It is the 120th Century CE. Two android soldiers, 2B and 9S, at last find sanctuary from endless war and heartbreak in a hidden, inescapable kingdom of monsters beneath the surface of the Earth.

But the world they left is never far behind them, nor are the lingering traces of their bloody past. And soon they find themselves caught between a kingdom and its freedom... and a fallen angel and its vengeance.

Routes:

flowering [A]ntipathy (1-4)
the [B]est is yet to come (5-8)
lingering [C]urse (9-19)
Notes

Note: You do not need to have played both NieR: Automata and Undertale to read and understand this fic because I do try to make the story and lore as accessible as possible, but if you do have even the slightest interest in playing either game, please do so before reading more. This fic will spoil the main stories of both games.
A jumbled stream of fragmented sights and sounds flickered by, streaked with static and pixeled-out blotches of corrupt data.

Shrapnel. Boiling air. A bass rumble that rattled bones and shook the earth. A high-pitched, keening screech melded with the basso roar of a giant beast. A flash of blinding white light. Heaven and earth in a spiral, rushing to trade places with one another. Rushing wind howling as clipped metal wings caught vortices of air. Ground approaching faster and faster and

- Commencing System Check
- Memory Unit: Green

**Hey there. Are you all right?**

**Gosh, you look hurt. Here, it'll be all right.**

**What's your name?**

**That's okay, take your time.**

…**Chara, huh? That's a nice name. My name is…**

- Initializing Tactics Log
- Loading Geographic Data
- Vitals: Green
- Remaining MP: 100%

**Alorus, do you think she is…**

- Black Box Temperature: Normal
- Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
- Activating IFF

**What is this? Are there… two?**

- Activating FCS
- Initializing Pod Connection

“**Statement: unable to establish a connection to the Bunker. Proposal: find a position free of signal interference.**”

- Launching DBU Setup
- Activating Inertia Control System
- Activating Environmental Sensors

“**2B, are you all right? 2B!**”

- Equipment Status: Green
- All Systems Green
- Combat Preparations Complete

YoRHa Unit 2 Type B(attler)—2B—squeezed herself free of the wreckage of her mangled flight unit, setting foot on the grassy, flower-dotted soil coating the ground. **Command won’t be pleased,**
she thought as she glanced back at the hunk of twisted metal she’d had to wrench her legs out of. The boys in the hangar bays pitched a fit if one returned a flight unit with so much as a scratch on its hull.

She stood in a cavernous grotto, the only light coming from a small aperture in the ceiling dozens of meters above, filtering through the thick air and illuminating floating motes of dust. Yellow flowers—flowers with wide, bright petals—fluttered at her feet, disturbed by her landing. On the other side of the cavern stood crumbling pillars, a weathered and eroded brick wall, and a yawning, arched doorway. Torches lined the doorway but offered scant illumination.

2B’s recent memories were in fragments, possibly due to trauma from the crash, but from the wreckage strewn around the cavern it seemed she’d sheared off a wing of her flight unit while flying through the hole.

What strange behavior. She didn’t remember being shot down. What reason had 2B needed to diverge from her course and abandon her squadron? There was a Goliath-class machine on the other side of the mountain she and her companion had been set to engage. Her companion…

“2B?” YoRHa Unit 9 Type S(canner)—9S—laid a gloved hand on her shoulder. “Any damage?”

“I may be experiencing some memory corruption,” she replied, shrugging away his hand as she brushed soot and dust off her elegant black dress and made sure the sword at her side was still in one piece. With an experimental swing she made certain her near field combat programs were fully functional. “However, physically, I think I'm unharmed.”

2B noticed much to her surprise that her counterpart, the silver-haired 9S, stood in front of his own flight unit, which was not in pristine condition but still looked plenty flight-capable to her.

“You didn’t crash here with me,” she pointed out to him.

9S cringed, visibly uncomfortable. His eyes were hidden by his black cloth visor, as were 2B’s, but she could see the embarrassment written all over his face. His support pod, Pod 153, floated by his side at eye level, the black hull of its boxy body catching what little light filled the cavern. From the way its manipulator arms flexed, if it were humanoid, it would be wringing its hands. “Well, I…”

“Observation: YoRHa unit 9S abandoned his position,” Pod 153 interjected in its cool female voice, “once Unit 2B’s flight unit crashed. Perhaps he wished to guarantee your own safety foremost over engaging with the Goliath.”

2B frowned. It was a sweet gesture, and certainly heroic, but not the kind of action permitted to YoRHa androids. Perhaps the androids in the Resistance could get away with such tomfoolery, but better was expected from such elite models as 9S and 2B.

“Before continuing with the mission,” 9S hastily added, “of course.”

“Statement: YoRHa unit 9S has retreated from battle against orders, and as such is now a deserter,” Pod 042, 2B’s own support pod, answered. “Proposal: 9S should be prosecuted for dereliction of duty. The recommended sentence is execution.”

Execution. The word stung 2B’s ears. “The Commander,” she replied coolly, waving Pod 042 away, “will decide his fate.” With the barest hint of a wry smile, she added, “Perhaps if he distinguishes himself in battle, his punishment will be lighter.”

“Well, then, let’s not waste any more time down here.” 9S brushed a bit of debris off the shoulder of his short black coat and led 2B to his flight unit. “Come on. We’ve got machines to kill.”
“This course of action is not recommended,” Pod 153 pointed out as it drifted alongside 9S. “It is unsafe to fly two per flight unit.”

If 2B wished to do things by the book, it would have been recommended, admirable even, to detain 9S (whether by incapacitating or terminating him) and simply take his flight unit for herself to complete the mission. But the last thing 2B wanted to do was kill her partner. Not now, not ever.

“Oh, hey! Howdy! You two aren’t tryin’ to leave, are ya?”

2B and 9S both zeroed in on the source of the saccharine, sickly-sweet voice emanating from down at their feet.

Down there was a rather large flower that just about came up to 2B’s thigh, plain with big yellow petals. Beyond belief, a humanoid face was set within it, smiling with little crinkles at the corners of its eyes.

9S whacked at the side of his head a few times. “2B, is there something wrong with my visual processor?”

If there was, then somehow 2B was suffering from the same exact fault. But she couldn’t explain what she was seeing. The only intelligent lifeforms on the planet were androids like her—and whatever nebulous alien intelligence lorded over the hordes of machine lifeforms rampaging over the surface. There were no humans and certainly no sentient talking plants.

It was said the alien mothership had buried itself underground. But this couldn’t be the form the aliens had taken, could it be?

“There are no faults detected within YoRHa Unit 9S’s visual processor,” said Pod 153.

“You four are awfully funny, you know that?” The flower smiled. “I’m Flowey. Flowey the Flower. What’re your names?”

9S chuckled. “This guy’s for real?” he half-whispered to 2B.

“We don’t have time for this,” 2B sternly reminded him. “We’ve got to return to the surface. 9S, why don’t you go up and call for backup?”

Flowey’s petals drooped. “Oh. Well, um… I hate to break it to ya, but… you guys can’t just leave.”

9S drew his own sword, the bronze-bladed Cruel Oath. “That sounds like a threat.”

“Jus’ a fact,” Flowey said apologetically. “Y’see, there’s a magical barrier over this whole mountain. Anyone can come in… but it’s not so easy to get out.”

