering for a heartbeat too long to be accidental. Carefully, letting him pull away if he wanted, she threaded her fingers through his. The lightest of squeezes - barely a curl of his hand around hers - made her blush. She was 90% sure it was due to whatever human survival instinct produced population booms after wars, but she really, really wanted to get her boyfriend alone. Maybe see if he’d be willing to engage in some more cuddling. Or a touch of heated making out; she wasn’t in the mood to be picky.

Well...she had to pick up her daughter first. So the making out would have to wait. Cuddling, though? Maybe she could use Attie as bait and lure him into a cuddle pile. She owed the both of them ice cream and probably cake, for starters. They’d been through enough because of their association with her.

After the long, grey walkways of New Home, the golden tunnel of the Judgement Hall came as an unpleasant shock. She hadn’t even been paying attention to where they were walking, too focused on the hand in hers to do more than follow the group blindly.
“We’ll be safe here,” Undyne said. “DD? Bruce? Neither of you are known to the media; can you go check for reporters? I thought I saw some vans headed this way when I came back up the mountain.”

Bruce saluted and headed off, Darker Dog right behind him.

“Now we-hell, dude, are you alright?”

Frisk glanced at Sans...and gasped. He was staring off into nothing, one eye flashing like a strobe light. His hand hadn’t even twitched in hers. “Sans? Sans, are you alright?”

He looked over at her, and it felt like the universe slowed down. His eye sockets stared into her, through her in ways she couldn’t comprehend or describe.

* You feel your sins crawling on your back.

Something about this was very, very wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans knows everything Frisk and Papyrus said. And now he knows more.

Thank you all for your patience as I dealt with family issues these past couple of months. I’m sorry I haven't had much time to post new chapters or to reply to comments, but I've read each comment and am slowly working my way through them. I shall catch up soon!!

The family member who was...having trouble is about as okay as can be expected. She got professional help and ultimately must make her own life decisions now. Please, if you’re feeling suicidal or depressed or anxious, please tell someone and get help. There’s a suicide prevention hotline in the US, and the International Association for Suicide Prevention, among other groups, offers services around the world. Major holidays tend to cause a spike in suicides. Please, if you need help, reach out. And if you suspect someone is having a bad day, offer whatever help you can. They may not thank you for it, but you might help save a life.

...On a lighter note, I hope to be back to once-a-week posts now! I hope you're all having a good Advent or pre-Christmas festivities or Hanukkah or general wintery fun times (or summery fun times, if you're on the flipside of the globe). Enjoy the snow (or sunshine), have a big mug of hot cocoa (or lemonade), stay safe, and enjoy the this time of growth and renewal. 2018 is almost over, my dear readers, and this story has been going for almost a full year. Thank you, each and every one of you: my regulars, my one-off commenters, and all the readers who simply enjoy the story in silence. Words cannot express how much you all mean to me.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

See you next week!
In Which Sans Whistles Through a Cemetery

Chapter Summary

...And sees far more than he’s comfortable with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans tried to blink, to shake his head, to do something to break the hold of whatever magic had gripped him, but control felt like sand sifting through his fingers. The drugs at least had the blessing of rendering him unconscious. This left him powerfully, painfully aware.

Undyne-

-walked through a field of echo flowers, arms swinging, humming a little tune. Unaware of what awaited for her at home. The dust. The bullet holes in the ceiling, walls, floor. Her father and baby sister, gone all too soon. And for what? Drugs? Money?

-scrambled over a pile of discarded trash, searching the Dump for scrap metal with her mother. Her stubborn, foolish mother. Most monsters would lay down and die after their families suffered such a huge loss; they were both made of sterner stuff. But grief made a monster reckless. She was learning to harness it, turning her rage into a force nearly as powerful as the barrier. It was eating her mother alive, one day at a time.

-stepped forward to help him collapse against a pillar, frowning when he slid down and toppled over. This wasn’t something she could fight and she knew it. Helplessness didn’t suit her.

“We need to move him.” That was Frisk.

“What?!? No! Stay back; look, can’t you see his eye glowing? Monster eyes only glow when they’re about to attack!”

“He’s had plenty of opportunities; he’s not a threat. Now help me carry him. Sans? Can you hear me? Sans?!”

Frisk was suddenly leaning over him, one gentle hand on his cheek. She was so much better to him than he deserved. She-

-cuddled with a teddy bear in a closet, trying to block out the sounds of the screaming match on the other side of the thin wall. Her parents hated each other, almost as much as they hated her. Without her, they could separate. But she was special, for some reason, and that was why their bosses wouldn’t let them get away from each other. They were paid to take care of her and make more babies, Mommy said once. She hoped they never did.

-clutched at a tree, trying to catch her breath. She’d taken the bus her last two attempts and had gotten caught, so she’d tried to walk. It was a lot farther than she remembered. Mt. Ebott was her last hope, and it wasn’t a very good one, but she’d relived the same few weeks more than thirty times. They said that those who climbed the mountain never returned. Maybe it would hold true for people caught in strange time loops? Anything was worth a try. Even oblivion sounded better
than an eternity like that.

-was kneeling down next to him, trying to actively shake him out of it. Frisk, who-

-stared at the strange skeleton from a distance, watching him sleep at his sentry station. Fear wrapped icy talons around her chest. She’d been killed half a dozen times already; the Snowdin boss always saw her coming. How could he possibly know where she was? Did he have a lookout? A...sentry, perhaps? The boss’ brother was a mystery, offering threats and aid and insults in the same breath. Whose side was he on? Not hers, she decided.

-flinched as a bone went straight through her stomach, but the feeling faded mercifully fast. Darkness surrounded her, blotting out the golden light that glittered through broken stained glass windows. She knew with utter certainty that she had two options: to continue fighting, or to RESET everything. And she had come too far for the latter to be an option. She would get back up and fight again, no matter how many tries it took, no matter how many times this mysterious ‘Judge’ killed her.

-had never done anything terrible enough to deserve what he’d done to her.

“Help me! We have to get him out of here,” she said, trying to hoist him back upright. “I think this started when we walked into the Judgement Hall. He’s not responding, and his eye just keeps flashing...”

Undyne-

-screamed her fury, charging at the enormous figure. She did not expect to survive the battle. All she knew was that her mother was gone and there was nothing left for her...but she was too stubborn to give up. A moment of disorientation; then she was on her back, breathing hard and feeling something like power flow through her arms and legs like she never had before. Why did she feel so alive only when it was too late to make a difference?? The king...he didn’t finish her off. He made her an offer. Train? To become a guard?? She would rather die! She struggled, trying to get back on her feet, to charge him again...and her vision blacked out.

-stared down at the pile of dust. The thief had been about her age, just another hungry mutt that preyed on the weak of New Home. Not for the first time, she wondered what made her so much better than the criminals she was assigned to hunt. It wasn’t like her life choices had been particularly great. It was only by the king’s MERCY that she was alive at all. This wasn’t even justice; the Royal Guard was practically a gang in its own right. It was enough to make a girl give up. But giving up...well. That wasn’t her style.

-put an arm under his elbow and lifted him back onto his feet. “...Alright, if you think moving him’ll help, but if there are reporters outside and they see him like this they’ll start asking questions they will not like the answers to.”

“Then we won’t go all the way to the exit. We’ll head through the Cavern of the End and out the guards’ door. How far is that from the parking lot?”

“Too far. Let’s get him as far as we can; I can pull your car around. We shouldn’t see anyone but a few guards.”

The walk through the hall seemed endless, but keeping his mind focused helped avoid those invasive, disjointed flashes of memory.

It felt...well, it felt like the Judge’s magic gone wild. He’d never experienced it quite like that.
Usually he was well-rested and in control of himself when he was in the Judgement Hall. Was it just a loss of control? It felt awful, whatever it was. It felt like he was going to die-

-like that froggit had, just dissolving into a cloud of dust. Dust was everywhere: on her hands, on the knife the goat lady had given her. What had gone wrong? What had she done?!? She screamed and screamed and screamed...but nobody came.

-but he knew better. He wasn’t in danger of anything worse than simple exhaustion. Magical, physical, emotional exhaustion.

The change in scenery helped him clear his head, but it was a slow process that left him feeling like every ounce of magic had been sucked out of him through his eye socket. He was tired. So, so tired. He just wanted the day to be over. He-

-strained hard, trying to control the situation, but rage made it hard to think clearly. They were both going to die! The humans were going to kill them! Stupid, stupid kid! He said he could handle this!! Now they were going to die and it was all HIS FAULT!!

-jolted in surprise, because that was not what he’d expected. Frisk and Undyne were physically in the room with him, but...what had that been? He’d never been able to read someone’s soul from a distance. His magic was clearly worse off than he’d thought.

Still, something tickled the back of his memory. He had a feeling he ought to know who that was, but...

...Nah. Too tired.

Sans didn’t really pay attention to much after that. Frisk and Undyne got him out of the Underground through one of the small side exits the Royal Guard thought they hid so well, then dragged his boney ass down the mountain to the parking lot and into Frisk’s car. He wasn’t sure how Frisk won the argument over driving privileges, but he was glad she did. Undyne looked like she was in the mood to do something stupid and reckless.

And then...they were in front of a house. Tori’s house. Undyne made a quick getaway, nearly slamming the door only to catch it at the last second and let it close gently.

“Sans?” Frisk asked, twisting around on the driver’s seat. There were smudges under her eyes and her hair was messed up, but she looked more relaxed than she had in weeks.

Oh, right. She was talking to him. “Hmm?”

“Are you alright? You look better, but you sound pretty out of it.”

“Mmm.”

“Is that a ‘yes, I’m better now’ or a ‘no, please cuddle with me?’”

He glanced away, but his hands felt too heavy to cover his face.

“Aww. Well-”

The world started to tilt, and suddenly he was hanging out the door by his seat belt looking up at...“Tori...?”

She just frowned at him and placed one massive paw over his face. For one terrible moment he
thought she was trying to smother him for getting her daughter into trouble, but then the green magic started.

It almost disguised the feeling of her checking him.

“What?” he asked, but it was probably unintelligible.

“Be silent.”

Ouch. Cold.

At least he was too out of it to feel his wounds healing. Everything radiated a dull ache anyways; any pain she was causing was lost in the general feeling that he was going to fall to pieces.

After an uncomfortable, awkward silence, she eventually removed her hand and arranged him so he was sitting mostly upright again. “You will sleep,” she ordered, leaving no room for questions. “Both of you. Frisk, tell me if his eye begins glowing again. He will explain what happened once he is rested. Won’t you, Sans.”

He had no idea what she was talking about.

“Tell me if he is any trouble. I suspect he will sleep for a few hours, a day or two at most.”

“Alright,” Frisk said.

“And if you need-”

“If I need anything, I’ll call you. Mom, I’ll be fine, I promise. Just a few bumps and bruises; not even worth healing. See? We’re safe, just tired. I’ll text you when we get home, okay?”

“That would be appreciated, thank you. And please let me know when you wake in the morning as well. The terrorist attack gives us a reason to postpone certain events, but there will be a press conference at 10 o’clock that I would like you to attend if possible.”

“Alright. I’ll set an alarm and I’ll call you when I get up.”

“Thank you. Have a safe evening. Undyne, you will be staying with them, correct?”

Undyne sighed like a deflating balloon. “I’ve gotta get down to HQ to debrief the first responders. We didn’t even finish the paperwork for the bomb threat. I’ll...send one of the dogs over to spend the night.”

“Very well. If you require the assistance of the Queen’s Guard, either for guard duty or general assistance while you are short-staffed, they are at your disposal.”

“...Thanks. I’ll take you up on that; paperwork alone’s gonna be a regular fish dinner, and we’re taking custody of all the arrested monsters as well. Let me get back to HQ and see what the situation is, and I’ll give Dromeda a call. She’s still your captain, right? Cool. Shouldn’t be more than an hour.”

“I shall tell her to expect your call within the hour, then. Good night.”

The door closed gently.

A soft pat on his skull made Sans flinch, but his eyes had drooped closed at some point and he was too tired to open them. He didn’t need to see who was sitting next to him; even if the booster seat
wasn’t buckled in next to him, he would have known her instantly. “Hey, kid,” he mumbled.

“Hi, Mr. Sans. Are you okay?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Did the bad guys beat you up?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Oh. Did Mommy beat them up?”

“Attie,” Frisk said. Sans could hear the frown in her voice. “Please let Mr. Sans sleep, okay? He’s had a very long day.”

“Okay. I had a really long day, too. Granny Ree had a whole bunch of meetings so I played with puzzles for a really long time, but it isn’t as much fun by myself so it got really boring.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. Oh! Happy birthday, baby boo!”

“Thanks! You t...oh, sorry.”

Sans grinned.

He must’ve dozed off again, because the next thing he remembered was the disorienting swaying of Undyne hauling him over her shoulder like a sack of stolen goods. “Let’s get you inside,” she grumbled.

“Mmm.”

“By the way, we need to have a proper debrief once I figure out what the hell is going on. The queen was really freaked out when I told her about the eye thing.”

“Mmmkay.”

“Are you even conscious?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“UGH!” She tossed him onto the loveseat hard enough that he bounced awkwardly on his spine. Thank the stars Tori had healed him earlier. “JUST NAP, YOU NERDS! I’LL BE BACK LATER!”

He barely registered Frisk and Attie collapsing onto the big couch.

“I’m not sleepy,” Attie said.

Her mom mumbled something back. She sounded half-asleep already.

“Ohay. I’ll be a security while you and Mr. Sans sleep.”

Frisk mumbled again.

“What?”

“Don’t answer the door without me or Mr. Sans.”
A huff. “I’m not a baby, Mommy. I know how to be a security.”

“‘Kay. G’night.”

“It’s just lunchtime! You’re silly.”

“I’m tired.”

“Okay.”

That was about when he tapped out. At least, he assumed he was asleep; he vaguely remembered Attie and TOSS having a conversation about experimental physics, but that was probably a dream.

He didn’t feel any better when Attie shook him awake, whispering about the door, but he’d gained two HP above his maximum so at least something had happened. Frisk was lying on her side, curled up on the couch, only her hair and the tips of her toes visible under the blanket someone had thrown over her.

And someone was knocking on the front door.

He made his way over to it and concentrated, trying to clear the sleep fuzz out of his skull. It felt like...there was a lot of people on the doorstep. Dogamy, Dogaressa, and...babies? He opened the door.

Ah.

Not babies, exactly: puppies. Their puppies. And Tiny Dog; he recognized that nose.

“...Hi?” he said, not sure why two Royal Guards were standing outside Frisk’s door with the dog pack’s collective offspring.

(“I am here to spend the night,”) Dogaressa woofed. (”Someone needs to keep an eye on the puppies.”)

Her expression clearly said that he, Attie, and Frisk were included in ‘puppies,’ but he was too tired to care. He opened the door wider and let the dogs in. “Frisk’s asleep,” he mumbled. “Don’t wake her up.”

The look he got was sheer disdain.

“I...uh, dunno where you guys can spend the night-”

“I’ll get the playpen,” Frisk called. She hadn’t even shifted from her spot under her blanket, that he could see.

“Uh. Okay.”

“And I’ll start dinner. Dogamy, can you stay?”

The poor dog looked like he very much wanted to stay, but he declined. Right; the guard was probably busy.

“Alright.” She sat up, slowly, eyes still closed. “Dogaressa, are your puppies eating solid food yet?”