“Magic?” 2B scoffed.

“There is,” Pod 153 said, “an unidentifiable energy field over the aperture we traveled through. Sensors also detect background radiation consistent with traces of Old World magic. This unit cannot verify any further claims by this organism without additional data.”

“I mean, you could try to fly out,” Flowey said, “but you’d probably blow yourselves up.” He peered up at 9S, straining his stem against the soil. If he had feet, he’d be standing on his toes. “How ‘bout I show you how things work down here? Y’see, we’re all about love here, and we share that love through little white… friendliness pellets.” A ring of little white motes materialized around the flower. “Wouldn’t you—”
“I don’t care.” 2B brusquely pushed Flowey aside but felt a jolt of pain shoot through her hand as a “pellet” brushed against it. Interference washed through her visual subsystems in response, causing her HUD to flicker and distort for a moment. By instinct, 2B drew her sword and lashed out with superhuman android reflexes.

“Yikes!” Flowey shot back underground just milliseconds before he would have been decapitated and popped out a few meters away, his cutesy visage replaced with a toothy, feral snarl. “Got some fight in you, eh? I like it!”

A bolt of fire, its color a strange pale lavender, cut through the air, scaring the malevolent flower away. “Begone, foul creature!”

The flower vanished underground once again and did not return.

2B honed in on whoever had thrown that fireball, readying her blade, and found herself face to face with a creature nearly as unbelievable as a talking flower.

It was a humanoid creature: tall with a somewhat-heavyset, feminine body obscured beneath faded and tattered violet robes; it had alabaster-white fur, paws like a bear’s, and the head of a goat. In one upraised paw, a ball of pale violet fire writhed and roiled, lighting up the beast’s face.

“Greetings, children. I am Toriel, the caretaker of the ruins.” She had a kindly, grandmotherly voice. “I do so hope that beastly weed was not tormenting…” Her voice trailed off. “Children, would you kindly set aside your weapons? I mean you no harm.”

2B and 9S shared a suspicious glance between the two of them before sheathing their swords.

Pod 153 chimed in. “Proposal: More information should be collected from the creature known as Toriel.”

Oddly, flowers and vines grew all over the ruins, green and lively despite the lack of sunlight. The ecosystem was, like 2B and 9S’s support pods wasted no time in pointing out, absolutely nonsensical. Of course, magic needed not to make sense. That was why it was called magic, and not science.

The creature known as Toriel had a house deep in the dark, maze-like ruins remarkably similar to the kinds of houses 2B and 9S had seen on the surface of the Earth, albeit much more well-kept.

As soon as 2B and 9S stepped over the threshold into Toriel’s gloomy abode, she bade them sit at the dining room table. The two androids’ support pods, not ones for idle chatter, retreated to the corner of the room to share data silently among themselves.

Toriel set saucers in front of both androids. “Would you two like some tea—oh, I’m so sorry, children, I haven’t caught your names yet! As I have said, I am Toriel, caretaker of these ruins, and you are…”

“YoRHa units 9S and 2B,” 9S responded.

“Nyness and Toobee?” Toriel stroked her muzzle. “What strange names you children have these days. Anyway, tea—is there a blend either of you would prefer? I have chamomile, echinacea, Earl Grey, ginseng…”

“We require nothing to drink,” 2B said with a dismissive wave of her hand.
“We’ll have Earl Grey,” said 9S.

2B was nonplussed as Toriel trundled off into the kitchen.

9S crossed his arms and put up his feet. “Proposal: even unneeded hospitality should be accepted in the name of information-gathering,” he said in a pitch-perfect imitation of 2B’s Pod 042.

“Proposal.” 2B fired back, knocking 9S’s feet off the table, “putting one’s shoes on a table is a grave breach of etiquette.”

“So,” 9S said in hushed tones, leaning in closer to 2B, “what do you think of this?”

“I think,” 2B answered brusquely, “we’ll both be lucky if we aren’t branded as traitors and shot on sight when we return to the Bunker, 9S.”

“Be a little more optimistic, ma’am—”

2B glared at him beneath her visor. She didn’t like when he called her ‘ma’am’—it always felt uncomfortably formal and deferential.

“2B. We’ve found something extraordinary here. Intelligent biological life! This…” 9S gestured to the walls with their faded floral wallpaper. “This could change everything. The Council of Humanity needs to know about this.”

2B couldn’t fault 9S for his enthusiasm. He was a Scanner model, after all. It was natural for him to be curious—sometimes too curious.

Toriel returned with a pot of tea and two small teacups, which she filled in front of her two guests. “I do hope I am not intruding, children—do you prefer butterscotch or cinnamon?”

“We don’t require—”

“Cinnamon,” 9S replied, taking a sip of his tea. “Thank you, Miss Toriel.”

“Thank you, dear.” Toriel vanished yet again into the kitchen.

“How do you feel,” 2B asked 9S, “that this creature is stalling us?”

“I’m beginning to get the sense. She isn’t a machine, but she sure is acting suspiciously.” 9S crossed his arms. “You know, I heard that in the Old World, humans would tell their children things called ‘fairy tales.’ These stories would be full of magic and other fantastic elements. Like witches who ate children.” He cast a glance back at the kitchen. “Think we might be in one?”

2B hoped not. Artifacts from the old world of humans containing magical energies were vanishingly rare, but when they cropped up the trouble they could cause rivaled the machines. A magical weapon could cut right through even the strongest electromagnetic field barriers like butter.

“2B, I’m…” 9S hesitated for a second before resting his chin on his hands. “I’m sorry. I know leaving you behind was the right thing to do, but… I couldn’t.”

In the war against the machines, one or two YoRHa units could change the course of a battle on their own—especially a battler unit as skilled and decorated as 2B. For their allies fighting on the surface, the loss could be enough to turn the tide against their favor, and 9S knew it. 2B could see clearly from his forlorn expression that he felt great remorse for his behavior.

“Run a diagnostic on your logic circuits,” 2B suggested. “Errors in decision-making like this may be
symptomatic of an early-stage logic-virus infection.”

9S sighed. “Thanks, 2B. You always know what to say to cheer a guy up, don’t you?”

Toriel poked her head out of the kitchen once more. “Oh, children, I beg your pardon—but you do not dislike butterscotch, do you?”

“No,” 2B answered.

Satisfied, the creature retreated yet again.

“Wait!” 9S held up his hand. “Would you care to answer a few questions, ma’am?” he asked Toriel.

“I… well, I suppose so.” The caretaker took a seat at the table adjacent to both 9S and 2B. “Ask away.”

“What are you?” 9S asked.

Toriel shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I—I had assumed that was obvious. I am a monster.” Oddly, while the word “monster” tended to have harsh connotations, she used the label as casually as one would say “human” or “android.” “I know,” she added, “you’ve probably only heard of us in fairy tales and bedtime stories…but that is indeed what we are.”

“And what are you doing here?” 9S pressed on. “Underground, imprisoned beneath this—am I to understand—magical barrier?”

Toriel looked away. “Oh. Well, since you asked—”

“What is your connection,” 2B butted in, “to the machine lifeforms?”

“The what?” Toriel seemed to genuinely not understand 2B’s question, and 2B’s facial recognition subroutines saw no sign she was lying. Then again, 2B could hardly say she knew what a lying goat looked like.

“Please, ma’am,” 9S insisted. “Do go on.”