(“Only soft foods, but I can nurse them for the evening. We would not expect you to feed us all.”)
“We can take a look through the cupboards and see if there’s anything they’ll eat. Oh, and I’ll need to puppy-proof things a bit; Attie’s old enough now that I don’t have to worry about power cords laying out and that kind of thing.”

 (“That would be helpful. Puppy, dear, are you sure you can’t stay and help?”)

Dogamy was already halfway out the door, whining about running late.

 (“Alright. Come back here and say goodbye, then, at least…”)

Sans rolled his eyes at the…very overt display of affection the two engaged in and shuffled into the kitchen after Frisk. She appeared to be doing her best to ignore the fact that she was actually awake; her eyes were open only the tiniest amount. “I can, uh, put a casserole in the oven or somethin’.”

“Nnno, it’s okay. I’ll make something on the stove. Dogaressa, do your…oh, um, never mind.”

“Sorry, should’ve warned you.”

 “...Attie’s not watching that, is she?”

 “Watching what?” Attie said. She was perched on a nearby cupboard and leaning precariously, trying to see around her mother to what was going on in the other room.

 “Oh, hi, baby boo. Nothing. They’re being…very friendly.”

“Is that bad, Mommy?”

“...Not really…”

Sans chuckled. “They’re kissing.”

“Eew.”

“They’re doing messy kissing.”

“Eeeew!!”

He ignored Frisk’s narrow glare and opened a cupboard at random. There on a high shelf was his saving grace. “Oh, hey, you have a cake mix right here.”

She shuffled over to squint at it. “Oh. Huh. I don’t remember buying one…”

“Guess it’s just lucky.” He floated the box down, wincing when the blue magic scratched at his limits. “It’s not expired or anythin’.”

“It’s plain white cake mix. Attie, want to help me make your birthday cake?”

“We’ve got the cake, don’t worry ‘bout it.”

Frisk shrugged and started collecting ingredients for some kind of stir-fry. Attie was happy to help with the cake, but she kept trying to steal nibbles of cake batter until Sans finally lifted her off the counter.

“Go play with the puppies.”
“But Mr. Sans…”

“You’ll have a surprise birthday cake. Shoo.”

She shooed, but dragged her feet the whole time.

Frisk raised an eyebrow at him. “A surprise? You know she’s going to check, right?”

“You have sprinkles in the cupboard. That’s a pretty good surprise.”

“Sprinkles, hmm? That’s setting the bar pretty high. Next birthday you’ll have to think of something better.”

“Chocolate chips. That’ll buy us a year before we hafta break out the trick candles.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

He hadn’t thought it through, not at all; he was flying entirely by the seat of his pants. “Gotta keep the kid happy, or she’ll pout.”

“Oooh, a pouting child. Truly, a fearsome foe.”

“Worst thing I’ve seen all day.”

She returned his grin, eyes sparkling, then leaned in. And gave him a little smooch on his cheekbone that he didn’t have the presence of mind to expect. “You’re the best,” she said, and he could feel her sincerity. “Of all the people in all the world I could’ve been stuck running for my life with, I’m glad I was with you.”

Well that was a horrifying thing to say. She laughed when he told her so.

“It’s supposed to be sweet! You’re a handy person to have around in a pinch!”

“But...hell, Frisk, if somethin’ happens to me I hope you stay far, far away. Not that I don’t appreciate you comin’ after me, but I’d rather...rather rip my own arms off than have you put yourself in danger for me.”

“See, now that’s horrifying.”

Fair enough. He appreciated the thought, anyways.

Baking the sprinkle cake wasn’t too hard; he just mixed everything together, dumped it in a cake pan, and stuck it in the oven. The timer beeped around the time Frisk was finishing up her stir-fry. They had just one problem.

“Hey, Frisk?”

“Hmm?”

“D’ya have any frosting?”

She froze. Turned. Stared at him with wide eyes. “I...I don’t think so.”

“Huh. Okay.”

“I didn’t even think about it. We could probably make some...if I have powdered sugar...”
“‘Ts fine.”

“But…”

“Hey, Attie, c’mere a sec.” Attie appeared in a moment, catching herself on the kitchen door frame but still skidding a little. “Waddaya think of the surprise cake?”

She tapped her chin as he floated it over for her inspection. “Hmm…it has no frosting on it.”

“Frosting? But then you wouldn’t be able t’see the surprise!”

“What surp…oh! Mr. Sans, you put sprinkles in my cake!”

“Yeah. Ya like it?”

She was bouncing on her toes. “Yep!! That’s really cool! Like oatmeal dinosaurs but really small!!”

“Sure is. Think you can live without frosting?”

“Yes! Thank you so much, Mr. Sans! Thank you so much, Mommy!!”

Stir-fry and plain cake might not have been the fanciest dinner, but in Sans’ completely unbiased opinion it was the best thing he’d ever tasted. The dogs, who were enjoying Frisk’s supply of rawhide bones instead of sugary cake, clearly didn’t know what they were missing.

The warm food and general atmosphere of safety were about to put him to sleep again. Frisk didn’t look much better. In fact, she looked like she was about to faceplant onto her plate.

“Hey,” he said, putting one hand over one of hers. She jerked awake, eyes wild, and he felt something squeeze in his chest. “Wanna head t’bed? We’ve got the dishes.”

“I…the playpen…”

(“I’ll set it up,”) Dogaressa woofed, wiping down one of her wiggly pups. (“You get some rest.”)

“But…”

Sans grabbed an arm and draped it over his shoulders, remembering how she’d helped him through the tunnels earlier that day. “C’mon. Let’s get you some sleep.”

“Attie…”

“G’night, Mommy!”

Frisk drooped a little. “Good night, baby boo. Sans, I can walk…”

“Sure ya can.” He gave her arm a little squeeze.

It was a little frustrating, the way she never stopped fighting, but…she wouldn’t be Frisk if she gave up. Even half-asleep, she kept trying to insist that she was fine, that she could walk, that she didn’t need help…

He ignored it all, focused on getting her onto her sad mattress-bed and tucking her in.

“Now g’night,” he said, giving her shoulder a firm pat. The kiss he planted in her hair was...
of habit, definitely. She was acting like an eight-year-old, so he treated her like an eight-year-old.

She was already half-asleep, but still managed to free one hand and raise it to her lips before giving him a light swat on the cheekbone. He deserved it for being so cheeky, but-

Oh. That was her kissing him back, wasn’t it. He’d seen her do that to Attie, sometimes.

(“Are you well?”) Dogaressa asked him when he wandered back into the living room. (“You look very…red.”)

“Yes, ‘m fine. Now let’s get that playpen set up.”

He ignored Attie laughing at him.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: the Queen's Guard are technically a division of the Royal Guard, but report directly to Toriel instead of Asgore. They have their own captain (Dromeda) who leads them. This was part of the agreement between Toriel and Asgore that resulted in a unified royalty; after all, the first thing Toriel knew about Undyne was that the latter is fiercely loyal to the king. Allowing Undyne to order her guards around is a gesture of trust and goodwill from Tori's end.

Also, I'm sorry that it's been more than the promised week. Christmas was busier than I thought (in a good way!) and I missed posting. I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas, and that you are all safe and happy over New Year's! See you all soon!
In Which Everyone is Okay

Chapter Summary

...Or so they say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans groaned. The quiet of the house felt like bricks sitting on his chest. Everyone else had gone to sleep hours ago; even the puppies had eventually run out of energy after a few hundred games of tug. He was so unbearably tired, but whenever he closed his eye sockets he remembered...

Attie laying on the ground, staring blankly up at the trees overhead.

A wall of white-hot fire tearing down a hallway towards him far faster than he could react.

A wooden baseball bat swinging at his skull, dread and terror mixing as he realized that his overused magic couldn’t get him out of the way.

The gang of monsters stalking through the gloom of the embassy’s parking garage, far too close to Attie for comfort.

Mettaton’s smug face leering down at him and Frisk as they fell into an empty abyss.

The amalgamate scrambling up a steep rock pile, Frisk’s determined face barely visible as she leapt overhead.

The impact of bone on bone as Boss deployed his special attack, nearly splitting Frisk’s glaive in half.

Sleep was as elusive as a star on a cloudy night. The only reason he kept trying was because he needed to watch Attie in the morning, and she hated it when he couldn’t take her outside...

But then again, he had some work to do before they went anywhere near the park. He sat up, mentally calculating Frisk’s next free day. Maybe she’d have some time off due to the circumstances? Every instinct he had screamed at him not to leave her alone and unprotected, but she was far from helpless. She had her barrier, for one, and she clearly knew how to hold her own in a fight. He didn’t know how long she’d be assigned a live-in guard, but given how upset Undyne had been the evening before...probably a while.

Long enough for him to track down a group of child-murderers, at least.

But...what then? Could he really murder them in cold blood? He’d have to if he found them. There was no way he could let them go, and he couldn’t let his actions lead back to Frisk.

See, it occurred to him - a bit belatedly - that what he was planning was both illegal and (arguably) immoral. It could get him killed. It could spark a backlash against him or Frisk or monsters in general.
And these people hadn’t, technically, done anything to Attie. Was it really worth the time and hassle to find them?

The weight of the guilt he still carried for killing Frisk told him it was. And besides, they’d been willing to kill Attie and kidnap Frisk, even if they hadn’t had the opportunity (yet). What else could they be capable of?

Maybe...maybe there was a way to get around this. He did have that agreement with Tori. If he could get the people who’d killed Attie arrested by the Royal Guard…

And they were associated with the Sparks, after all…

Soft, uneven footsteps put him on alert. One of his humans was walking down the hallway. Probably Attie with a nightmare. She wasn’t normally so quiet, though.

The door creaked open.

“Hey, kid,” he said, rolling over to face his visitor.

“Hey,” Frisk whispered back.

In hindsight he shouldn’t have been so surprised, but it was always hard to pinpoint her in a house saturated in her magic. “You, uh, okay?”

“Yeah. Sorry; it’s silly-”

“‘Ts fine.” She was turning to leave, though, one hand pulling the door closed behind her. He caught the door with blue magic, careful not to let the glow touch her. “What’s got you up so late? I thought you were asleep.”

“I...was.”

Oh, right; Attie wasn’t the only one prone to nightmares. “You...uh. I dunno what I can do. Don’t think readin’ a story’d work. Wanna...talk?”

“I didn’t mean to wake you up. I’ll just go back to bed-”

“I wasn’t sleeping. Too much on the ol’ skull.”

“But...” He could see her wavering. Her expression was half-hidden in shadow, but the internal war between her stubborn independence and her desire for comfort and support was obvious. “Alright.”

Before he could scoot over to make room for her, she’d planted herself right on his lap. It couldn’t be comfortable - her legs were dangling off the side of his cot, one bony femur trapped under them and probably digging in - but she snuggled into the hoodie he’d never bothered to remove.

“I. Uh.”

“Sorry; too much touching?”

“No, ‘ts fine.” And it was, despite habit telling him it shouldn’t have been. It wasn’t all that different from the way they’d woken up that morning, except that their positions were reversed and he was in a lot less pain. “Just...I can’t smell too great.”

She hummed. “Yeah, you still smell a bit like drugs and smoke.”
“I can, uh, go shower…or change...”

“Nooo...don’t go, I’m comfy.”

“Heh. Alright.” He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, mostly because it felt like she was dozing off again and he didn’t want her to fall over.

She was *almost* out when she suddenly jerked in his hold. “Ugh. I...I can’t. I don’t want to sleep.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“But I’m *so* tired.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I just...”

“We’re safe now, so it’s like all the memories that piled up over the past couple’a days are all comin’ back at once.”

“Exactly! So much happened, and...I just can’t turn my brain off. I fell asleep for a couple hours and...and I had a nightmare about *Attie...*”

She didn’t need to clarify any further. “I can’t stop thinkin’ about it either. I...uh...I wanna go find those people.”

“Oh?” There was a wealth of emotion behind that statement. He had a feeling she knew exactly what he meant by ‘find.’

“They can’t get away with what they did!”

“They didn’t *do* anything.”

“Sure they did! Even without...what kinda didn’t happen, they *made plans* to kidnap you ‘n Attie. They were *waitin’* for ya. That’s a crime here, isn’t it?”

“Well...I think so, but...how would we prove it?”

“We’ve seen them hangin’ around the park.”

“We didn’t...well. I guess we did, sort of. But who would believe us? We have no proof.”

“And that’s why I wanna find ‘em.”

“Sans, you can’t kill them for something that happened before I LOADED.”

“Sure I can. They aren’t *that* tough, ‘n I know their tricks.”

“Sans, *please* don’t kill them for something that happened before I LOADED.”

“...Fine. But I’m still tellin’ Undyne I saw some shady guys by the park. It’s only been...what, a day or two? Maybe they’re still around.”

“I doubt they’re camping in the woods near the park. But...maybe someone else saw them.”

“All we need is for the Royal Guard to investigate. The dogs’ve got good noses, and there’s gotta be somethin’ linking those guys to whoever coordinated this whole thing.”
“Hmm. There might be...but the question is, would we be able to find it?”

He shrugged. Looking for physical evidence wasn’t his strong suit. With his powers, he rarely needed to.

“...You’re planning something, aren’t you.”

“Sure.”

“Tell me?”

He would do absolutely anything she wanted if she kept rubbing the back of his neck like that. “I, uh, have the right to request cases. Part of the agreement with Tori...with yer mom. I wanna be in charge of the trial.”

“Oh.” She shifted, leaning back a little to look him in the eye sockets. “If it’s part of that agreement I don’t want to interfere, but...would you promise me two things?”

“Sure.” If she asked for the moon, he’d get it for her or die trying.

“I don’t want you to hurt yourself doing this. I saw how you reacted after Graciela Lira’s trial, and...they’ve already hurt one person I care about. I don’t want them to hurt another. They’re not worth that.”

“I’ll be fine. Jus’ tired.”

“I also don’t want this to be about revenge. If they’re really guilty of plotting to kill or capture us, then that’s one thing. But I have it on good authority that you try to be fair as the Judge; don’t compromise that over these assholes.”

That was going to be hard. He so desperately wanted to tear them limb from limb, to listen to their screams...he’d never had much of a stomach for torture, but for someone who’d killed Attie? Well. He could make an exception.

But he’d told Frisk he’d do whatever she wanted.

“I...promise.”

“Thank you.” She leaned back in, settling herself once more. “I have a weird request.”

“Another one?”

“...Can you read to me? I know it’s silly...”

“Nah, I, uh, I can do that. You...want some tea, or...?”

“I’m afraid I’d wake the dogs up. The puppies, especially.”

“You got it. Anythin’ in particular?”

He turned on the desk lamp with a gesture as she leaned over awkwardly, trying to stay attached to him and reach for a particular shelf at the same time. “Here. I’ve heard good things about it, but I’ve been too busy lately to read.”

The book was a sci-fi novel he’d never seen before. The cover was a hazy orange with a single, humanoid figure in a spacesuit floating weightlessly through the fog.
“‘The Martian,’ huh.” He gently swiped a thumb across the words, feeling it slip across the shiny text. “Welp, here goes…”

Sans was a chapter and a half in before he realized that Frisk had, at some point, fallen asleep on him. He’d gotten so caught up on the story of this guy who got himself stranded on Mars, of all places, that everything else - including his stressed girlfriend - had kind of just…faded into the background. It was a bit embarrassing.