“Well…” Toriel raised a paw to her nubby horns. “Many thousands of years ago—a dozen millennia, by my reckoning—there was a terrible war, children, between humans and monsters. Our kingdom suffered a horrible defeat, unable to defend itself from human violence, and we survivors were imprisoned using magic arts long since—”

In mid-sentence, she shot out of her chair, standing bolt-upright. “Children, do you smell that?”

2B and 9S both sniffed the air. Something was burning, judging not just from the acrid smell but the smoke wafting through the kitchen doorway.

“Oh, dear!” the goat-woman exclaimed. She rushed to the kitchen, eyes wide with panic.

2B stood up. “Come on,” she told 9S. “Clearly she is wasting our time.”

9S groaned and rose to his feet, summoning Pod 153 to his side. He offered it a friendly fist-bump as it hovered beside him. “Nice going, Tubes,” he muttered. “You scared her off.”

“Do not call me that ever again,” said 2B.

“Aw, come on. I let you call me ‘Nines.’”
2B refrained from pointing out that 9S could let her call him ‘Nines’ all he wanted—she still wouldn’t do it. It wasn’t that she disliked 9S—quite the opposite, in fact, as he was a loyal and helpful companion through thick and thin—but she didn’t want him to think she was that close to him. Doing so would only cause trouble.

2B left the dining room as Pod 042 drifted over to her from its resting place. As she passed by the kitchen with her counterpart and his support pod in tow, she heard Toriel’s voice.

“Oh, egads! My pie is ruined! But what if… I were to purchase a store-bought pie and disguise it as my own baking?” She chuckled. “Delightfully devilish, Toriel…”

2B and 9S crept through the house. One room, a bedroom, had an open journal lying on its desk. 2B took a moment to read from the page displayed.

*Why was the skeleton so lonely? Because he didn’t have any body!*

“Think this might be the lady’s bedroom?” 9S wondered.

Pod 042 chimed in. “Analysis: long-range scans of the space within this mountain have been completed. Sensors detect six black box signals emanating from the center of the mountain.”

2B froze.

“Black box signals?” she hissed.

The black box was the heart and soul of any YoRHa-type android—and, in dire circumstances, a weapon of last resort. Its signal could be used to track the whereabouts of androids anywhere in the world. Why had nobody detected these signals before? Was the apparently-magical barrier enclosing this space so strong?

9S looked aghast and turned to his own support pod. “Pod, can you corroborate these findings?”

“Observation: independent scans do verify the findings of Pod 042,” Pod 153 answered. “There are indeed six unique signals from YoRHa-type androids deeper into the mountain.”

“We just might not be in trouble with Command, after all,” said 9S. He left the bedroom and crept up to a door blocked with thick chains and a heavy padlock. With a swing of his sword, he cut the lock off, then with a careful nudge from his foot swung the door open, revealing a descending staircase and a pitch-black corridor.

“Soliton radar scans indicate a passage deeper into the mountain through here,” Pod 042 pointed out.

2B took the lead and ventured into the basement, her sword in her hands. The corridor stretched on for meters, light from 2B’s support pod’s beacons casting sharp chiaroscuro shadows across the crumbling stone walls and floor. Up ahead was an ancient stone door, cold air seeping through the cracks between door and wall. If 2B were a human, she would have shivered.

“Wait!”

2B stopped and glanced over her shoulder. Behind her and 9S, panting for breath, stood Toriel.

“Please,” the old monster said, “take not a step farther. You do not know what grisly fate awaits you deeper within our kingdom. Step beyond that door and I will not be able to guarantee your safety. The King of Mount Ebott… King Asgore…” The old woman shuddered. “He is ruthless, merciless, and evil. He will rip the souls from your bodies… just as he has done,” she continued, her voice
quavering, “to every child who has passed through this tunnel.”

_Children?_ 2B wondered.

“Please, stay here with me,” Toriel pleaded, holding out her arms. “I know it is not much here. I know you must miss your homes, your family, your friends. But please, children, nothing awaits you beyond that door but death.”

The androids did not budge.

Fire blazed to life in the goat-woman’s paws, casting dancing violet shadows across the stone walls of the corridor. Toriel’s eyes gleamed, glowing bright red.

“Prove yourselves to me, then,” she said, the globes of fire shifting and morphing into a long and regal scepter. “Prove to me, children, you are strong enough to survive in this wicked kingdom!”

Tongues of flame lashed out, scorching the walls. For a creature who had seemed so old and so matronly, Toriel was shockingly nimble, and 2B and 9S found their swords locked against her staff as the androids struggled to avoid errant bursts of flame.

“Call me crazy,” 9S breathed, leaping backward, “but I’m having a hard time justifying hurting this old goat.”

“You’re crazy.” 2B pressed on, engaging the flame-summoning monster with a flurry of slashes.

The fiery scepter dug into 2B’s torso, knocking her back, then caught her under her chin, nearly lifting her off her feet. She was sent reeling all the same. Toriel was far stronger than 2B had expected—perhaps even comparable in strength to a machine lifeform.

“You wouldn’t last an hour out there!” Toriel told her. A burst of fire sailed over 2B’s shoulder, singeing her silvery-white hair. “The kingdom I once knew and loved has been gone for generations!”

2B drew back her blade for a killing blow, but Toriel pressed on.

This time, though, 2B now knew enough about Toriel’s attack patterns, speed, and strength not to be caught off guard. She dodged the next few strikes with ease and grace until the fiery scepter’s decorative finial crashed into her collarbone. A follow-up strike knocked the Virtuous Contract from 2B’s hand.

“2B!” 9S cried out.

“This mountain is a hideous and brutal place!” Toriel cried out, a wave of flames emanating from her held-out paw and driving 9S back as he tried to rush to his counterpart’s side. “I beg of you—please, do not go like all the others!”

9S threw the Cruel Oath. The sharp, curved katana blade glittered coppery-bronze in the flickering flames before 2B snatched it out of the air.

“My children—”

With an elegant, perfectly-executed riposte, 2B slid the Cruel Oath’s blade along the length of the lavender scepter and tore it from Toriel’s paws. As it left the old monster’s grip, the scepter flickered and burst apart into a flurry of harmless sparks.
The tip of the blade nicked Toriel’s throat and at that exact moment, the old monster’s attacks instantly ceased.

2B’s attack, however, did not; the blade kept going, piercing the monster’s neck just above her collar. Gouts of blood poured down her violet robes, staining them an even deeper black in the flickering and fading firelight.

Toriel gasped and fell to her knees, eyes wide and unfocused, as 2B yanked out the blade. She laughed weakly.

“Foolish… foolish little queen,” she croaked. “I should have known. The two of you…”

Toriel smiled and shook her bowed head.

“Now I see who I was protecting by keeping you here. Not you… but them…”

And then Toriel collapsed, her body crumbling into white dust. She left nothing behind but a bleached pile of dust settling atop a stained and ragged violet robe.

Pod 042 floated back to 2B’s side. “Analysis: no further life signs detected from the monstrous lifeform designated ‘Toriel.’ Proposal: continue on as direct a route as possible toward the black box signals.”

2B handed 9S back his sword and collected her own discarded weapon, sheathing its ivory-colored blade at her side. She pushed the heavy stone door open, letting windswept snowflakes flutter through the aperture on whirling currents of brisk air. “Come on, 9S. Let’s go.”