“Can you keep reading, Mr. Sans?”

He glanced over to where Attie and Tiny Dog were standing in the doorway, staring at him with wide eyes. “You…like this kinda thing?”

“It’s outer space, right?”

“Space!” Tiny Dog woofed. His tail was wagging hard enough to be dangerous. Great, another weird kid who wasn’t afraid of nasty skeletons. Sans was too tired to be a big bad guy at the moment, too.

“It sounds really cool!”

He sighed. “Alright, but ya gotta keep quiet.”

They ended up with Frisk laying half on top of Sans, both pairs of legs pulled up onto the cot, with Attie squeezed in next to their shoulders and Tiny Dog curled up on a nearby shelf that was half-clear of books.

“You two sure ya wanna read this? Not somethin’ with pictures?”

Attie shot him a look she’d clearly learned from her mother.

“Mkay.”

The kids were more resilient than Frisk was - or, at least, better rested - because it took three chapters for them to drift off. By that time Sans had hit his limit. Not even the ridiculous little puppy snores Tiny Dog was making could keep him awake.

His family was there with him, protected and safe. Finally, he could rest.

It was an uneasy sleep, though. He lost count of how many times he woke up, terrified that he’d lost everything he’d come to love, ready to burn the world down in revenge. Then Attie shifted or Frisk made some little twitch and he came back to himself.

Rinse and repeat.

By the time the sun began filtering through the curtains he’d pretty much given up on the exercise. It wasn’t worth it.

Frisk, on the other hand, looked like she’d gotten a very good sleep. The dark shadows that had been chasing her for weeks were gone. “Well hi there, handsome,” she whispered, giving him a lingering kiss on his cheekbone. “Thanks for letting me crash with you.”

He shrugged.

“Are you still okay with…this?” She wiggled her toes, her legs still tangled around his.
“Yeah, ’ts fine. ‘Sides, you’re not the only one.”

The look of shock on her face when she realized they weren’t alone nearly made him laugh out loud. “Oh. Ah. Kids.”

“Kids.”

“Kids.”

...He was missing some context again. “That a problem?”

“I...no, no it’s not.”

There was something suspicious in the way she carefully separated herself from his boney legs, but he decided not to pry. She looked happier than he’d seen her since this whole mess began and he didn’t want to ruin it.

“I’d better go start breakfast,” she said, stretching wide enough to show off a thin line of skin between her pyjama shirt and pants. “Do you want to sleep in a little?”

“Nah. Don’t think I can sleep right now.”

“You don’t look like you had a good night…”

He shrugged. “Nothin’ an afternoon nap won’t fix.”

“Alright. Let’s see what we have in the kitchen.”

Dogressa nodded to them as they passed. If she’d gotten any sleep herself, it didn’t show; she had at least one of her puppies curled up against her chest under a paw print blanket eating breakfast, but that was probably the only thing keeping her awake. She was swaying dangerously.

“Can you start coffee?” Frisk asked, handing him a carafe of water he hadn’t seen her fill. “I’ll make pancakes, I think. That sounds good, and it should be soft enough for the puppies…”

He nodded along. Coffee would help wake him up. Hadn’t Undyne said that she was going to come over and brief them at some point? Oh, and, “Didja text yer mom?”

“My mom…? Oh, that’s right! Thanks.”

Making coffee was something he could do without really thinking, which was for the best; he didn’t think he was entirely conscious.

“It’s 9:15 now. I need to be at the embassy by 9:45. I should probably leave soon…”

“Eat some pancakes with us ‘n I’ll get you to the embassy on time.”

“You can’t drive, Sans.”

He winked at her. “Nah, but I know a shortcut.”

“Can you...do you have enough magic for that?”

“I will after breakfast.” Hopefully. Good sleep or no, he was significantly better off than he’d been the day before.
“If you’re sure…”

He wasn’t sure - at least until his third pancake - but he thought he hid it well. He’d always been good at lying, especially to himself.

Frisk looked grateful for the proper breakfast, though, which made any discomfort worth it. Although...they really needed to come up with a better solution for teleporting, he decided. He felt like an idiot huddling with his girlfriend behind her garage in full view of the neighbor’s house.

“Ready?” he asked, making sure he had a good grip on her arm.

“Ready!”

A step later, they were in her office. Undyne, who looked half asleep for a split second as they appeared, made an extremely undignified noise and backflipped over the chair she’d been sitting on. It clattered to the ground with a crash that seemed far too loud.

“What the hell, you two??”

“Hey, Undyne,” Frisk said. “Sorry if we scared you.”

“SCARED?? FUFUFU!! It’s gonna take a little more than THAT to scare me!”

“I didn’t mean just this morning, but good to know. I didn’t apologize properly last night, with everything that was going on. I’m sorry I’ve been so reckless lately. It wasn’t done intentionally to worry you.”

“...Well...I guess...you were doing what you thought was right. That DOESN’T EXCUSE LETTING YOURSELF GET KIDNAPPED, EITHER OF YOU, but under the circumstances...you both made it out, so I guess I won’t handcuff you to a pair of my special agents.”

As much as Sans wanted to tease Undyne about how much of a softy she was being, she didn’t look like she’d gotten much sleep in the past few days. It wasn’t (entirely) compassion that made him decide not to taunt her: it was self-preservation.

“Now let’s get READY!! Sans, are you coming to the press conference...? You aren’t on the list of speakers, but you could watch.”

He shrugged. “I could. I’ve gotta get Frisk home…”

“Psh. I still need to debrief you two. I’ll drive her over. Hey, what’re you two looking at each other like that for??”

“Nothin’.” Neither of them wanted to say that Undyne was definitely impaired, but…

“I’ll call you if I need a lift,” Frisk muttered under her breath as she hugged him goodbye. “See you in a couple hours.”

“Kay.”

Of course, he realized as he stepped back to his spot behind the garage, he’d need a bit more magic if he planned to actually pick Frisk up. Maybe a nap?

“Mr. Sans!!” Attie was beaming at him when he made it inside. “We did some stretching exercises already and I started on Grammar!”
“Nice. Need any help?”

“Nope. Grammar’s easy.”

“Mkay.”

He watched her for a moment. Grammar may have been easy, but the constant distractions from Tiny Dog and Dogaressa’s pups weren’t helping. He checked his inventory; maybe he had a stick or a ball or something.

**Box Bomb??** What was...oh, right. **That.** He’d better remember to give that to Undyne; she’d know what to do with it.

**ID Bundle** ...that was the pile of ID cards he and Frisk had gathered under Mettaton’s place. Another thing for Undyne.

**Hair Ties and the Toothbrush and Jacket** were no help. Well, the jacket was. He pulled it out and set it on the back of a chair. He’d have to dispose of his nasty sweatshirt somewhere. Maybe burn it. It really did smell pretty bad. And sure, it was kinda weird that he of all people was complaining about smell, but humans were sensitive to such things and he was getting used to cuddling with a certain very specific human.

The **Glaive Blade** was going to be kept right where it was until he needed it again; better safe than sorry. Same with the **Kitchen Knife** and **Lockpicks.** Despite being vaguely stick-shaped, he didn’t think Dogaressa would appreciate him trying to get Tiny Dog to fetch either of those.

And...oh, right. He blushed as he glanced at the last thing he had in his inventory. He forgot he’d picked it up that last time through the department store. It had been a whim, something to excuse his presence; after all, it hadn’t felt like it mattered at the time. And it was hardly worth remembering after everything that had happened. He’d have to find a safe way to dispose of the damn thing before Frisk found out how stupid he’d been.

Aside from assorted papers, he really didn’t have much else on him.

Thankfully, Tiny Dog bounded up with a chunk of twisted rope knotted on both ends: a much better toy than anything Sans could’ve come up with. “TUG!” he barked, so loudly he startled a few of the sleeping puppies. “TUG!”

“Yeah, yeah, c’mon.”

It was kinda pointless, from Sans’ point of view. He held one end of the rope and Tiny Dog bit the other. The little pup wasn’t nearly strong enough to actually steal the rope, but he seemed to enjoy trying. And the tiny growls were hardly threatening.

“Enough, kid,” he finally said after half an hour of tugging and growling. “I’m gonna take a shower and a nap.”

He ignored the little whines - **not his problem, really!** - and checked on Attie one more time before heading to the bathroom. Carefully he wadded up his nasty clothes, scrubbed himself down, and snuck into Frisk’s office without being waylaid by enthusiastic kids.

It felt like his skull had barely hit his pillow when he was woken up by a chorus of yappy little barks. And...oh, that mechanical sound was the garage door. Nice. Frisk was home.

He pulled himself upright, feeling only marginally better than he had earlier, and shuffled out to the
living room to greet-

“WHAT’S UP, NERDS??”

-an extremely sleep-deprived Undyne. Oh, and Frisk, who almost seemed to disappear into the shadow of a raging fish monster.

Sans sidled up to her as she attempted to retreat down the hallway. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need five minutes.”

She didn’t look so good. In fact, she looked like all the energy and DETERMINATION had been sucked right out of her, and she’d only been gone two hours or so according to his phone. Carefully, he placed a hand on her shoulder. “You sure? You look-”

“Five minutes, Sans.”

He let her go.

Instead of heading down the hall to her bedroom, she stopped off in the bathroom. That was...odd. Maybe she’d gotten messy? The washer and dryer were in there…

A low thump against the door caught his attention. Maybe he should check on her anyways.

Maybe-

As he reached for the door, he heard a small, stifled noise. Just an intake of breath, nothing big. He lay his hand against the door, as close to the source of the thump as he could, and concentrated.

A wave of sadness washed over his senses, twisting something in his chest. He breathed past it, searching for anything else. There was a strange sense of exhaustion, which was to be expected; he was feeling it too. But Frisk was at the end of her rope. There was no deep damage, nothing that would keep her from recovering, but she was feeling overwhelmed and stressed and really needed some time to herself.

And under all that there was a deep, unwavering drive to do more, to get better, to become stronger. DETERMINATION. Her blessing and her curse.

As he stood there, he felt the DETERMINATION win out. Frisk pulled herself together and stepped away from the door. A moment later he heard the sink running.

...What the heck? How often did that happen? Did Undyne know? He glanced over towards the living room, but he couldn’t see anyone.

Did something go wrong with the press conference? Or was this still the aftershocks of a truly awful few days?

It was incredibly irritating to stand in the hallway doing nothing. If Frisk was sad, she should’ve said something, right? He’d helped her before. Undyne would happily go off and punch whatever had upset her. She had options. But…

But he knew from personal experience how hard it was to rely on others sometimes. She had lived alone, raising Attie and acting as the tenuous connection between monsters and humans for nearly a decade. If she needed a few minutes to herself, well, that was completely understandable.

Didn’t make him feel any less helpless, though.
“How’s the girlfriend?” Undyne growled, far too close for comfort.

“Holy shhhhh.”

“HAH! Sans the skeleton, censoring himself? You’re whipped, you little shit!”

“Not here. Frisk’s…” he gestured, not sure how to describe what she was doing.

“Pff. C’mon then.” She dragged him by the back of his hoodie out to the living room. “You look awful, by the way. Go take a nap or somethin’. BUT LATER, after I debrief you!!”

“Kay. Did, uh, somethin’ happen at the press conference?”

“What? No. I mean, a few people got kinda aggressive - reporters are assholes - but it wasn’t any worse than usual. She’s fine! Just a little tired.”

He remembered Frisk’s smile that morning as she woke him up with a kiss. She’d looked happier than usual, not tired at all. “Mkay.”

“FUFUFU! Stop worrying about your girlfriend; I said she’s FINE! She’s tougher than you are!! NOW WHERE’S YOUR COFFEE???”

“Don’t have any.”

Undyne gave him a glare that rivaled a volcanic explosion in sheer destructive potential. “WHAT.”

“We didn’t much this morning. ‘Ts gone now. Wasn’t sure what time you’d be-”

“GET OUT OF THE WAY, THEN!”

Frisk poked her head out of the bathroom. “Everything okay out here?”

He gestured in the general direction of the kitchen. “Undyne. Coffee.”

“...Oh. I offered to pick some up for her on the way, but she doesn’t like fast food coffee. Something about cost and taste compared to home coffee.”

A mighty roar rattled the walls.

“Yyyeah, I’d better go supervise that. You alright, Sans?”

“Yeah. You? You didn’t look so good…”

“Oh, I’m fine. Thanks for looking out for me, though.”

His concern earned him a peck on the cheek, which was...nice, but he had the feeling he wasn’t getting the whole story.

Oh, well. They could talk things over once they’d rescued the kitchen from Undyne’s wrath.
Fun fact of the chapter: Yes, Sans *still* has that bomb on him.

Also, Andy Weir's book *The Martian* is both amazing and nerdy. The movie based on it is pretty cool also.

So...I feel like I've been apologizing a lot lately. Probably because I haven't been sticking to my update schedule. And once again, I apologize for being so late. Thanks for hanging in there.

There's been a lot going on in my life: personal, professional...etc. Most recently I helped my company through a lot of changes that, despite my best efforts, culminated in me no longer being employed. So please, if you're the praying sort, I'd really appreciate anything you could send my way.

But hey, my schedule's no longer nearly as full as it was! So updates should be more reliable. And I'll be able to finally catch up completely on that comment backlog.

There's a silver lining to everything, isn't there?
In Which a Situation Develops

Chapter Summary

...And for once, it isn’t really Sans’ fault.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“See? Isn’t that better?” Sans eyed Undyne over his own mug of coffee. Never mind that it was coming up on noon; it had been one of those mornings that seemed to last the whole day.

Undyne had been communicating solely with strange growls for the past ten minutes while dumping coffee down her throat as fast as he could brew it. At least between him and Frisk they’d coaxed her into a chair.

“Y’know, I’ll never understand why someone who hates the heat so much drinks boiling hot coffee.”

“Shuddup,” she growled. Guess she wasn’t completely incapable of speech. She also gave him a very rude and anatomically unlikely hand gesture once she was sure Attie wasn’t watching.

Frisk was, though, and she glared at her bestie. “Undyne…”

The only response she got was another growl.

“…Alright. You want something to eat with that? It’s going to go straight through you, and you know how pleasant that is. I think we have some leftover pancakes; want me to heat them up? Yes? No? Well, I’ll go grab them anyways. Unless…Sans, do you want a sandwich? It is lunchtime, I guess.”

“Sure. Lemme…”

“No, it’s fine. You watch the puppies.”

He shrugged. The puppies were all asleep except Tiny Dog, who was playing with a bouncy ball Frisk had found somewhere. Dogaressa had gone home shortly after Undyne arrived to get some much-needed sleep, leaving the puppies with them (well, specifically with Frisk) for about an hour until another pack member stopped by later to watch them. Someone had given Undyne a few cans of wet dog food to hold them over until then.

Dog monsters really were funny. They acted quite a bit like non-magical dogs, complete with the instinct to wiggle their legs when their heads were scratched, but they aged much slower. Take Tiny Dog. He was just a little older than Attie, and he acted like it. An eight-year-old true dog would have been past middle age, just shy of being considered elderly.

“Do they have names yet?” Frisk asked, watching the sleeping puppies and waving a sandwich on a plate in his general direction. “Last I had a chance to play with them, the Dogi were still thinking.”
“Nah. They’re waiting a few more weeks.”

“Ah.”

It was a tradition, back in the Underground, to wait to name kids until they had a decent shot at survival. Most kids hadn’t been named until they could talk, as if a lack of name would somehow make the agony of losing a young child less real. Many monsters had moved away from that, especially since the paperwork necessary for citizenship on the human side required names and changing those names after the fact was a hassle. Just another way Frisk had changed their lives.

Undyne was significantly more coherent after coffee and leftover pancakes. She extracted a pen and notepad from her inventory and sent Attie off to go play with Tiny Dog. “So. Debrief. You guys tell me what the hell has been going on the past few days, and I’ll fill you in on what I found.”

Sans glared at his pancake, trying not to look at his girlfriend. “Alright,” Frisk said. “I guess I’ll start.

“Sans and I became aware of a plot to plant a bomb in or near the embassy. I texted you while he went to investigate. He found a piece of paper at Grillby’s that led us to the correct building, and he was able to go in and assess what the situation was. He actually managed to grab the bomb—”

“Where is that, by the way?”

Both women turned to Sans. “I, uh, still have it in my inventory…”

“Shit, really?”

“Yup. Want me t—”

“No!” they yelled in unison.

“Kay.”

Undyne sighed. “I’ll…figure out where we wanna dispose of the damn thing. I know the humans have a site a few hours west of here that they sometimes blow things up at. Maybe they’ll let us use that. They’re working with us on the investigation into that whole mess anyways. Frisk, continue.”

“Alright. Sans found the bomb somehow, grabbed it and got out. I alerted you; you’d know better than I would what happened there after he left. We watched the news to make sure everything was alright then decided to go home. I did promise to leave after things settled, after all. Sans grabbed Attie from daycare so the staff could clear out as well, then headed out to my car while I finished filing some notes from the meeting this morning.”

“And Sans, you were kidnapped out there?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. One guy was following us. A knight knight, wasn’t wearing armor. He herded us towards the cars, then a group of monsters jumped out of a van parked across from Frisk’s car. There were…six of them, including the knight knight. A fish, a dog, a rabbit, and two clam guys.”

“Really? No monsters native to Hotland or New Home?”

“Not except the knight knight.”
“And you just...didn’t notice a bunch of monsters waiting for you??”

“They were using a magic nullifier. I can sense magic, but that doesn’t work if it’s blocked.”

“Huh. Good to know.”

“I attacked them to buy time for Attie to get back inside, but they jumped me pretty quick. Didn’t bother goin’ after the kid. They kept me tied up with a bag over my head most of the trip, except for a picture they sent to Frisk from my phone. Not sure where that is.”

Undyne pulled something from her inventory and set it on the table. It was...a very familiar-looking phone, complete with the red ladybug case Attie had picked out for him because it had his ‘favorite colors’ on it. “I’ll explain later. Continue.”

“Uh...okay? No clue how they got me into the Underground, but it felt like we entered somewhere in Hotland.”

“They got though both barriers?”

“Yeah. I think...the dog drove? That’s just from what I could tell when they talked. Not sure. Anyways, they passed me off to a couple of guys - pyropes, I think - who took me through Hotland to their secret lair. Kept me under a magic nullification field the whole way. Eventually threw me in a cell, kicked me around a little, ‘n chained me to the wall. Nothin’ really happened after that until Frisk showed up.”

Frisk took over, explaining how she had gathered “some friends” (no names mentioned, despite the fact that Undyne had *been there*) and headed to Mt. Ebott after receiving the call from someone she called “Thresher.” She described the path she and Grillby took through Hotland, as best as she could recall, and how she’d gotten into Sans’ cell.

“They told me Sans had been drugged with a ‘double dose’ of Deliria, though we aren’t sure how they calculated that. The people who drugged him said that they got it from Alphys specifically for him; perhaps she worked the numbers. Sans acted...odd, under the influence. He didn’t attack me, like they said he would, just...um.”

“Just what?” Undyne clearly knew what had happened, and judging by the wide grin on her face, it was embarrassing. “It’s for the official record, y’know. We gotta make sure everything was alright.”

“Just...kind of...curled up and fell asleep on me.”

Sans felt his entire skull turning red. *Stars.* It was partially true, but the way she wouldn’t look at him said that Frisk wasn’t being entirely honest. Had he hurt her? Was she trying to protect him? She hadn’t *seemed* injured...

“He...um...slept it off for a while. We were located by our friends who began raiding the building. As soon as Sans was awake, he and I headed upstairs. We were informed that the Guard had been called. Since there were two humans in our group, we decided that it wouldn’t be a good idea to be caught in the warehouse district and began making our way towards the surface.

“Along the way we found a group of about thirty monsters traveling between Hotland and New Home who had been held up by rumors of Mettaton’s recruiters. They were especially concerned for the children in their group. As it turns out, they were correct; we were ambushed, but we managed to break free. Only Sans and I - and one of the kids - were caught.
“The recruiters took us to Mettaton, who dumped us down a disposal chute.”

“What??”

“It was very sudden. I can check my phone for the time. He was intimidating one of his employees regarding a passage in his employee handbook that allegedly forbade capturing royalty; I texted the embassy with the reference he gave me. I can grab the timestamp.”

“And what did that f...I mean, what did Mettaton’s handbook say?”

“I got a text back from Records this morning, and I’m told that was one of his “do whatever I say” passages. I have an assistant combing through the handbook to see if there are, in fact, any references to detaining royalty specifically, since that was the basis of the disciplinary action against that employee. Anyways, one of his other recruiters ended up in the disposal chute with us. Sans was able to slow his fall and mine, but the recruiter...didn’t make it.”

“Did you find any ID?”

“Yes. Sanders was the name. We found...a lot of ID cards down there, actually. Sans has them. I would like to make copies of them to compare against missing persons reports we’ve received, since we usually see those first up at the embassy, but I’ll turn them over to the Royal Guard as soon as that’s complete.

“Mettaton eventually came downstairs and offered to let us go in exchange for blanket permission to emigrate out of the Underground. I refused to go outside normal procedures or make promises I couldn’t back up. He was...somewhat upset by this; he sent us into his battle arena and tried to make us fight an amalgamate.

“When we proved that we were able to avoid the amalgamate, Mettaton turned on some kind of really awful noise that...enraged it, I guess. We were rescued when a member of the audience jumped through the glass enclosure and told us to run.”

“Do you know who it was?”

“No-

“It was Little Tim,” Sans said. “One of my...my old roommates. I’d know that voice anywhere. Dunno why he’d do somethin’ like that - we didn’t part on good terms - but that was definitely him.”

“...Alright. When Little Tim got us out, we quickly found a Royal Guard contingent led by Vice Captain Papyrus. There was a fight in the lobby of the arena involving Mettaton and a few of his guards, but that was interrupted by Goopy. Ah, the amalgamate. I’m not sure what happened to Little Tim. Sans and I led Goopy away from the fight, and it was captured by the Royal Guard soon after. There was a brief altercation with Vice Captain Papyrus, who tried to force Sans to go home with him, but that resolved itself. We met up with some of our friends and left via the guards’ exit in New Home. My car was parked closeby.”

Undyne checked her notes. “And the whimsun kid?”

“Followed the guards when we parted ways. I’d like to know what happened after that, if you can find out.”

“Right. Well first, that matches what I have, pretty much. Sans, your phone was delivered to Royal Guard headquarters this morning by Rhyson, one of my guards. He was...helping a friend
out for a couple days and returned home to find that his cousin, who lives with him, wasn’t home. A noise made him investigate his cousin’s room and he recognized the name on the lock screen. If you’ll give us the unlock code, we’d like to check it for activity over the past few days.”

He shrugged. “Sure. It’s just 1234.”

“...Of course it is.” She wrote it down anyways, pen digging into the paper. “Let’s see...Fuku Fire is currently in the custody of the Underground Patrol. She’s not under arrest, but we’re looking for a guardian for her.”

“Grillbz won’t take her?”

“More like she wants nothing to do with him. Insists that she’s a big girl and can take care of herself and her little sister. Well, Grillby has gotten pretty fond of Pele...and he is Pele’s legal guardian. That conversation went about as well as a nice swim through swamp mud.”

Yeah, Sans could imagine it had.

“So we’re still working on that. Frisk, if you know any reputable fire elementals on the surface who’d be willing to take in the little shit, I’d appreciate you letting us know. I’d like to see someone set her straight, but we can’t keep her much longer. She keeps hollerin’ up a storm; the station down there’s been calling me up to complain every few hours.”

“I can’t think of anyone off the top of my head, but I’ll ask around.”

“We have a lead on the kidnappers, but it’ll take some time to hunt them down. Any ideas, identifying features...?”

Sans shook his head. “Nah. I saw some suspicious people hanging out around the park down the street, but they were elementals.”

“...What the hell?”

“There were what, Frisk, two fire elementals and a big guy, probably a rock elemental?”

She glanced at him, and for a moment he thought she was going to deny seeing anyone, but she played along. “Yeah, and there was a human nearby. He was close enough to them that he might be associated, but that would be very strange.”

Undyne went from mildly irritated to absolutely outraged in less than half a second. “WHAT THE HELL?? WHEN WAS THIS?? THE ROYAL GUARDS ARE IN THE PARK ALL THE TIME??”

“Heh.” Sans winked at her. “Thought you guys knew. It was...right before the whole bomb thing, I think. Maybe folks around here’ve seen somethin’.”

“But why would they be there in the first place??”

“Dunno. Why were a bunch of monsters hanging out in the embassy’s parking garage? Maybe they were waitin’ for someone. Maybe they’re new and don’t know how to make friends. Who knows?”

From the expression on Undyne’s face, a seed of doubt had been planted. Good. She took threats against Frisk and Attie seriously; she’d send someone to investigate the park.
She took a deep, calming breath and (barely) managed to contain herself. “...Right. Okay. That’s...something else to do. Uh. Where was I. Right; kidnappers. We’ll get on them. I’ll make sure that whimsun kid’s alright; I didn’t see anything about it in the report I got this morning from the Underground Patrol. Uh. What else…”

Frisk pulled some kind of freaky finger maneuver and managed to extract Undyne’s coffee cup and pen from her hands. “Look, you’re off-duty now, right?”

“I...had to interview you guys. Still hafta get over to Bruce’s place ‘n talk to him. We’re starting investigations into Alphys and Mettaton. And the guys at the park…”

“Undyne, you’ve been up for at least two days straight, probably more like three. Coffee won’t keep you going forever.”

She snorted. “Don’t diss coffee.”

“No one’s dissing coffee. But you need sleep.”

“Frisk, I don’t have time-”

“None of us have time for sleep, I know, but we need it anyways. Don’t make me suplex you.”

“...You couldn’t suplex me if you tried.”

“Sure I can...if Sans helps me with blue magic.”

Sans raised a hand in a vague summoning gesture.

“Ugh. Fine. I officially regret shipping you guys; this is bullying.”

“It’s for your own good, and you know it. You’ll go right back to shipping us when you wake up feeling a lot better than you do now. Do you want the couch? There are puppies out here, they’re very distracting. You can borrow my bed if you’re prefer; I can keep people out of there, at least.”

Undyne was wavering...physically and metaphorically.

“I’ll put fresh sheets on. I have those flannel ones with the fish print. Just freshened them up the other day.”

“...Ugh. Fine.”

It only took a few minutes for Frisk and Attie to change the sheets on Frisk’s mattress, but in those few minutes Undyne’s situation deteriorated rapidly. She fumbled her phone while texting, nearly nodded off twice, and made a depressingly half-hearted attempt to escape.

Sans caught her easily with blue magic, despite not having much of it at his disposal. “Y’know, it’s not like you’re in any condition to drive. How’d you even make it here?”

“...Frisk drove.”

“Heh. Explains a lot.”

“I don’t need help, Sans.”

“But ain’t it nice, havin’ someone watch your back for a bit? Now, do I need to hold your phone while you take your nap? I hafta do that for Attie sometimes.”
She snarled. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wanna bet?”

Yeah, he didn’t dare. He valued his life. Still, it was fun to tease her when she was wobbly like that.

Frisk and Attie appeared, grinning at the scene. “Well, we’re ready. Undyne? Everything okay?”

“Go to fudge, you fishsticks!!”

“I don’t think she’s making any sense, do you, Attie?”

Attie shook her head, hiding her giggles behind her hands.

“Would you like us to tuck you in?”

“I hate you all.”

“Have a good sleep, Undyne!”

With a grumble and a (mostly) censored hand gesture, Undyne stomped off down the hallway.

“She doesn’t really hate us, does she, Mommy?”

“No, Baby Boo. She’s just saying that because she’s cranky.”

“Because she didn’t sleep well?”

“Because she didn’t sleep at all. You know how you sometimes ask to stay up all night?”

“...Yeah?”

“That’s what happens when you stay up all night.”

“Oh. That doesn’t look fun. When I stay up all night, I’m gonna play puzzles with Mr. Sans instead.”

Frisk poked her daughter in the stomach. “No you won’t. Now let’s be quiet and see if we can get some schoolwork done while the puppies are asleep.”

The puppies - who somehow slept through all of Undyne’s screaming - stayed that way exactly five minutes longer, then all woke up at once. Most of them were distracted by the canned dog food Sans helped scoop into their bowl, but one just wanted to play.

She - Sans was pretty sure this one was introduced as a ‘she,’ but didn’t care to check - kept running in circles around his legs making nonsense little puppy yips. She didn’t want to play with bones; she ignored the one he threw for her, at least long enough for Tiny Dog to run off with it. She didn’t want to play tug. She wanted—

Chomp!

—to bite his fingers off, apparently. He barely bit back a curse as he lifted the twerp by the scruff of her little neck. “I’m gonna call ya Chompy Dog if ya keep that up,” he growled to the unapologetic pup. She just wagged her tail at him. “Don’t test me. I know people. The name’ll stick.”
Frisk extracted the puppy, dropped her gently back in the playpen, and examined his fingers. “It doesn’t look deep. Are you alright?”

“’M fine. Just a puppy; doesn’t have enough intent to do damage if she tried.”

“That’s good.”

“...Your hands are shaking. You okay?”

She snatched them back. “Yes! Fine!”

“Frisk…”

“I’d better help Attie!”

The bright smile she gave him wasn’t nearly enough to fool him. “She’s just about done for the day. Look. If you don’t wanna tell me, don’t. Stars know you don’t pry into my bullshit. But don’t lie t’me.”

When she met his eyes, surprised, he saw her mask waver. She really was doing alright, better than he’d feared under the circumstances, but she had no clue how to deal with the trauma of the past few days. She was falling back on her usual tactics: ignoring the problem until the sharp sting of recent memory faded. Everything was just too raw to face at the moment.

He didn’t blame her. He was trying to do the exact same thing.

“...I’ll keep that in mind,” she said. “I promise, I’m not going to break down anytime soon. I’ll tell you if that changes. And really, thanks for worrying about me.”

Her smile was more honest that time. “‘Kay. Do you need sleep too? You looked tired earlier…”

“I don’t think I can sleep. I’m not...well, not physically exhausted. Dealing with the press is always mentally and emotionally draining. I guess it hit me harder today than it usually does, especially after everything that’s happened. And I had a bit of a scare; thought I saw someone familiar. I’m just overreacting. I have the rest of the day off. Mom’s going to stop by later, bring me some work and catch me up on what’s been going on; I don’t want to miss her.”