As the brighter light from the door traveled across 9S’s face, 2B noticed that he seemed almost morose.

“9S. This way.”

“Sorry. It’s just that… for a second there, she seemed nice.” 9S shook his head. “Guess she was just the witch who wanted to bake Hansel and Gretel into a pie all along.”

As much as she didn’t wish to admit it, 2B felt a slight pang of regret as well. Shaking it off, she stepped forward and found herself standing in a forest she may have mistaken for the outside world were it not for the telltale glances of craggy stone peeking out from above thick clouds overhead. Evergreen trees grew tall here, even without the sun to provide their nutrients. And even without the sun, the sky was still somewhat bright, like early morning or early evening in midwinter. Bright enough to still discern the snow from the trees.

2B and 9S pressed onward, leaving the dust-filled ruins far behind.

In the distance, hidden behind a bristly conifer, a single golden-yellow flower watched the two androids travel deeper into the snow-sugared forest.

“Chara, is that you? ” he asked, his words falling on nobody’s ears but his own.
[A] Wretched Weaponry

Chapter Summary

2B and 9S travel through the wildlands surrounding Snowdin, meeting a pair of skeletons and a couple of dogs.

2B and 9S trudged through the thick snow blanketing the ground. At points the path narrowed, growing thin enough that needle-coated branches on both sides brushed against 2B’s shoulders and clung to her arms; at other points, the trees grew so far apart that they vanished into the thick snowfall limiting her visibility. Entranced by the beauty of the surrounding environment, 9S lagged behind while 2B strode down the tree-lined pathway through the alpine forest.

2B had to admit it was beautiful, although she had too much on her mind to take in the scenery as much as her partner.

Monsters. An ancient war. Six captured androids mistaken for humans. Some nonsense about a creature named Asgore collecting human souls—or what he seemed to believe were human souls. It was a lot to process.

Something cold and soft hit her in the back. 2B whirled around, sword at the ready, and found 9S crouched down over a snowbank, using his hands to scoop up and mold a rough, misshapen spheroid out of the snow.

“9S. What are you doing?”

“It’s, um…” 9S sheepishly dropped the ball of snow, brushing errant snowflakes from his gloves. “It’s something humans used to do in the winter. They’d make little balls of this stuff and throw them at each other.”

“Humans were such strange creatures.” 2B turned around and kept going.

The next snowball hit her in the back of the head, a shower of frigid snow pouring down her neck and back. 2B whirled around, sword at the ready, and found 9S crouched down over a snowbank, using his hands to scoop up and mold a rough, misshapen spheroid out of the snow.

“9S. What are you doing?”

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The next snowball hit her in the back of the head, a shower of frigid snow pouring down her neck and back. 2B looked over her shoulder and saw 9S standing bolt-upright, his hands hidden behind his back, trying desperately to keep his face from breaking out in a boyish grin.

“9S. Please.”

9S’s shoulders slumped. “C’mon, 2B. It’s fun.”

“We don’t have time for this.” 2B turned her attention back to the path in front of her and kept walking. “Don’t fall behind, 9S.” Despite her admonishments, she couldn’t help but smile just a little at his antics—although, of course, she’d never let him know that.

“You wanna know,” 9S said, rushing to keep pace with 2B and pulling just slightly ahead of her, “what I’ve always wanted to do once the war’s over?”

2B nodded. “I believe you called them ‘snow angels.’”

“Yeah, I—” 9S froze, his mouth agape in surprise. “Hey, I—I don’t remember telling you about
“Of course you did.” 2B passed by him once again. She grabbed a gnarled pine branch and bent it out of her way as the trail narrowed yet again. “Just a few months ago, when we were—”

“2B, I just got assigned to you last month.”

Alarmed at her slip of the tongue, 2B cut herself off. “I mean,” she lied, “I must have overheard it from somebody at the Bunker. Your operator, perhaps.”

“Well, that’s rude,” 9S huffed. “I told that to 21O in confidence. Who was she blabbing that to?” He stomped his way past her, grumbling all the while, but once he’d gotten about a meter ahead of 2B he suddenly plunged into the snow all the way up to his shoulders.

2B took her time to assist her beleaguered partner, carefully testing each step she took to avoid plunging into a sinkhole herself as their two support pods floated down and grabbed 9S by his arms.

“Don’t you laugh,” 9S admonished her.

“I would not dream of it,” 2B assured him as she crouched down and reached under his armpits to help the pods haul him up.

“Looks like you guys could use a hand,” said a short, stocky, completely bald man in a ragged blue winter coat who had somehow appeared out of the forest right by 2B’s side without her noticing.

2B looked again. No, he wasn’t a bald man. He was a skeleton. There was not a trace of flesh or sinew on him or at least none 2B could see. Despite his total lack of ligaments, all of his bones seemed quite soundly connected to each other.

Yet another strange denizen of this equally-strange underground realm. 2B paid the biological impossibility no mind as she did her part to free 9S. “Thank you, kind sir,” she told him, “but we do not need any help.”

The skeleton coughed into his sleeve. “No, I said you could use a hand.”

2B and the pods hauled 9S out of the sinkhole, sliding him onto higher ground. The snow was thick and wet and clung to the poor android’s coat and shorts. 9S’s clothes were left soaked through as patches of snow sloughed off.

9S reached out for the skeletal stranger’s hand and grabbed it. “Dunno who you are, but thanks, pal—”

The skeleton’s bony phalanges and metacarpals tore away from his wrist, leaving 9S holding the disembodied hand in his own. In her surprise, 2B let go of 9S, and in his surprise, 9S would have slipped back into the sinkhole were it not for the pods still supporting him.

“You can have that one,” said the skeleton. “It’s on me.” He held up his other hand. “Well, actually, this one’s on me. That one’s on you.”

“Statement,” said Pod 153. “That was a practical joke.”

The skeleton chuckled. “Nice to meet you four. The name’s Sans.”

“Sans, huh?” 9S stood up and brushed the remaining snow off his coat, still clutching the Sans’ hand. “Well, I’m 9S, and this is 2B. Our pods here are 042 and 153.”
“Wow. Your parents were really creative, huh?” A little light twinkled in the Sans’ skeletal eye sockets. “Seriously, though, fun and games aside, I actually need that hand back.”

“Oh. Sorry.” 9S handed the hand back to Sans.

“Say… you two aren’t humans, are you?” he asked as he snapped the hand back onto his wrist, cracking his knuckles.

“Of course not,” 2B answered.

“Oh, all right, good. That’ll make things a lot easier for you guys. Me, I don’t really follow the trends,” Sans said, shrugging. “but my brother? He’s a human-hunting fanatic.”

*Human hunting. Was that what happened to the other YoRHa androids?* 2B wondered.

“Has he caught any?” 9S asked.

“What? Of course not. There hasn’t been one down here in years. Actually, do you think you could do me a favor?” Sans asked. “My brother’s been a little down in the dumps, and he’d really love it if you two pretended to be human for just a little bit. It’d really cheer him up.”

“We’re sorry,” 2B answered without the slightest hesitation, “but we are in a hurry. We can’t afford to indulge your brother.” She pressed onward. “9S, stay close to me.”

“A little grumpy, isn’t she?” she heard Sans comment to 9S before he and 2B fell out of earshot.

“Well, if you run into him,” Sans called out, “be nice to him. He’s delicate.”

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The woods seemed to go on forever, quiet and empty. The silence was unnerving—in 2B’s experience, silences served as preludes to ambushes.

A branch snapped, the crack nearly deafening. 2B nearly drew her sword and whirled around, only to see 9S standing beside a tree and sniffing the sap oozing from a branch he’d plucked from it.

He looked at 2B as if he’d been caught red-handed stealing something. “Research,” he said, letting the branch fall to the ground.

2B sighed.

“You know,” 9S said, catching up to her, “how 6O always asks you to take pictures of flowers and stuff for her? Imagine what she’d say if she were down here with us!”

“Perish the thought.”

“Oh, come on. You like her, don’t you?”

6O was the Operator-type android assigned to observe and guide 2B from YoRHa’s base in orbit around the Earth. Her requests were sometimes bothersome, but a welcome sort of bothersome. 2B didn’t quite know how to explain it. But she had to admit that 6O’s presence, her cheerful and sunny attitude, was sorely missed down here.


“About 6O? I think you’re lucky to have an Operator with that kind of personality. I mean, 21O is good at what she does, and I like her, but sometimes she’s just so—”
“Not that. This place. These creatures.”

“Well… they don’t seem too bad, or at least that short guy didn’t… but they don’t have much love for humans down here, that’s for sure,” said 9S. “We might be cut off from the Bunker, but we still know YoRHa’s mission statement. If we could receive orders from command right now, I’m sure they’d recommend we neutralize them, just like the machines.”

The motto of YoRHa was “Glory to Mankind.” 9S was still young, still inexperienced, and still gung-ho enough to buy into it. 2B, though always the consummate professional, knew too much to accept that kind of tribalistic nonsense anymore—although she would never admit it to her peers, let alone her superiors. There was no room for ideological debate within YoRHa, and 2B had seen firsthand what happened to models who’d gone against its hegemony. She’d had to kill some of them herself.

“Yes,” 2B said, her voice flat and perfectly devoid of any emotion or judgment. “That is exactly what they would recommend. For now, though, I think we should just concern ourselves with what happened to the other androids first, then move onto finding a way out of here.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. We can figure out what to do about this place when we get back in touch with the Commander.”

As the two androids neared a clearing in the woods, a shrill, nasally voice cut through the air like a knife.

“Sans! It’s been eight days and you still haven’t re-calibrated your puzzles! All you do is sit and boondoggle!”

Standing in the clearing beside the short skeleton in the blue jacket was a much, much taller, lankier skeleton. A red scarf hung around the taller skeleton’s neck, flapping in the air like a cape as he stood with gloved hands on his hips striking a handsome pose.

How did Sans get ahead of us? 2B wondered. We’ve been traveling in a straight line.

“I will be the one!” he shouted. “I must be the one! I will capture a human! And then… I, the great Papyrus, will get everything I utterly deserve!” Papyrus flung out his arms. “Respect! Recognition! I will finally be able to join the Royal Guard! People will ask to… be my… friend?”

2B and 9S hid behind two trees on opposite sides of the path, neither saying a word.

Papyrus went on. “I will bathe in a shower of kisses every morning. The king will carve a hedge in the shape of my face. None of these good things will happen to be if we don’t both work hard—so for goodness sake, Sans, start pulling your weight!”


9S snorted with laughter, hastily disguised it as a cough to avoid giving away his presence, and then, realizing his mistake, tried in vain to disguise the cough as a bird call.

“Aw, come on, Papyrus. Who knows? There just might be a couple humans closer than you think…” As if Sans knew the two androids were there, he looked down the path they’d taken and gave them a thumbs-up.

Papyrus crossed his arms, pouting. “If you need me, I’ll be working on my fiendishly challenging puzzles. As for you…” He strode off, tossing the end of his scarf over his shoulder. “Put some more… backbone into your work.”
The path ahead forked. Papyrus took the left-hand path, and as he did so and vanished from sight Sans sighed. “Come on, guys. That was your cue.”

2B stepped out of hiding. “As I said, Mister—Sans, was it?—We have business to attend to. You’ll forgive us if we don’t indulge your brother’s crippling insecurity. This way, 9S.”

Papyrus barged back into the clearing. “And one more thing, Sans! I—”

The skeleton stopped dead in his tracks, his eye sockets widening. “Oh, my god! Are those—” He crouched down to whisper to his brother. “Are those humans?”

“What, those? No, those are trees.”

Papyrus seemed to deflate. “Aww…”

“But what about those things in front of the trees?”

Papyrus perked up. “Are those…” he gasped.

“Actually,” 2B said, growing tired of these charades, “we’re…”

“Humans!” Papyrus drew up to his full height and cleared his throat. “You stand before the great Papyrus, the puzzle master of Snowdin! I, the soon-to-be youngest member of the Royal Guard, stand before you! I will challenge you! I will befuddle your human minds with puzzles of a genius-level caliber! I will capture you! I will take you to our great King and… and…” He leaned over. “Sans,” he whispered, “what happens next?”

Sans shrugged.

“We’ll find that out later!” Papyrus clapped his thick red gloves together. “Follow me if you dare, humans, and the challenge will begin!” He began walking down the left-hand path again. “This way! Do not take the path to my right! If you do, you might run into the Royal Guard, and then I won’t get any of the credit for capturing you!”

“Did he say puzzles?” 9S asked, an eager grin beginning to form on his face. He cracked his knuckles. “I could give this guy a run for his money.”

“Focus, 9S.” 2B tapped on her support pod. “Pod. Which path will take us closer to the black box signals?”

“Analysis: Based on long-range topological scans, the right-hand path is shorter.”

“That settles it, then.” 2B started down the pathway to the right. “Down we go.”

The forest thinned out and gave way to snow-blanketed plateaus separated by deep ravines and valleys. Wooden bridges crisscrossed the open air. The cloud coverage grew thinner, revealing the dark and craggy walls and ceilings of the cavern. In one of the valleys, nestled at the side of a river and surrounded by a crescent of snow-capped trees, was a smattering of buildings ensconced in the soft amber glow of civilization.

2B stood at the edge of a steep escarpment and sniffed the crisp air. This was a beautiful place, but cold. It was fortunate she and 9S had such high tolerance for extreme temperatures—especially poor 9S, whose coat had begun to freeze solid and now crunched whenever he moved.
“It’s gorgeous,” 9S breathed. “Why do these monsters want to leave so badly? I’d give my left stick of RAM to live here.”

“Analysis: the extreme temperature range may make it quite difficult for most biological entities to survive this climate,” Pod 153 offered.

“You’d need a thick skin to live here,” said 2B as she led 9S across the bridge stretching across the ravine to the next plateau. “Or no skin at all.”

Looking down through the uneven slats of the simple wooden bridge, 2B noticed large blocks of ice floating down the river. They were bobbing up and down in the rapids, nudging against the thin and fragile skin of frost gilding the water, their shapes far too perfect cubes for them to be natural ice floes.

9S noticed it as well. “2B, look.” He leaned over the rope handrail and pointed over to the far bank of the river many meters below the opposite side of the bridge.