“Alright. Glad you’re okay…”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. We’ll be fine. Are you, though? You didn’t look too good after Undyne and I got you through the Judgement Hall. And you still look exhausted.”

“Heh. ‘M fine. And I have no idea what the hell-uh, heck that was back in the Hall. I saw...things.” He closed his eye sockets, sifting through the strange scenarios he’d been bombarded with. “Memories, I think. Not mine.”

“Oh? Then-”

“Yours. Undyne’s. And...I caught a whiff of somethin’ at the end, there. Not sure whose memories those were; maybe we were bein’ watched or something. It’s never happened before, and I dunno why it happened then. I, uh, didn’t mean to pry…”

“I believe you. Stars, Sans, you scared me, especially after Mom wouldn’t tell me what was happening! But if it was just weird visions or something...I guess we can dissect what it all means later.”
“’Kay. Sorry I don’t have more answers; Tori made it sound like she knew what was going on.”

“Yeah. But what’s done is done. I’ll add it to the list of things to work through when we have
time. Although...I am worried about something.”

“What?”

“...Can you see if you can find TOSS for me? I knew he’d be upset by the dogs, but he didn’t even
eat breakfast.”

“Heh. Sounds serious. Yeah, I’ll find ‘im.”

It took him almost an hour to find the dumb cat, partly because Attie tried to ‘help’ and wound up
making so much noise that she riled the puppies back up. After checking everywhere he could
find outside Frisk’s room (TOSS would’ve raised a fuss if he was locked in with Undyne) Sans
collapsed onto the floor of Frisk’s office. That was it; he was done.

A single yellow eye glared at him from under his cot.

“Aww, there ya are, buddy,” he muttered, offering one hand for the offended cat to sniff. TOSS
turned his nose up at the opportunity. “You hungry? We were gone a few days; you can’t be
full...”

“Mrrrrrr...”

“Thought so. C’mon; the dogs are contained. Don’t...gah. Don’t dig your claws in, you dumb cat.
Stop growling, you aren’t scary. Just...let...go...”

He finally managed to extract the cat from the carpet, but trying to stand up unbalanced him and he
topped over. With both arms occupied by an angry cat he had no way to break his fall, and he
went skull-first into Frisk’s work desk.

“Ouch. Dammit.”

TOSS had the gall to look smug before escaping down the hallway towards the kitchen.

“You’re lucky I like ya, demon cat.”

As he pulled himself upright, something caught his eye. A plain brown folder was sitting under
the desk, placed neatly enough that it probably hadn’t slipped out of anything. How...odd.

Sans didn’t consider himself a curious person. Leaving most things well enough alone had kept
him alive more than once. But...

“Sans? Can you help Attie with her Science? Work just texted; I need to call them back.”

...It could wait. There was a thin layer of (non-magical) dust on the cover; it had been there for a
while. Frisk either didn’t care about hiding it or was very sure he would never see it. Either way, it
was unlikely to disappear in the next few minutes.

Still.

Even Attie’s Science lesson - on astronomy, no less - couldn’t hold his focus; his mind kept
wandering back to that folder. He wasn’t curious, really! It was just a puzzle with no solution. It
was completely understandable that he’d be frustrated.
All thoughts of the mystery fled when Tori walked through the front door. She looked _pissed_. He glanced over at Frisk, who looked just as surprised as he was.

“He, Mom. Everything alright at the embassy? I called them back earlier about the Chandry situation and it sounded chaotic, but Linda said you had it under control.”

“No. No, we do not.”

“...I’m sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I think you have done _quite_ enough, my child.” She settled herself in one of the huge chairs at Frisk’s table, managing to look regal despite the decidedly common furniture. “I shall be blunt. Tell me, did you intentionally make a declaration of intent towards Sans without consulting your family?”

_Declaration of intent??_ Sans thought back. There was...well, she’d made some rather suggestive comments around Mettaton’s recruiters (and during the fight with Papyrus, which he was trying to forget about) but there was nothing that would constitute an official statement about the nature of their relationship.

Frisk had arrived at the same conclusion. “I haven’t made any declarations to anyone. And I wouldn’t do so without asking you and Dad. I’m not _that_ ignorant.”

“And yet, the Office of the Royal Family has been fielding questions all afternoon asking for a formal press release regarding your relationship. _What exactly_ happened over the past few days? There was no report from the Royal Guard to reference, no mention of anything leading up to this. We survived a terrorist attack and you disappeared for two days immediately after. It is no wonder the media spread rumors that you had been killed!”

“The reports are a work in progress. I convinced Undyne to get some sleep; she’s in the back room. We gave her our statements so they should be just about ready. I’m sorry for disappearing on you, Mom. I told you what happened—”

“You told me that Sans was kidnapped by a group of terrorists who demanded that you surrender yourself in exchange for his life. _We do not_ deal with terrorists, Frisk, and _we especially_ do not hand over important public figures. If you had come to us, we could have arranged a better solution.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“That, at least, is understandable. Perhaps admirable, in the eyes of some; rescuing your significant other with no regard to your own safety could be seen as romantic, and both humans and monsters appreciate romance. A declaration of intent, formal or informal, made without the approval of your family is a very different thing. It is an _extreme_ breach of protocol. You are a member of the Royal Family, and you _must_ act like it. If you do not, you jeopardize the stability of the entire kingdom.”

“I didn’t realize that anything I said would be taken as a declaration of intent. The only thing I can think of that might lend itself to such a misunderstanding is something I said to one of Mettaton’s recruiters.”

“Oh?”

“They wanted to separate Sans and I, and I knew we had a better chance of escape if we stuck together. I told them that we were not going to be separated and that...um. That he was ‘mine.’ I
understand if that sounds a bit like a declaration, but I didn’t mean it that way. We are dating, after all; he’s my boyfriend. That’s all I meant.”

“And you are certain that is the only situation in which you made such a statement?”

“Yes. Wait; there was also…” Frisk glanced over at Sans, her brows furrowed. “Papyrus...said he was going to take Sans ‘home’ with him. I challenged him. I did explicitly say that I was fighting for Sans’ right to make his own decision, though; there shouldn’t have been any confusion.”

Toriel sighed. “It appears that he has deliberately misinterpreted your intent, then. He was the first one to report these rumors; the first, but certainly not the only. It is possible he was their origin, I suppose, although I thought better of him. This has caused quite the stir at a time when we must be seen as a united force.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure how else to handle things, and letting him take Sans was not an option. After all, he’s not just my boyfriend; he’s important to the Kingdom of Monsters in his own right.”

“On that we agree. However, the fact remains that someone has been spreading the news of your impending marriage among monsters when no statement from the Royal Family has been made. The fact that it comes from what appears to be an official source means that we cannot counteract it easily.”

“Then-”

“I am pleased that this was a misunderstanding; at least we do not need to officially reprimand you. As for the rest...I have left it up to your father’s discretion. He wishes to see you - both of you - at your earliest opportunity.”

“Oh. Well, I have Attie-”

“I can watch Atlas.”

“And-”

“And the...puppies. Lesser Dog will be arriving momentarily, at any rate. You had best not keep your father waiting.”

“Alright, then. Sans?”

She held out a hand to him, which he took. He could feel her shame at causing trouble for her mother, her overwhelming nervousness about her meeting with her father, and - under it all - her almost giddy joy at the excuse to hold his hand.

Crazy.

Together, they made their way out the back door.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: Tori is more upset about the fact that she was left out of the loop than the fact that Sans and Frisk are (FINALLY) dating.
Asgore may have other ideas.

Again, I apologize about disappearing for so long. When it rains, it pours, and I had an avalanche of things crash down on my head. Not that it's an excuse for going AWOL on you lovely folks for three months. Many thanks to everyone who sent encouraging messages during my time away. And this chapter was already written as a recap of recent events for the benefit of Undyne's report, so it's not the worst one to come back to...

No promises, but I am genuinely going to try to get back to weekly updates. I may skip next week - Easter is a big deal in my family - so if I don't post then, please have a good time and stay safe.

At least we're not leaving things on a cliffhanger, right?

:-)

If you want something to read in the meantime, regular commenter ShiningWings has started a story called If You Could Only Try. It turns quite a few common Undertale tropes on its head. It's currently tagged as Frans - with an adult Frisk - and I'm looking forward to seeing where things go!
In Which a Door is Opened

Chapter Summary

...But the people involved don’t know it yet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sans let Frisk lead the way into the throne room, unashamedly using his girlfriend as cover. Asgore was her dad. Sans would defend her to the death if something awful actually did happen, but the old goat wouldn’t lift a finger against his own daughter.

No; the only person in danger was him, if Asgore had the same misunderstandings about their relationship that Tori had. Whatever Frisk said, Sans knew how monsters operated. Back before the barrier was broken, any father would have killed a monster who made his daughter so potentially vulnerable. A declaration of intent without her family’s approval? Hell, he was lucky Tori hadn’t killed him.

It was a serious thing, after all. A declaration of intent meant that the folks involved were going to start a new family. Making babies was something inherently dangerous to monsters; there were countless horror stories of young, starry-eyed lovers killed by a sweet-talker who just wanted the EXP. Getting the blessing of both families was supposed to prevent things like that. Over time, winning family approval became a hard requirement: suitors who couldn’t demonstrate a certain level of strength or skill were chased off by their darlings’ families.

And Sans was hardly an ideal suitor for a princess.

The king was sitting on his throne as they approached. He didn’t move, didn’t react to his daughter’s presence. Frisk felt uneasy - that much was clear from the way she gripped Sans’s hand, even if he couldn’t feel her intentions - but at least outwardly, she was perfectly composed.

No one said anything. Asgore’s gaze was on the ground by his feet, one massive paw propping up his chin and the other loosely wrapped around the fearsome trident that was leaning against the throne. He wasn’t brandishing it - yet - but the threat was implied.

“Frisk,” he said, finally, without looking up, “I am...disappointed in you.”

“I see.” Frisk released Sans’s hand and took a step forward, fully putting herself between Asgore and her boyfriend. “What about our actions, then, is disappointing to you?”

There was a waver in the king’s expression, but he steeled himself. “It is not you that disappoints me, child; merely your actions. Specifically, the actions of the two of you. Together.”

“I see.” Frisk released Sans’s hand and took a step forward, fully putting herself between Asgore and her boyfriend. “What about our actions, then, is disappointing to you?”

The king glanced up. He looked tired, like the weight of the Underground rested on his shoulders and he didn’t dare sleep lest it all collapse around him. In short, he looked his age for the first time Sans could remember. Back before the barrier fell, he’d always had a kind of mad, desperate energy; chaotic, yes, but effective. The hard-won sanity he’d achieved through years of
consultation with human doctors wasn’t treating him well, it seemed.

“The monster monarchy is a delicate thing, my child. We stand between monsters and humans: mostly in a diplomatic capacity, these days, but it is not always so. We must present a strong and unified front.

“This dalliance you are engaging in is...unseemly.”

Frisk’s fingers twitched in agitation, and Sans wished he could see her expression. She took her roles as ambassador and princess very seriously. Tori’s complaints were one thing; for her father to tell her that their relationship jeopardized everything she’d worked for...well. It wasn’t like Sans had expected them to last as long as they had anyways.

He focused on the flowers surrounding the throne, willing himself to remain calm. He was not going to embarrass Frisk in front of her father. If he was lucky, she’d still let him babysit Attie sometimes. It would be a good excuse to see them both. How was he supposed to go back to living like he had before? Like nothing mattered?

“I’m not entirely sure what you mean.”

“Surely, you do not think the tales would escape me forever? When they are being broadcast to the world? Even-”

“Please, let me finish. Sans and I have no formal arrangement. Yes, it is true that he has lived with me for several months, but that was because he needed a safe place to stay. We have separate rooms; there is nothing physical about our relationship. He watches Attie in exchange for room and board.”

Well. That cleared things up rather nicely, didn’t it.

“And yet, I have reports that you two have been seen together often, alone and with Atlas, engaging in...public displays of affection. Displays that only serve to verify these more recent claims that you have made a declaration of intent without the approval of anyone else involved.”

Well sure, put that way it sounded like they had been knocking naughties in the park. Sans thought back. Someone must have caught them holding hands or something; he could count on one hand the number of times they’d kissed, and they had all been brief moments of intimacy in the privacy of her home.

“Well. We have been getting to know each other. It’s gone no further than a few dates right now, mostly because I’ve been so busy, but I won’t deny that a long-term relationship would be...” she paused, took a deep breath, and glanced over her shoulder. Her expression was...nervous, hopeful. A little bit frightened. “Would be acceptable. But we have made no promises to each other. I know how much family approval means to monsters; we wouldn’t have gone further without going through the proper channels.”

“Acceptable,” the king echoed thoughtfully. His hand left the trident and he stood, towering over the other occupants of the room. “I see. Interesting. And why do you say this?”

“I...I find Sans’s company to be...pleasant. It’s true that we have had our differences in the past, but we’ve moved past them. He’s shown incredible, selfless kindness to me, and to my daughter too. It would be an honor beyond compare to earn his trust.”

Something on Sans’s face must have shown his embarrassment at such undeserved praise because Asgore glanced at him over Frisk’s head. The king hummed, then stepped off the dais that held
the thrones. He was still taller than both of them combined. “Frisk, I believe I can assist in that regard. Come, my child. Give me your hand.”

She presented her hand to her father, palm-up, without hesitation. He let it rest on one of his own. “And you, Sans. Give me your hand.”

Something tugged at Sans’s memory. He’d seen this formula before, once, a long time ago. One of those things that was memorable because he hadn’t understood it at all. An ancient ritual between two monsters. A life-bond. A wedding.

Frisk had turned enough that he could see her face. She looked tired, relieved, and...confused. She didn’t know what was happening.

She didn’t know what was happening.

Maybe he was the mistaken one?

“Sans. Your hand.” Asgore’s tone brooked no argument.

Fearing for his life a little, Sans placed his hand - trembling, despite his best efforts - into the massive paw. They stood there for a moment, a chain of Sans-Asgore-Frisk all holding hands, before a swift motion from the king brought Sans and Frisk’s hands together, palm to palm, trapped within his own.

A surge of confusion (Frisk’s) washed through his skull before-

“My daughter, today I give to you...”

No no no no no no no no no shit crap fishsticks-

“...in the most ancient of bonds...”

Say something. Say something, you idiot. She doesn’t know, she doesn’t know-

The hands around his own felt like a vice. He could hardly hear over the ringing in his skull.

“...‘til ash and dust consume us all. May the stars observe this union.”

Suspicion had been growing in Frisk’s eyes, but at the word “union” it became realization. Unfortunately for her, it was too late: the incantation was complete. A flash of bright magic - one of the few pure things monsters had preserved in their awful time underground - engulfed both hands.

The initial pulse felt like burning without pain, but that quickly faded. The closest comparison Sans could draw in that moment was sticking his hand under a waterfall: there was a stinging force of something rushing in and around and through his bones, pressing him closer to Frisk, but it didn’t hurt because she was right there beside him. She felt like stability, like the only thing he could cling to to keep from losing himself, and yet he could feel her clinging to him just as hard. A moment of strange, intimate vulnerability.

And then...it stopped. The tingling in his hand faded until all that remained was a thin line of fire encircling the bones of his wrist. That did hurt, but it was manageable.

On instinct, he looked up. Frisk’s eyes were wide, but there was no pain in her expression. She looked...overwhelmed. Her fingers were shifting against his, but she wasn’t trying to pull away.
No; it was almost a comforting gesture.