Her line of sight followed the arc of his finger and saw, there on the riverbank, a hulking hairy creature carrying a long pole. 2B squinted and zoomed in on the image. The creature looked like a wolf, its pelt a mottled silvery-gray, but it stood on two legs. With the pole like a shepherd’s crook in its paws, it nudged the ice cubes as they sailed along. Further upriver, another hairy monster hefted a cloudy block of ice larger than it was and tossed it into the river.

“I read somewhere that before humans had invented refrigeration technology, transporting ice was a major industry,” 9S commented. “Enormous blocks of ice had to be hauled from cooler climes to warmer. 2B, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

2B was. The river would naturally lead to an area that required so much ice in such large quantities. A warmer, more densely populated part of the kingdom.

“It’s not like we can go in a straight line to wherever those signals terminate… but this river has to be the shortest path. Otherwise, too much of the ice would melt before it reached its destination.”

“Are you suggesting we jump down there and follow the riverbank?” 2B looked down. It was a long way down to the river, but nothing either of the two of them couldn’t survive.

“You there! Humans!”

A trio of furry canine creatures in archaic plate armor rushed to the end of the bridge and began to cross it, shaking the rickety wooden slats and causing the bridge to sway. “In the name of King Asgore,” one shouted out, “surrender to the Royal Guard immediately!”

9S grabbed onto Pod 153, and with a roguish grin he replied, “I’m thinking of something a little more dramatic.”

2B nodded, taking hold of her own support pod’s arm. “Pod 042, target our end of the bridge and fire.”

The pod nodded and fired a hail of bullets at the bridge, chewing it more voraciously than the hungriest termite. The bridge lurched and the world began to spin as what had once been solid footing became free fall.

With nothing to slow their descent, the guard dogs plummeted to the water and splashed down in the midst of the ice floes. 9S and 2B, though, under their pods’ power drifted safely down—but drifted off course as well, missing the solid ground of the riverbank and ending up in the middle of the river.
2B touched down atop one of the massive ice floes, threw out her hand, and caught 9S by the arm before he could hit the water. She skidded and slipped across the ice as the river’s strong current, a monster of its own with an appetite as insatiable as beasts of legend, took hold of 9S’s legs and tried to drag him under.

The guard dogs poked their heads above the water, one of them latching onto the same ice cube 2B had landed on with his claws and hauling himself up onto the frigid platform. The water coating this guard dog, already freezing, had slicked down his thick pelt of black-and-white fur to make him seem far skinnier than he had before. Under the added weight, the cube bucked and swayed. The other two took their positions on adjacent floes, baring their teeth and their weapons.

2B’s stiletto heels dug into the ice like pitons, anchoring her in place as she pulled with all her might, the tug-of-war between android and nature threatening to wrench her shoulder from its socket. As the river dragged her and 9S along, 2B’s heels rent furrows in the ice, her feet edging closer and closer to the edge of the cube.

“Pod, take my shoulders and pull!” 2B let go of the pod and grabbed onto 9S’s arm with both hands. She nearly flew off the cube right then and there, only for Pod 042 to latch onto her and lend her its own strength. 9S came free of the churning froth, the force 2B had been exerting tossing him over her head as her feet slipped out from under her.

2B fell onto the surface of the ice floe and slid on her back, her legs falling off the surface and dangling in thin air. Before she could slide all the way into the river, she twisted herself onto her stomach and grabbed her sword in a reverse icepick grip to drive it into the ice and anchor herself. The blade put a long crack into the cube but held fast, and 2B managed to haul her legs back on solid ice.

9S drew his own sword and raised it just in time to parry a strike from the dog who’d climbed onto the ice floe, sparks flying from the guard’s sword as the blade’s mechanized teeth ground against the brass-bronze blade of the Cruel Oath in 9S’s hand. 2B recognized the sword as a part of the now-obsolete YoRHa Type-3 equipment set—a weapon salvaged from one of the fallen “humans.”

The guard dog fell back, swaying as he tried to keep his footing on the ice as 9S took the opportunity to reach out and take 2B’s hand. As 2B rose to her feet a spray of white bullets—the same as the “friendliness pellets” Flowey had been able to conjure back in the ruins—took through the surface of the ice, throwing up a hail of chips into the air. The ice chips sprayed against 2B’s face, a shower of cold but ultimately fragile and harmless needles.

One of the guard dogs standing on an adjacent ice floe, this one wielding a huge, if primitive, double-headed battleax. He shook his head, spraying droplets of cold water through the air; some of the water, already frozen into ice, clung in beads to his white fur, while the other droplets froze in midair and clattered across both ice floes.

Raising a gauntleted paw, the dog let loose another burst of magically-conjured bullets and tore into 2B and 9S’s ice floe, forming a worryingly-growing crack along one of its fault lines. Pod 042 retaliated with a hail of gunfire. The ax-wielding dog raised his weapon to block the spray of bullets, so Pod 042 changed its target to the ice floe beneath him, ripping through it and gouging out huge chunks of its surface.

9S parried another strike from the dog with the purloined YoRHa-issue sword as the ice floe shuddered and bucked yet again, its corner dipping under the churning, frothy surface of the river. The other two ice floes, driven by helpful pushes from the shepherds on either side of the river, slammed into the androids’ ice floes; the cube in the middle began to shear under the stress.
The impact sent 9S tumbling down and nearly knocked 2B off her feet as well just as the ax-wielding guard dog brought his battleax down on the cube. The heavy, oversize blade of the ax stuck in the ice cube.

9S swung his sword from his prone position and caught the dog with the Type-3 sword across the thigh, sending him down as well. The mechanized sword fell from the dog’s paws as one more strike from 9S’s sword cut through his chest; the dog collapsed and turned to fine white dust as the two flanking ice cubes banged against the middle one yet again.

The opposite ice cube from 2B had yet another ax-wielding guard dog with just as large and thick of a battleax in her paws; she deftly used it to block the gunfire from Pod 153.

The middle ice cube kept crumbling and finally split apart, separating 2B and 9S. The half 2B stood on pitched and yawed in the water and rolled over; as the once-relatively-flat surface of the floe became its side and threatened to capsize its passengers, 2B leaped for the ax-wielding dog’s cube.

2B grabbed onto the edge of the cube, her fingers digging into it with all her might as she swung her legs over the side and slid behind the guard dog.

9S tried to pull himself up as his half of the ice cube tumbled in the river, but the water that had doused his legs when he’d nearly been swept away by the current had now frozen and fused to the ice cube’s surface. Pod 153 swooped down and applied a small cutting torch to the ice in a valiant effort to free him.

2B raised her sword as the ax-wielding dog whirled around to face her. Axe met sword, the ancient weapon proving remarkably resilient against the pristine blade of 2B’s Virtuous Contract. Glancing over the guard dog’s shoulder, 2B saw 9S’s severed ice floe bobbing in the swirling currents as he struggled to free himself.

A hard metal pole dug into 2B’s back, knocking her forward. She stumbled as the dog’s ax swung down and bit into her right forearm. Switching her sword from right to left hand just in time to parry another swing, 2B glanced behind her shoulder just in time to see one of the wolfish ice-shepherds swinging his pole for her head. 2B ducked as the blunt pole swished across the air; Pod 042 fired on the wolf and hit him square in the chest. The monster immediately disintegrated, his pole tumbling into the river.

2B slid further back against the impact of yet another ax strike, nearly to the opposite end of the ice cube, and reached out, snatching the long ice-shepherd’s pole as its tip caught the water. She swung the pole over her head; it traveled in a long and lazy arc through the air with a satisfying swoosh.