When Asgore let go of their hands they remained together there for a moment, clasped around each other. Then, slowly, Frisk relaxed her grip and lowered her hand. Sans let his own fall as well.

“I shall take the liberty of making the official proclamations. Atlas will remain at her grandmother’s for a few days; she has enough clothing and schoolwork that she will not need to bother you through the weekend. The Dogi should have retrieved their pups from your home. They will be unavailable to give you the security Captain Undyne would prefer, but I expect that your new husband can provide that for you.

“You both have a week of leave from work for the traditional...ah, ‘honey moon,’ pending emergencies. The following week you will prepare to attend the World Alliance of Interspecies Collaboration’s annual conference. Both of you shall attend and represent us to the best of your abilities.

“Now go.”

Frisk had been nodding along slightly, but Sans realized she hadn’t really processed what she heard. Even after she had been summarily dismissed by her father she just stood there, staring down at her hand.

Sans carefully curled his own hand - the one that didn’t burn - into the crook of her elbow and led her out of the throne room, back towards the Judgement Hall. Once he was past the palace protections, he wrapped them both carefully in magic and prepared to teleport towards home.

Home. It was their home now, wasn’t it? At least in theory. She could ask him to move out. Asgore and Toriel lived separately most of the time, after all. But-

“Sans?” Frisk’s voice held a fragility he hadn’t heard in a long time, but the hand she placed over his was firm. “Can we go home? Please?”

“Sure.” He held her a little closer and took a careful step through space. She followed him blindly through the barriers, trailing a little behind him.

They finally landed back behind the garage, about six inches above the grass. “Uh, sorry,” Sans gasped. “Landing...uh...”

“I think you can be excused for that,” Frisk said. “I don’t think either of us were expecting...that to happen today. Let’s get inside.”

She unlocked the door with surprisingly few fumbles and led the way in.

True to Asgore’s word, Attie and the puppies were gone. There was still some evidence of their presence - Tiny Dog’s rope toy, the puppies’ playpen, a pair of Attie’s socks that had wound up on opposite ends of the living room - but the house was quiet.

Frisk stood there, staring blankly at her couch.

“Look, how’re ya holdin’ up?”

“Huh?”

“Your dad basically just married you off. Without askin’ you. Are you okay?”
She thought for a long moment. The look on her face said that she hadn’t quite considered it that way, and Sans was sorry he brought it up. “I guess...I mean, I’m not opposed to this, really. But...it’s always been a hypothetical, you know? Thinking about something in abstract and being forced into it are two very different things. I don’t know how I feel right now.”

That hurt a little, but he understood. With that information, he was really glad he hadn’t mentioned that little box he’d picked up back in the department store. That would’ve been embarrassing.

“I don’t even know if you want such a thing. I mean, I’m human, and you’re a monster. We never really talked about what that means for us long-term. I mean, do you really want to stay with us? Would you rather go live with some monster lady? I-”

He wrapped his hands gently around hers, hindering her increasingly-frantic gestures. “Gonna stop ya right there. Frisk, I wouldn’t be here - in this house, in this...whatever our relationship is - with you unless I was sure I wanted to be here. I chose to be here, remember? You gave me that. It doesn’t bother me that you ‘n Attie are human. Does it bother you that I’m a literal skeleton?”

“Well, no...”

“Then we’re even. After all we’ve been through, I think we get along just fine. Now, in the interest of honesty, I’ll tell ya that I don’t really m-mind it all that much. Maybe ’cause I’ve not really had much choice until recently; I’m just used to other folks running my life. I...I wish someone had asked us, or at least you, but...”

“You don’t mind?”

He wasn’t sure how to read the look on her face, which was odd. Especially after the events of the past few days, he thought he had a pretty good grasp of her expressions. “Uh, n...that’s not really what I meant? I think? I mean, I mind that you didn’t get a say - I don’t want this if you’re being forced into it - but bein’ with you is...it’s nice. I don’t think I’d mind spending the rest of my life, uh, like this.”

He was making a fool of himself. Spending the rest of his life with her? That had always been a pipe dream, and a distant one at that. A few months camping out in her office and a couple days of desperate fighting by her side had clouded his judgement, made him forget where they stood in relation to each other. He’d been fooling himself when he bought that ring. He’d been fooling himself all along! Why would she - brilliant, composed, beautiful - want to spend the rest of her life with him?

“Sans?”

“Y-yeah?”

She stepped forward, close enough that he could smell the floral shampoo she used in her hair. “I may not have been expecting this, but I’m not sorry. Of all the people Dad could’ve married me off to, I’m glad I’m stuck with you.”

Stuck. She was stuck with him. Stars...

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothin.”

“No, you look sad. Did I say something?”
Nothing but the truth. “I...I’m sorry. I figured out what was goin’ on; I should’ve stopped it…”

“You couldn’t have known that I hadn’t figured it out. I don’t know where my head was at, that I didn’t realize it sooner.”

He couldn’t have known, but he’d suspected. “But…”

“Hey, now. Sans - oh, may I give you a hug?”

Part of him really didn’t want to be touched - the part of him that he never seemed to be able to scrub clean of blood and dust and despair - but he nodded. He owed her. He-

-Didn’t mind it, actually, when she wrapped her soft and surprisingly strong arms around his ribcage and laid her head on his sternum. Didn’t mind it at all. His arms rose like they had little strings attached and wrapped themselves awkwardly around her shoulder blades.

“Sans, this has been an awful few days at the end of a stressful few weeks. And I don’t know about you, but I know that I blame myself for a lot of it. Right or wrong, that’s probably not healthy. And I’m pretty tired. I propose that we take a nap, order pizza for dinner, and figure things out from there. How’s that sound?”

“That...sounds pretty good, actually.”

“Awesome. Hey, awkward question, but can we nap in my bed? Your cot is kinda small for both of us.”

...Oh, so she meant for them to nap together. He weighed his options. On the one hand, the thought of being so close to someone was unappealing on principle. On the other...well, they had slept in close proximity the past few nights and it had been pretty nice. For him, at least. He didn’t have soft bits like Frisk did - wasn’t snuggly at all - but maybe she didn’t mind? “Uh. Alright?”

“If you don’t want to…”

“No, I, uh...I can be a bit...pointy.”

One of her hands ran up the side of his hoodie, pressing gently into the spaces between each rib. It felt odd, almost over-sensitive, and he tensed to avoid flinching. “I haven’t noticed. C’mon, Pointy; I’m about to collapse.”

It was strange, settling next to her on her mattress bed. It was larger than his old mattress and certainly much larger than his cot. The inches between them seemed to stretch for miles.

Carefully, he reached out a hand to where one of Frisk’s rested on her pillow. Her eyes - which had closed before her head hit the pillow - snapped open, but she smiled when she saw him.

“G’night,” she murmured.

“G’night.”

Sans half expected memories to keep him awake again, but he’d had a long day (several long days) with little sleep. Exhaustion caught up to him and pulled him under without much of a fight.

His dreams were...strange, and far more vivid than he expected. He dreamed of sitting on a bench in the sunshine, swinging legs so short they didn’t touch the ground, eating ice cream that tasted like peaches. He dreamed he was underwater, watching ripples of sunlight on the blue waves until
his lungs and eyes burned. He dreamed he was staring down into a crib where a tiny baby lay sleeping, running one finger along her impossibly smooth cheek.

A finger.

He jerked awake. He’d...he’d been human in all those scenarios. It had seemed so natural that his sleeping mind hadn’t questioned it, but...that was incredibly odd, wasn’t it? Did people normally dream about being another species?

Had Frisk...?

Actually, where was Frisk? He could feel her like she was right next to him, but the other side of the bed was empty. Had he imagined everything?

“Sans?”

He rolled over. Frisk was standing in the doorway. That must’ve been it; his sense of distance was thrown off by all the stress or something. He’d always had a hard time pinpointing her in the house, what with all her magic all over the place. “Hey.”

“Everything okay?”

“Uh. Yeah.”

“I just stepped out to order that pizza. I need to put on something a little less wrinkled so I don’t scandalize the delivery-”

“I’ll do it.”

“But-”

“You’re supposed to have a guard, right? I’ll do it.”

She stared at him for a long moment, and he was sure she’d fight him for the right to step out into the chilly night and retrieve their supper. “...Alright. But you don’t have to.”

“Don’t have t’do what?”

“...Cover for me?”

“Cover for who? I just want first dibs on the pizza.”

He could see her fighting a smile. He didn’t bother fighting his.

They sat lay side by side on the bed for almost an hour, waiting for the text that would let them know someone was waiting outside. It was a comfortable silence, only broken by the sound of their breathing and the infrequent passing of cars outside, until Frisk pulled her legs up and turned towards him.

“Sans?” she asked, gently taking his hand in both of hers.

“Hmm?”

“I’m...sorry you got messed up in this.”

“I’m not.”
“Still…”

“Being here with you ‘n Attie is the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. Maybe it’s selfish, but I don’t mind one bit.”

“You do so much for us, though. I feel like we’re making a whole lot of demands we can’t pay back.”

“So what? We’re - technically - family now. Family doesn’t have debts.”

When she didn’t reply, he glanced over at her. She was biting her lip, eyes narrowed, focused over his shoulder on a bare patch of wall.

“…Frisk?”

No reply.

“Hey, you okay?”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Are ya-”

Her phone dinged, louder than either of them expected, and they both jumped. “Oh. Pizza’s here. I can-”

“I said, I got it.” He was in the hallway before she could protest.

Sans was still wearing his clothes, wrinkled though they were, so he just shuffled out the front door. There was a kid at the far end of the front walk examining the barrier like it was about to bite. “Hey,” he said as he crossed through.

“Oh, uh, hi? I have a pizza for...uh...for Dreemurr? Ambassador Dreemurr? Or does she go by her first name?”

“I got it. How much?”

“Oh, uh, hi? I have a pizza for...uh...for Dreemurr? Ambassador Dreemurr? Or does she go by her first name?”

“I got it. How much?”

“Uh...she already paid. Just the tip. If you...uh... Want to.”

Sans retrieved an arbitrary amount of human money from his pocket and handed it over. Monsters didn’t usually tip - giving money away for no reason went against every instinct they had - but it was a part of the local human culture. And besides, he was having a good day; might as well spread it around a little.

“Oh! Uh, thanks! Here’s your pizza, mister!”

“Have a good one, kid.”

Once safely back inside the barrier, he checked the box. Apparently Frisk was in a carnivorous mood. He picked up a slice and took a bite. Not bad. He’d only had pizza a few times before, but he’d yet to find a kind he didn’t like.

Then again, there was apparently some kind of controversy about putting pineapple on pizza. Why humans would put fruit on savory food was beyond him, but...oh well. He wasn’t going to knock it ‘till he’d tried it.
“Thank y- Sans! You actually stole the first slice of pizza!”

“Mm-hmm.”

Frisk threw her hands up in exasperation and retreated to the kitchen to get plates.

Between the two of them, they managed to demolish all but a single slice of pizza. Sans kinda wanted to finish it off, just on principle, but he acknowledged that Frisk had a point when she said it would keep just fine in the fridge.

“So...what now?” he asked, handing her a freshly-washed plate.

“Well...much as I hate to admit it, I think we need to talk some more. Even though we debriefed with Undyne. This won’t be a very quiet week, no matter what Dad says. We need to figure out the ID cards, the bomb, the kidnappers in the park, and...there’s something else I need to tell you if you’re coming with me to the WAIC conference next week.”

“Anythin’ important?”

“Well yes, but the biggest part of it is...not my secret to tell. You’ll have to wait for that; I’ll have to talk to people to see how they want to handle that bit. As for my part, that I can share. Hang on.” She dried her hands and disappeared down the hallway.

To Sans’s surprise, she reappeared moments later holding the folder from under her desk. The dust had been mostly blown off, but bits of fuzz had stuck to her sweater. She laid the folder on the table with extreme care. “Here. Most of the top documents are in legalese, and I haven’t printed off the latest copy of the official statement, but this is my reference copy.”

He opened it with the same care she seemed to be treating it. ““Treaty for the Recognition of Non-Human Citizens,” he read. “What...?”

“Basically, we’re getting the governments of about two dozen countries to sign a treaty recognizing the rights of monsters as equal citizens. Right now, we’re pretty much limited to living in a single country with some special exceptions for diplomatic missions; this will let us immigrate or obtain work visas elsewhere, if we choose.

“It’s been five years in the making. A large part of that time has been spent arguing over what provisions we can and cannot ask for. Things like the right to a jury trial and equal application of criminal law are hard requirements, for example, but how do monsters fit into current laws on equal accommodations? It would be absurd to expect, say, an individual apartment complex to be able to house every type of monster. Even our housing in the Underground doesn’t meet that standard.

“Most of us are roughly the same size and shape, but what about those who are too large or too small to conveniently use human-sized resources? Or who only breathe water? Or who are mostly made of fire or smoke or stone? Is it a violation of Grillby’s rights that he can never safely fly on an airplane? Is it a violation of a rock elemental’s rights that he can’t ride an elevator?”

She paused for breath, looking a little embarrassed that she’d been ranting about her fancy agreement.

“Sounds like you had a bunch of problems to work out.”

“Ah-yes, you could say that. And the science we’ve been doing up here on the surface for the past few hundred years applies to creatures that operate under completely different rules; in many cases,
we still don’t know what’s safe for monsters. We know that monsters are more sensitive to changes in air pressure, for example; flying is uncomfortable for many of us. Them. You. I’ll let Unydne give you the full airplane debriefing, if she has time; she has the latest info.”

“Uh, okay?”

“It’s nothing serious...that we know. It doesn’t cause HP to drop. But what if there are long-term effects? Or effects that only develop after frequent flying? We won’t know for years. Even if there aren’t, I don’t imagine there will be many monster pilots unless there’s some big technological breakthrough. Does that mean airlines will face discrimination charges because they don’t have many monster employees? And what about the military? Monsters are used to fighting, but are notoriously weak against humans. Many countries have a draft requiring their citizens to serve in the military; should monsters be exempt?

“The fact is, there are concrete physical barriers between monsters and certain jobs, simply for safety reasons. Many in the public will see it as some kind of discrimination; that can’t be helped. But I think this is a step in the right direction. Ah, you can read through it if you want; I’m just babbling.”

He grinned. “I’d rather you tell me about it.”

“...Because you don’t want to parse legalese, or because you want to hear me talk?”

“...Both?”

“Hah! Alright; let’s sit on the couch, and I’ll give you the abridged version.”

It sounded like much of the agreement had been based on monsters’ current living situations on the surface. They were currently in a legal grey area, due - in a large part - to the fact that no one knew how to solve some of the problems Frisk had outlined. Sure, Sans himself could survive fairly well in a human environment, but not everyone could. Whimsuns, froggits, ghosts, octopi, elementals…so many different types of monsters had unique requirements for food, shelter, transportation, and sometimes even communication.

He’d never thought about it before, really. Back in the Underground, it was every monster for himself. If you needed something you found a way to take it or trade for it. If you needed to talk with someone, you hacked out a language system. Up here, humans were very, very concerned about things like equality and fairness. Violently concerned, in some cases. The mind boggled.

What about weapon laws? Every monster was armed and dangerous...permanently. Many countries had strict regulations on weaponry. How would they view monsters? Or, stars forbid, what would an unarmed population do if a monster went bezerk? Especially since it was no secret what a human soul could do for a monster. It could very easily turn in a massacre. But would magic inhibitors - like the ones used when monsters first came to the surface - be feasible? Magic was a vital part of a monster’s daily life; without it, falling down was a very real possibility.

And, too, there were humans themselves to consider. For example, would adjustments to a car to make it monster-friendly pose a danger to humans? Possibly, if some of the more outlandish designs Frisk showed him were any indication. He was starting to see why it might be difficult to convince other countries to accept monsters; it sounded like a massive headache.

But, she pointed out, her legal document aimed to set boundaries for both humans and monsters. It provided a foundation upon which each country could build its own set of rules and regulations to accommodate everyone involved. Sure, there would be screw-ups, especially in the beginning.
And maybe not every monster would be allowed to move to every country, due to logistics. But it was a start.

And Frisk was just so proud of what she’d accomplished, of what this could mean for her people, that Sans couldn’t help but feel excited as well.

He had no idea what the conference would entail, but he was not going to mess it up for her.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact of the chapter: There is a reason for Sans's dreams.

So Frisk has her hands full, yes? This overview doesn't come close to covering all the nitty gritty logistical issues she's had to sort out over the years. Monsters have such a drastic range of forms and needs...as she mentions, it's just not feasible to ensure exact equality. So then, what counts as "good enough?"

As I've said before, this is Underfell: things weren't perfect in the Underground. This treaty is intended to improve life for monsters, while giving them the freedom to not be tied to Mt. Ebott. Sorry if things got a bit heavy at the end there.

C.S. Lewis didn't have to deal with all these problems. He just decided that talking animals would all live together and that would be that. Man...

But hey, doesn't everyone talk about complex political treaties on their wedding night? What do you mean, that's not what wedding nights are usually for?

Sans and Frisk both have a bit of healing to do, for different reasons. And they've both been through a lot. They deserve a nap.

And...I don't really mind pineapple on pizza. I've had pizza from a wild array of different cultures, and pineapple is far from the strangest thing I've had on a pizza pie. Other weird toppings I don't really mind? Sliced hard boiled egg (Uruguay) and corn (Austria). Preferably not together. But let's face it: whoever first had the idea to put chopped fruit on pizza was probably either drunk or desperate. Since several people claim to have started the trend, the world may never know the truth...
The Trouble with Choices

Chapter Summary

A young woman reflects on weddings and how they don’t just affect the two people involved.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk shifted, trying to deal with an itch on the very bottom of her foot without waking up her...her husband. She admitted that the annoyance she felt was completely unwarranted. It wasn’t his fault that he was practically wrapped around her, or that her soft heart wouldn’t let her just dislodge him to deal with whatever itchy thing kept tickling that one spot right on the arch of her foot where she couldn’t seem to get any leverage to rub it against something.

A careful maneuver let her gently scrub the bottom of her foot against one of Sans’s toes. Nice. At least he was making himself useful.

It occurred to Frisk, very belatedly, that she could just LOAD and fix this problem. She’d SAVED as soon as she saw her daughter safe and sound in her mother’s living room, and that wasn’t too far back. Only...gosh, was it only a day? She checked the clock on her phone, moving very slowly to avoid disturbing the bony fingers that had a death grip on her shirt, right above her belly button. Attie’s birthday had been Wednesday, and if her phone was reliable it was Friday morning. About a day and a half, then.

It seemed like so much longer.

Still, she could undo all this-

But what would Sans think? She hadn’t even brought up the topic of marriage before Asgore sprung his little surprise on them. Hadn’t dared to. Their handful of dates and stolen moments were hardly the stuff of romantic novels. She’d been hoping to let things die down, then in a few months - after the dense calendar of conferences and meetings and travel was over for the year - doing something big. A gesture of gratitude. Maybe a family vacation or something; she’d never gone on one of those before.

That wasn’t an option, now. Well, the family vacation was probably on the table, but her dreams of a slow and gentle romance had pretty much been upended. Even if they went back, even if she and Sans tied Papyrus up and sat on him for a few days, they would both remember.

(And she didn’t trust herself not to do something regrettable to Undyne’s second-in-command if he was ever at her mercy. Not after everything he’d done. Why, why hadn’t she beat him up when she had the chance? She wouldn’t have killed him, probably, but putting him out of commission would have solved so many problems...)

And Sans. She’d seen the way he looked at her. How she’d joked that he was stuck with her and he’d just...stared. Then glanced down at his shoes. It was such a strange thing that it hadn’t registered at the time, but...stars! It wasn’t like she hadn’t joked around with him before! Heck,
she distinctly remembered telling him on Attie’s birthday - only two days ago - that she was glad she’d been “stuck” with him while they were running for their lives! And, well, he’d said he’d rather rip his arms off (she shuddered; that was an awful thing to say) but he hadn’t reacted quite so...negatively.

He...he had self-worth issues. She knew that. She’d done research, carefully, keeping all her books at the embassy where no one questioned the new additions to the psychology and sociology section of her little library. She’d learned that it was a common thing for survivors of domestic abuse to face lingering effects, and Sans had only been free of his brother for a few short months. Practically nothing compared to the years he’d been harassed and beaten.

But the way he’d spoken...Sans hadn’t been asked about all of this any more than Frisk herself had, yet his primary concern was that she’d been wronged. That she hadn’t been given a choice. Even when he’d admitted to being happy he’d seemed guilty for it, stuttering in a way she hadn’t heard from him in quite some time.

What would he think of her, if she LOADED?

Well, he’d see it as a rejection, for one. That much was clear. Perhaps, if they discussed things first…

But was it really too much to ask to let this one, precious thing be her own choice? She hadn’t asked to fall into the Underground. She hadn’t asked to have strange time magic. She hadn’t asked to be the only human monsters trusted when they first came to the surface. She hadn’t even asked for Attie. Was she ever going to be allowed to make her own decisions??

Her train of thought was completely derailed when Sans abruptly flinched hard into her back. The hand at her stomach clenched tight around her and his knees dug themselves into the backs of her legs.

“Sans? You okay?”

No response.

Carefully, Frisk tossed her phone onto the crate she used as a nightstand and curled her hand around his. “Hey, you’re alright. Everything’s fine. It’s morning. A bit early for you to be up, I’d imagine, but we’re okay.”

He mumbled something into her hair and slowly began to relax.

Then stiffened. Ah, he must have finally woken up. “Hey, sleepybones.”

“Mmmmmph. Hey.”

“You alright?”

“Kinda...uh. Uh. Sorry.” He pulled away from her completely. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to...ugh. Sorry.”

It didn’t make any sense for her to feel lonely when he was literally in bed with her. “It’s fine. You had a nightmare, I think; I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Jus’ weird dreams.”

“Alright. So...if you’re awake, we need to talk.” She rolled over in time to see a look of sleepy
confusion cross his face. She could imagine what he’d say if he was more awake. ‘We’re already talking, Frisk.’ Something like that.

“We’re already-”

“I mean we need to have a serious talk. I don’t know about you, but I think that what Dad did last night was...less than ideal. Not because of the results, but because of how it was done. I know you said you didn’t mind it, but I always thought getting married would be something to celebrate, not just tolerate. I...I wanted that for us.”

Sans closed his eyes, but it couldn’t stop her from seeing emotion paint over his strangely malleable cheekbones. It was glorious. It was heartbreaking. On the one hand, he really did want this, she realized. Of course he did! He was practically family already, and to have that assurance? Well. She couldn’t imagine how that would feel. Or how it would feel to lose it.

On the other, her admission that she wanted to celebrate their relationship...it had clearly touched him somewhere deep.

“Sans?”

“Alright,” he breathed. “Go ahead.”

“Go ahead?”

“Do your thing. Your, uh, load.”

“Are you sure?”

“Heh. No, but do it anyways.”

She closed her eyes, but the familiar feeling of DETERMINATION didn’t come. It was like she was...empty. Panic gripped her, hard and tight. No. No. It...it couldn’t, right? Oh stars, they were so screwed if she couldn’t-

Two hands wrapped around hers. She couldn’t tell who was trembling, her or Sans, but she appreciated the gesture. How had holding hands become his method of comforting her? Was it something he’d done before, or had it started back when she’d done it for him all those months ago after that horrible trial?

It didn’t matter. What mattered was that she had to LOAD. If she couldn’t, she...what was she going to do?

She took a deep breath, allowing Sans’ presence to steady her. She could do this. She’d gotten much better at SAVEing and LOADing over years of practice. She calmed down and tapped into that part of her, and-

* No SAVE found

...What the absolute hell??

“Frisk? What’s wrong?”

“My...my SAVE is...gone??”

“Gone? How’s that possible?”
“I don’t know! I’m going to try to LOAD anyways.”

“Wait—”

Fear drove her to seize the chance, however small, that everything was going to be okay. She reached out, and-

* No SAVE found

...got absolutely nowhere.

How could she have no SAVE??

“It’s gone, Sans! I can’t touch it!”

“‘Kay. Has it ever happened before?”

“No! Well, not like this. Flowey did something a couple times where he blocked me from reaching my SAVE, but that’s not quite the same thing. And it involved several human souls.”

“You think the little shit escaped the barrier? Stole some souls?”

“N...well, I’m not sure. I don’t know if the barrier even works on him, come to think of it. He doesn’t have a soul of his own - or he claimed not to, back in the Underground - so maybe he was able to slide under the radar. Or maybe this doesn’t have anything to do with this at all.”

Sans looked her over very closely. “Didn’t you say you had a hard time with yer time magic after, uh, after you got pregnant with Attie? D’ya think it’s somethin’ like that?”

“I don’t think so.” She tried not to remember that part of her life at all. “I suspect that was more, ah, emotional trauma and so many terrible things colliding all at once. This isn’t anywhere near as bad as that was. But...it could be something similar.”

“Then...?”

They stared at each other for a long moment. “I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know when this started. It’s been such a long, long time since I didn’t have a SAVE to fall back on, and I didn’t think it would be so...so terrifying. And before you take it the wrong way, it’s not because of, um, us. I just—”

“I get it. If somethin’ happened, you wouldn’t be able to fix it.”

“Yeah.”

“So. Uh. Wadda we do?”

Yes, that was the question, wasn’t it? The logical thing to do would be to try to SAVE. But what would be more terrifying: failing to SAVE, or succeeding?

“Hey.”

She looked up into Sans’ eye sockets.

“‘Ts gonna be okay.”

“Do you promise?” The question slipped out before she could think better of it.
“I promise.”

*SAVE CONTINUE*

It was done.

“Okay. Okay. So...now that this is going to be our lives from now on, what does that mean for us? What does this mean for you? I apparently don’t know much about monster marriage, but I know that humans have a whole bunch of different opinions on it.”

Sans shrugged. “Never, uh, thought it’d be somethin’ t’worry about.”

“Right. Well, do you know why Dad did what he did?”

“...Maybe? I mean, I dunno what goes through that mess of static in his head, but it was prob’ly to protect you.”

*What??*

“See, for monsters...uh, sex is a big deal. It can kill us real easy: if one person isn’t really on board with the whole thing, or is feelin’ a bit too aggressive, well. It lowers your defense when you get that close to another person with that much magic involved, so any intent is really...amplified, I guess. I know humans do it all the time, even with complete strangers, but that’d be suicidal for most’ve us.

“So we get married first. We get to know each other. We meet each other’s families, get approval. Yer family’s supposed to kick the ass of whoever they don’t think is a good fit for ya, anyone who might be just tryin’ to get some free EXP. And families back each other up, too. Big families - like the dogs ’n rabbits in Snowdin - can be downright scary. ‘Ts why no one messed with them.

“And, well, if kids...happen, then there’s this whole group’ve people who’ll watch ‘em. Not many folks’d dust a kid, but even one sick bastard could do a lotta damage. Families watch each other’s kids, like Dogaressa did yesterday with Tiny Dog.”

That certainly clarified some of the things she’d wondered about over the years. It wasn’t something monsters frequently talked about, at least at the embassy, but having access to a bunch of babysitters sounded glorious. And Toriel and Asgore had never complained about watching Attie, had they, even though they had never really bonded with her…

“Course, different kinds of monsters do different things. There’r some aquatic monsters that do this weird...swarmy thing instead: just release clouds of...stuff...and the whole group watches the kids as best they can. ‘Course, they usually have a ton of kids after they do their thing; they aren’t as protective of ’em as most.”

From a biological perspective, that made sense. The fewer children any creature had, the more protective they tended to be. It was two different survival strategies: investing time and care into offspring, or having so many that losing most of the brood wouldn’t matter. “I guess that lines up with what I knew. Monsters really don’t talk a lot about marriage, though.”

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s a personal thing, only between families. And really close friends ‘n allies. All anyone else needs to know is to keep their distance and not start shit they can’t finish.”

“...You do realize that a lot of people are going to know about us, right? For humans, a wedding is a much more social event. We invite all our friends, families...sometimes even complete strangers.
If we were doing this the human way, I probably would’ve invited a lot of diplomats and heads of state.”

“Uh, why?”

“For politeness. Even if people can’t come, it can be considered a snub not to invite them. It makes them feel included.”

“That’s...weird. What else do humans do?”

“Depends on the culture. Around this part of the world, people usually send or bring gifts. It can be a big production: the bride and groom will make a list of things they’ll need to start their new home, and there’s all sorts of gift registries that make sure you aren’t getting fifteen casserole dishes or something. The actual wedding takes place somewhere special: at a church, if the couple is religious, or at a place that’s especially pretty or has a meaning to the couple. They exchange vows, then an official pronounces them married. And then everyone goes and has a massive party.”

Sans threw his head back and laughed. It made Frisk’s heart skip a beat, and she tried to keep her expression neutral. “A...a party? You’re makin’ that up!”

“Nope! It’s called a wedding reception. People spend extravagant amounts of money on making sure they have the right place and the best food and all kinds of fancy decorations.”

“For one party??”

“Yes. It’s supposed to be a very important day, after all. A couple is starting a whole new chapter of their life together.”

“But...but don’t humans break up all the time? Even after they’re married??”

“Sure they do. Some people plan for it; they get married for their own reasons, I guess. Others intend to stay together for life. That’s more common in religious circles, I think. I’m not sure on the statistics, but I think around half of marriages end in divorce.”

“Wow. But what about the kids? Who takes care of them??”

Frisk picked her words carefully. “Many humans nowadays don’t see children as...desirable. Others don’t want to get married; they don’t want the commitment. That’s why you have plenty of families raising kids outside marriages, and a whole lot of married couples who don’t have kids at all. Usually if a couple breaks up they split custody: there’s a tendency to give preference to the mother, but typically the father will have a certain amount of time he gets to spend with his kids.

“Personally, I never wanted something like that. I’m already practically a part-time mother as it is; I’m so busy with work that Attie doesn’t get nearly the attention she deserves. I tend to jump into things wholeheartedly, for better or for worse. I...I guess I’m trying to say, I intend to give this my all. I don’t want you to think that I’m going to bail on you at the first sign of trouble.”

“...Thanks.” She hadn’t realized that Sans was so tense until he relaxed. “I’m no, heh, catch, but I’ll try to-”

“You’re better than you realize. And let’s be honest: we were headed towards marriage anyways, with the way things were developing, we just...skipped a few steps. That doesn’t mean we can’t take things slow, it just means things are more official now. I guess.”
“Okay, but-”

The sensation of someone crossing her barrier made Frisk bolt upright. She knew that magic. “Undyne’s here.”