The ax-wielding guard dog threw up his ax to block the pole, giving 2B the perfect opportunity to lash out with her blade and bisect the dog through the torso. “Dogressa, my love—!” he cried out with a mournful howl as his body collapsed into dust.

2B took a split second to catch her breath before hefting the shepherd’s pole again. The other ice cube carrying the final remaining guard dog clashed with 9S’s chipped, cracked, and dwindling floe; 2B took a running leap and thrust the pole forward, burying it into the surface of the dog’s ice cube and pole vaulting her way onto it. As she sailed through the air, Pod 042 swooped down from her side and took hold of 9S along with Pod 153; the two support pods lifted him up from the crumbling ice floe just before it broke apart.

2B landed on the ice floe behind the final guard dog, tossing the pole aside. The guard dog’s battleax crashed down with a force and ferocity easily double that of her counterpart’s—and if not for a quickly-timed evasive maneuver, it would have surely split 2B’s skull open.
The dog snarled as she wrenched her ax free of the ice. “Dogamy! I vow to avenge—”

9S dropped out of the sky, the two support pods hovering above him, and with a quick slash, he caught the guard dog in the throat with his blade. The dog staggered back, blood pouring in dark burgundy gouts from the wound before she fell off the edge of the ice floe. Her body turned to dust before it hit the water.

9S skidded to a halt, throwing his arm around 2B for support. The two of them collapsed onto the surface of the ice floe as it drifted down the river. On both sides, the ice-shepherds were starting to desert their posts, throwing down their poles and fleeing in terror.

“Well,” said 9S, panting, “that didn’t go as planned. You all right, 2B?”

2B nodded. “And yourself?”

“Legs are still a bit stiff…” A smile tugged at the corners of 9S’s mouth. “But it’s not like we can get frostbite, eh?”

The ice floe carrying the two androids drifted down the river, into the mouth of a cave, and sailed deeper down a twisting, dark subterranean river. The cave walls were hewn of dark, purplish rock; the banks of the river muddy silt, choked with tall river grasses. The air was warmer and more humid; the sound of dripping and trickling water omnipresent. Luminescent violet-pink crystals hung from the tunnel’s water-worn walls, and overhead, diamond dust studded in the ceiling twinkled like stars.

As 9S and 2B sailed deeper into the kingdom of monsters, a figure clad in armor watched from afar, gritting her fangs and clenching her fists in anger.
Chapter Summary

Undyne is here and she ain't happy.

Chapter Notes

I know things are still hewing (relatively) close to Undertale’s story progression right now, but don't you worry. Things are going to get weirder soon enough.

The ice floe started to sweat as the warmer, humid air of the watery cave network began to eat away at it. The river’s current was slowing and weakening, and as the combined search beacons of the androids’ support pods flashed across the walls and ceiling of the tunnel, it became obvious as to why.

Up ahead, the ceiling had caved in, completely damming the river. The ice cube bumped up against the ceiling-high pile of rubble and drifted drunkenly in place, carried along lost and wandering eddies denied their natural route. Other cubes began to drift into the dead-end, caught in the same meandering and diverted swirls of current.

2B suppressed a disappointed scowl. “So much for that plan.”

9S reached out and brushed his fingers against the dam, angling Pod 153’s beacon to cast its light upward where the pile of large, heavy rocks kissed the ceiling. “Pod 153, update geographical scans.” He paused for a moment. “These rocks are hot. This cave-in happened recently… and not naturally. And it goes on for nearly fifty meters.”

It seemed to 2B someone had sent a message ahead of them to block their path. Sensible, but at the same time ill-advised—this river did seem to be an important industrial conduit. Blocking it could do more harm than good to the kingdom.

At any rate, the two of them would have to take the long way around.

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2B trudged through reed-choked water that nearly came up to her knees alongside 9S, their makeshift ice floe raft abandoned. This new region of the underground kingdom was almost like a new planet in its eerie beauty; the starlike diamonds scattered across the tunnel’s ceiling were almost inspirational to behold.

As the tunnel widened, 2B and 9S stepped up onto dry land—or, at the very least, damp land. The soil was pale, almost purplish in the light of the luminescent crystals dotting the rock walls, and fungi sprouting out of the dirt glowed a pale aquamarine.

9S skimmed his hand through the damp sand and picked up a twisted, misshapen lump of grayish-
black rock stained with mud, then gasped and dropped it, wincing.

“Something the matter?”

9S shook his head. “No, it’s just hot. Really hot.” He rolled it in the sand a bit with the tip of his boot before picking it up again. He brushed the mud away, revealing that the little formation was speckled and translucent. “Fulgurite. Looks like lightning struck here.”

“And recently?”

“Judging by the heat.”

2B looked up at the ceiling less than a meter above her head. “And where would this lightning come from?”

9S shrugged. “Beats me.”

At some points the tunnels became straighter, their walls and floors smoother. It seemed as though the monster living here had once tried to build this entire network of caves, caverns, and subterranean rivers into something more civilized… but they seemed to have given up rather quickly and (judging by the weathering on the bricks in these barely-tamed stretches of the hallway) quite a long time ago as well.

It all reminded 2B of an anthill.

9S brushed his hand against the wall. “Hey, 2B. Hold on. There’s writing here.”

“That’s hardly our concern,” 2B replied. “Keep up, 9S.”

“‘The War of Humans and Monsters,’” he read aloud. “2B.” His voice echoed through the hallway. “Don’t you think this might be important to know about?”

2B paused, crossing her arms. 9S had a point. “Go on.”

Why did the humans attack? Indeed, it seemed they had nothing to fear. Humans are unbelievably strong. It would take the soul of nearly every monster just to equal the power of a single human soul.

But humans have one weakness. It is, ironically, the strength of their soul. Its power allows it to persist outside the human body even after death. If a monster defeats a human, they can take its soul. A monster with a human soul: a horrible beast with unfathomable power.

“Well,” 2B said as 9S paused, struggling to make out the next few glyphs, “That probably won’t happen anytime soon—unless we win the Machine War very quickly.”

This power has no counter. Indeed, a human cannot take a monster’s soul. When a monster dies, its soul disappears—and an incredible power would be needed to take the soul of a living monster.

There is only one exception. The soul of a special species of monster. These souls are strong enough to persist after death, if only for a few moments. A human could absorb this soul—but this has never happened. And now it never will.
“These guys sure are pessimistic,” 9S concluded.

“They’re right,” 2B said. “All those thousands of years and not a single human fell down here, even when the human race still lived on this planet. And in the thousands of years since then, only half a dozen of us have ever come here. If human souls are their salvation… they will be waiting for a very long time.”

When the war ended, leaving thousands of monsters dead and only a handful of human casualties, the humans gathered seven sages to imprison us deep within a magical barrier. The Barrier, the bars of our horrible prison, was made through the strength of seven human souls—and only through the strength of seven human souls can it be unmade.

“Hmm.” 9S traced the final line of glyphs engraved on the wall. “Hey. This writing is newer than the rest.”

A single monster can pass through, but not break, the Barrier with only a single human soul. This has only happened once. And it did not end well for the monster.

The only way to free our race is to gather seven human souls and present them to our king. Glory to Asgore. He will become as a god.