“The hell?”

“Undyne’s almost at the door. And we’re still in bed.”

They shared a panicked glance, just for a moment, then immediately scrambled for clothes. Frisk had her shirt off before she realized that undressing in front of Sans was something she was not ready for, but when she turned to apologize (or slap him, depending on his reaction) she just barely caught the back of his head as he hurried down the hallway. Right; his clothes were in her office.

“GOOD MORNING, CUDDLEFISH!”

Sans yelled back a curse Frisk would have happily slapped him for, had he been within arm’s reach. Which he wasn’t. Besides, both her arms were tangled in the loose tunic she was trying to pull on with all the grace of Attie learning to dress herself.

Undyne, meanwhile, stomped through the house with about as much subtlety as a clown at a funeral. “SO I HEARD YOU WENT AND GOT MARRIED WITHOUT TELLIN’ ANYONE! YOU SNEAKY LITTLE NERDS!”

Shirt on. Pants on. Hair...oh, who cared about hair? She ought to just shave it off. She could rock the bald look. She and Sans would match. “Undyne-”

“I THOUGHT WE WERE BESTIES!”

She peeked around the corner. Undyne was making a stand in her kitchen, looking like she’d actually gotten some sleep in the past 24 hours against all odds. She was wearing her metal armor - which explained most of the noise she’d made upon arrival - and one hand was twitching like it was seconds away from summoning a spear.

“We are, Undyne. It was a surprise to everyone.”

A yellow eye narrowed. “What the hell do you mean, ‘it was a surprise?’ Marriages aren’t a ‘surprise.’ ‘Oops’ is for cliffs and bear traps, not...not getting hitched to that!”

‘That’ was Sans, who had finally made an appearance. The grin on his face didn’t even flinch.

“‘That’ is my husband, Undyne. Even if this wasn’t what we were expecting right now, we’re going to work with what we have. You are my bestie, but-”

“Oh, come off it. You know I didn’t mean it that way. Now will SOMEONE explain WHY you’re MARRIED???”

“Dad had us come talk to him after the fiasco yesterday. When we arrived, he asked me a few questions about Sans and I and our relationship, then he did this...thing where he held our hands, and then we were...married. I guess.”

Undyne’s face had gone from angry to shocked to...something that could only be described as ‘soft.’ “Aww, he did the hand thing? He must’ve figured out that you like each other. You’re lucky.”
From the confused noise her husband made, Frisk could only assume he was just as lost as she was.

“Oh, come on, bone bag; you at least should know this. There’s different kinds of marriages, and they do different things. If you just wanna have kids, you make a promise to protect each other and any kids you make together. Those are the political marriages, the ones you make if your parents are bugging you about grandkids, that kinda thing. Still a lot more permanent than a human marriage ‘cause your word of honor’s on the line and if you leave you’re breaking your promise, but you’re not required to be all affectionate ‘n stuff.

“Then there’s a...I think they call it a handfasting? That’s a human thing, I know, but I think we kinda borrowed the word. Anyways, in that kind of marriage you actually like each other. You get to be more friendly with each other. Folks don’t get weirded out if you kiss in public. Your families can intervene if arguments get too bad. One of you can ask your boss for time off if the other one’s having a rough day. And so on. It’s pretty rare, even now, but back in the Underground...it was a big deal to admit you might have squishy feelings for someone else, y’know?”

“Wow. Okay. I...I had no idea.”

“Yeah, well, if you were a monster your mom should’ve talked this over with you. Or someone else in your family, I guess. If you don’t have a family, you kinda have to learn it on your own. Most folks don’t like to talk about which kind of marriage they have, but it’s pretty obvious.”

“But I’ve been working with monsters for more than eight years, and this is new to me.”

“And you’ve been looking through all the stupid legal records. Legally, both are just ‘marriage.’ Doesn’t matter to anyone who doesn’t know you which is which, and the Royal Family sure as hell doesn’t keep track. And, well, if you have enemies they’re more likely to attack your husband if you’re handfasted, but that’s a different story.”

“Oh, really, now?”

“Yeah. BUT! That’s not why I’m here. I’ve gotta steal your - fufufu - your husband for a bit.”

Frisk blinked. “...Why?”

“HE’S GOT A BOMB IN HIS INVENTORY!!!”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’ve got a deal with that army base on the other side of the mountain. It’ll take us all day to get to and from their test site. Timing kinda sucks, but-”

“But I’d imagine there aren’t many opportunities to safely dispose of that much explosive material.” And since the bomb was safe in Sans’ inventory, it made sense to leave it there. As nice as it would be to curl back up in bed with him and keep talking about the important things in life, it really wouldn’t be safe to try to pass the bomb off to Undyne over the kitchen table. Especially with the SAVE system on the fritz. “Sans, do you mind...?”

He shrugged. It was difficult to parse his expression, partially because he still looked half asleep, but at least he didn’t protest.

Until she tried to get him to take the last piece of pizza for breakfast. At first, she thought the mildly nauseated look on his face was because he was one of those pizza-for-breakfast snobs, then she remembered his...problem. He’d gotten so much better. Heck, he’d matched her slice for slice.
the night before.

But then, if he was half as stressed as she was, a relapse was completely understandable.

He accepted a yogurt cup instead, even though he wouldn’t meet her eyes after. Stars, Frisk hoped Undyne didn’t tease him about it. Her bestie was many things; tactful was not one of them.

The house sounded quiet after they left. Too quiet. Calling in to work would probably raise some eyebrows, so what else was there to do?

Well, she could take a page out of Sans’ book and head back to bed. She’d woken up fairly early, all things considered. Or perhaps her sleep schedule was just screwed up; she’d had several naps over the past few days, hadn’t she? Maybe it would be better to stay up-

It was TOSS who made the decision for her. He was stretched out lengthwise across her bed, paws sleepily making biscuits in the air. He looked absolutely content. And, well, there wasn’t enough peace to go around; may as well let the cat be happy, at least.

So that was out. Maybe-

Her phone rang, and Frisk answered on instinct. “Hello, Frisk Dreemurr.”

“Yes, hello, Frisk. Uh, Ambassador Dreemurr. This is Bruce Volks? Undyne’s friend, from the gym?”

It wasn’t until Bruce started talking that she realized she’d been expecting a call from Sans or Undyne saying that everything had gone to hell in a handbasket. She relaxed, perching on the edge of her mattress. “Oh, Bruce! Of course I remember you. I didn’t get a chance to thank you for your help.”

“No need! Always happy to be useful. I’m an old fart who’s been sitting behind a desk too long; it was a pleasure getting out and moving again.”

She knew what he meant. He was used to fighting, probably fighting for his life, if she had to guess. Living in such a peaceful city probably gave him few opportunities to exercise the skills he’d developed, and fewer opportunities to find the adrenaline rush that accompanied true combat. Undyne got twitchy, too, when she went too long without a criminal to hunt down. It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate safety, but old habits died hard.

“All the same, you didn’t have to risk your life for people you didn’t even know. I really do appreciate it. If there’s anything I can do for you, you only need ask.”

There was a brief pause. “...Actually, there is something, but please don’t think of this as me asking for a favor. I heard from Gills - uh, from Captain Undyne - that the girl who helped us find you, Fuku, is having some trouble?”

“Yes. It’s complicated. I really can’t give details-”

“Oh, sure, I understand! Oh, excuse me.” There was a muffled side conversation, then Bruce returned with, “Sorry about that. Anyways, I appreciate that you want to protect her privacy. It’s just...I’ve been through some shit before, pardon my language, and if there’s one thing that’s been ingrained in me it’s that you always take care of the folks who turn on their own to do the right thing. Interpreters, guides, little fire girls who lead rescue teams into gang hideouts...it’s all the same to me.
“Now, I have an idea of what might be going on. I think that girl’s hot-headed and lost. I think she’s too young to be on her own, and too old to like being reliant on someone else. I think she can’t stay in the Underground, but being up here in the snow and rain can’t be easy for her. Am I right?”

“You certainly have thought a lot about this.”

“Sure have. Now, I suspect - and forgive me if I’m wrong - I suspect that she and Grillby have a history. They didn’t explode on each other when they met, but it didn’t look friendly. Now, I’ve been to Grillby’s a few times. Nice bar, nice guy. And I haven’t met many of his kind, but his new barmaid looks an awful lot like Fuku.”

Well heck, it didn’t make sense to keep secrets if the guy was able to piece together the whole story, did it? “They’re sisters.”

“Aaah. And Grillby’s, what, her boss?”

“And guardian.”

“Hell. That can’t sit well with Fuku.”

“He’s a good guy!” Frisk couldn’t help the need to defend Grillby. “He’s been taking care of Pele very well. Child services was a bit skeptical at first, since he does run and live in a bar, but according to their reports they’re impressed.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s doing his absolute best. But Fuku won’t see it that way, will she? To her, he’s the guy who stole her sister. And either he can’t take another mouth to feed or she won’t put up with him.”

“That’s about right.”

“Then here’s my proposal. I live with my daughter, Ginger. We live right behind the gym in a three-bedroom apartment. Now, we’d be more than happy to clear out that third bedroom and take on a boarder. I know she wouldn’t be able to pay, at least at first; we’ll host her while she gets on her feet. The gym is always short on hands, or if that isn’t appealing I know a lot of the other store owners nearby. We’d help her make ends meet. And, well, we’re not that far from Grillby’s; maybe we can work out some kind of visitation.”

Frisk rested her forehead on one fist. “That’s very generous of you, Bruce. Thank you for the offer-”

“Well, before you shoot me down, I know this is a bit...irregular. And I’m sure we’d all have a lot to learn. But...I wanted to put the option on the table. I’m not sure who else has volunteered to take her in, but I want her to at least have options.”

“It’s not every day that someone offers to take in a stranger, sense of obligation or no. I’m not going to shoot you down. We’ll have to discuss this with Fuku, of course, and there’s more logistics involved than you’re probably aware of. But again, thank you.”

“Oh, no problem. Just let me know what she says; I’d be happy to come in and talk with her, make sure she’s okay with me and Ginger. And whatever we’d need to do to get her safe and comfortable, well, I’m sure it’ll be less chaotic than losing your whole life and livelihood and moving to a new, strange city.”

“That’s very true. I’ll try to get an answer for you today, or tomorrow at the latest.”
“Sounds just fine. Have a good one, Frisk.”

Click.

Well, that was one less problem on her plate, assuming it went through. Frisk trusted Undyne’s judgement when it came to her friend, but there would still be an intense vetting process to make sure it was safe for both Fuku and her human hosts to live together. Fuku would have to be trained in surface etiquette; since she wouldn’t be living with monsters, the culture shock would be intense and abrupt. There was a lot to do.

“...Aren’t you supposed to be on your honeymoon, Frisk?” asked Jamir, the office assistant who picked up when she called the embassy. “I distinctly recall receiving an email saying that you just got married. Without inviting your closest friends around here, or even telling us. Congratulations on that, by the way.”

“Thanks. And I’m sorry. Things got very complicated very fast, and now I’m on a...well, it’s more of a stay-cation, really. I just received a call and need to get things moving-”

“Who would call you directly instead of the office?”

“Someone I met in the Underground fiasco. He-”

“The fiasco where you had to rescue your...new husband.”

“Jamir, I need you to focus. I’ll explain things more when I get back to the office next week. Trust me, all this is not nearly as scandalous as it sounds. Now here’s what I need you to do…”

She managed to keep Jamir on track long enough to start the process of having Bruce vetted as Fuku’s potential guardian, and having Fuku temporarily moved to the surface for safety. Specifically, to a holding cell in Royal Guard headquarters. After all, Fuku wasn’t a citizen yet; while monsters had a certain amount of leeway, especially when it came to their children, they did have to abide by certain immigration laws if they wanted to leave Mt. Ebott. The sooner they could get Fuku into a home, even on a temporary basis, the happier everyone would be.

TOSS had decided roughly halfway through that conversation that Frisk’s sole purpose in life was to pet him, and had obligingly draped himself across her lap out of the kindness of his little heart. She gave him a gentle scratch behind the ears and smiled when a purr rumbled out.

It was...lunchtime, actually. She wondered if there were any leftovers. Hopefully there was something edible left. Grocery shopping was going to be out of the question for the time being; once her parents made the official announcement of her marriage, reporters and paparazzi would undoubtedly camp outside hoping for something juicy to report.

If only they knew.

On a whim, she texted Sans.

You 12:15 PM
How are things going?

What she got back was a slightly shaky...selfie?? Sans never took pictures of himself...but his arm was clearly visible as he held his phone inexpertly above his head. He was grinning in a wide, manic way that would have made him seem unhinged if his eye-lights weren’t nearly twice their normal size. It was a tell she rarely saw in him, usually only when Attie had done something particularly sweet. It was...happiness.
Behind him, Undyne - blurry from motion and armor looking dangerously singed - had been caught in mid-air next to a group of humans in pale camo gear. A crater was visible in the background, stark against the rocky open ground. Mt. Ebott was a surprisingly small shape on the horizon.

**SANS 12:18 PM**
Doin great

**You 12:19 PM**
You look like you’re having a good time.

**SANS 12:21 PM**
These guys r crazy
Completely batshit
Blowin things up all ovre th place
Gonna live here now

**You 12:24 PM**
Well, we were good while we lasted.
I’ll break the news to Attie.

**SANS 12:27 PM**
Shit no
Ill build a house out here
We can be one big happy explosion family
With explosions

**You 12:30 PM**
Temping, but the commute would be terrible.
And the alarm clock sucks.

What she got back was another picture, this one of just Undyne and the humans. Undyne’s helmet had been abandoned on the ground at her feet, and her arms were thrown over a human on either side of her. The whole lot of them had huge smiles on their faces, nearly identical for all that the humans lacked Undyne’s impressive teeth.

**You 12:34 PM**
At least the neighbors are friendly.

**SANS 12:36 PM**
Yeah haha
See u soon

Aww, he’d made friends.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Fun fact of the chapter: Sans didn't realize that Frisk started changing in front of him until he was halfway down the road with Undyne. She teased him about his overwhelming blush for the first hour of their trip.

Good golly, I wonder what could have interfered with Frisk's SAVE?
A note on monsters and marriages: I have based this largely on my study of cultures that hold to more traditional values, both modern ones and ancient ones. In areas of Africa and South America, for example, people still struggle for survival on a daily basis...and their cultures tend to value children much more than, say, modern America and Canada and England do. And when everyone around you is a potential enemy, having a family that is honor-bound to watch your back is an invaluable. By extension, marriage becomes a much bigger deal as well. My excuse for all this is that monsters were literally trapped under a rock for centuries; they were basically in a time capsule. They had some access to human garbage, but they didn't base their important life decisions off another species' trash, necessarily.

In other news, I'm so sorry this is late. I rewrote this chapter in its entirety three times, I believe. And halfway through that last rewrite I started having issues with the document I keep this entire story in - terrifying, I tell you - because I maxed out the character limit. So that was fun to figure out. We're all good, the story notes are safe, and I feel a new appreciation for everyone who's read this enormous story up to this point. Thank you all so much.

I promise I'll respond to the rest of last chapter's comments tomorrow, but I'm having sporadic internet issues and I am GOING to get this story out tonight before something else goes wrong. Have a great week, all!

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