“They think we’re humans,” said 9S, holding a hand to his chin as he pondered the writing. “So the six black box signals—those must be coming from androids they’re saving for some kind of holy ritual.”

“And if we aren’t careful,” said 2B, leading him further down the hall, “either of us could be the seventh.”

“I can’t help but feel bad for these guys, though. 2B, do you really think they were persecuted by humans?”

“The focus on souls sounds more religious than historical,” 2B commented. “And either way, it could just as easily be propaganda. Cave scrawls are hardly rigorously-derived treatises on history.”

9S shrugged. “Persecuted or not, the punishment feels a little excessive. Beautiful place, but I dunno if I’d want to live here.”

The hall opened up into a larger chamber. The ceiling was high above and obscured by clouds of condensation; wooden platforms wound their way across the walls up to its misty heights. Flowers glowing a pale cyan covered the ground, swaying gently even though there was no breeze to move them.

The circular shape of this space called to mind an arena, although the flowers suggested a garden.

2B walked on, the glow from the meadow casting a blue-green light against the pale skin of her thighs. As her legs brushed against the flowers, a cacophony of whispers reached her ears.

“I wish my job was easier.”

“I wish that girl I like would ask me out.”

“I wish my mom would start feeling better.”

“I wish I could see the moon.”
2B paused. As the flowers surrounding her settled down, so too did the whispering voices. “9S,” she hissed, glancing back at him. “Did you…”

Still standing on the edge of the field, 9S gingerly nudged a single flower with his foot.

“I wish I didn’t have to live in Snowdin.”

He knelt down. The soft bioluminescent glow cast a ghoulish pallor across his face even as it tinted his white hair a brilliant aquamarine. “It’s the flowers.”

With another prod the flower spoke again, this time whispering in a meek and tinny reproduction of 9S’s voice the exact phrase he had said. 9S looked up at 2B with an eager grin. “It’s the flowers, 2B! They record everything we say!”

2B took another step and another susurrus of timidly-hissed hopes and dreams filled the air, covering up the sound of rustling leaves and dripping water.

“I hope Asgore will free us.”

“Come on, 9S. We can’t afford to waste time.”

9S shot up to his feet and caught up with 2B, the flowers in his wake spilling the secrets of the monsters who’d spoken to them.

The two androids strode through the gloomy meadow, a thousand wishes following after them.

“I wish Asgore could find seven human souls.”

“I hope we can all see the surface someday.”

“I wish I could find a human.”

“I hope Asgore can become a god.”

“Glory to Asgore.”

“Become a god.”

“Become a god.”

“Become a god.”

“Become a god.”

“Become a god.”

“Become a god…”

2B’s reflexes fired and not one second too soon she slipped backward as a bolt of lightning struck the ground where she’d just been standing. Steam rose from the charred remains of one of the strange echoing flowers. The cacophony, the endless aspirations of these monsters, filled the air, but the thunderclap had left them more muted than usual. The ringing remained in 2B’s ears for several seconds while her auditory systems adjusted themselves in response to the stimuli.
“Six human souls.”

The voice came from above, booming and ringing in the air and overpowering the whispered echoes. As 2B craned her neck and locked onto the source of the outburst, she saw an armored figure wreathed in shadows standing atop one of the wooden platforms ringing the chamber. The knight pounded a glowing aquamarine spear against the wooden slats, causing the whole platform to shake.

“Our king, on whose shoulders rest our hopes and dreams, possesses six of the human souls he needs to free our people.” The knight took a few heavy, thudding steps down to the next platform, twirling the spear shaft in its hand all the while. “One more soul and our great king Asgore will set us free.”

2B eyed the cave opening at the other end of the massive chamber as the knight drew closer to the ground with theatrical slowness. “9S, this way.” She beckoned over to the cave.

“We’ve been in this mountain for tens of thousands of years, suffering under the yoke of—”

The knight paused as 2B and 9S made for the passage on the other side of the meadow.

“Hey!” The knight leaped up and threw the spear in midair. The spear buried itself in the ground at 2B’s feet, nearly tearing the hem of her dress. 9S nearly ran into her as she came to a sudden stop.

Undyne lunged at the androids. 2B took the lead and threw herself in front of her partner, since 9S (although capable of defending himself) lacked the combat-focused programming she had. Spear met sword, and 2B felt her heels drag through the mud beneath her feet as Undyne pushed her back. An electric tingle numbed her hands as she parried blow after blow.

She leaped back, a spray of bullets from her support pod covering her retreat. She didn’t have time to waste here—her HUD showed that the six black box signals were still miles away.

9S grabbed her by the arm. “Pod, collapse the tunnel on my mark.” With a dutiful nod, the black-hulled support pod drifted into position at the end of the tunnel as the two androids drew closer.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Undyne snarled, baring gnarled, yellowed fangs. She banged the butt of her spear on the ground and on cue a forest of glowing spears burst from the ground at the mouth of the tunnel, blocking it like bars of a prison cell. “You’re not running away!”

The joints in 2B’s legs seized, locking her knees and ankles; the android found herself immobilized from the waist down. An eldritch emerald glow like the coronal discharge seen on ships at sea—St. Elmo’s Fire, 2B believed it had once been called—enveloped her body.

“What?” she hissed. Had this enemy hacked into her systems somehow?

“Gotcha!” Undyne cried out. With a triumphant clench of her fist, a squadron of glowing spears appeared in the air at her side and launched themselves at 2B. 9S grabbed 2B by the waist and tried to pull her free, but 2B’s feet had somehow become rooted to the ground, and as he tugged on her the fire enveloped his legs as well, pinning him to the ground along with 2B.
With the volley fast approaching, 2B readied her blade. As her sword met the flying spears they vanished into flurries of sparks.

2B tightened her grip on the sword’s hilt as another hail of spears came her way, but as she swung to bat them out of the air they changed course, breaking formation and flying at the two androids from all angles.

9S gritted his teeth. “Pod, engage P-shield!”

The pod nodded, and a shimmering sphere of energy appeared around 2B and 9S just in time to block every single one of the flying spears.

2B growled as the shield flickered and faded away. One last spear made it through, but she managed to twist enough to swat it out of the air before it could hit 9S. She tried in vain to pull herself free of the morass entangling her legs.

Undyne yawned. “All right! That’s enough for now!”

2B lost her balance as the emerald aura vanished, but fortunately it took only a fraction of a second for her to adjust.

That second was all Undyne would give her. With a feral snarl, the captain closed in.

2B ran for the blocked tunnel entrance. She had no intention of wasting time here. She tore one of the glowing lightning-spears from the ground in order to make a gap wide enough to slip through; the strange, semi-substantial lance sent a numbing jolt of electricity up her arms.

She and 9S made it into the tunnel, their boots slipping against the slick, muddy floor. 9S glanced back at the tunnel entrance. “Pod. Laser. Now!”

The black support pod loosed a blast of energy at the tunnel ceiling, caving in the entrance in a shower of rocks.

“C’mon, 2B. Let’s—”

Undyne slid under the collapsing tunnel entrance, quickly catching up with the androids. With a mighty roundhouse kick she slammed her armored boot against 9S’s head, knocking him off his feet. Continuing onward on her own momentum, Undyne conjured another spear and swung it at 2B.

With the purloined spear and her sword 2B locked Undyne’s spear in place, struggling to wrench it out of her hands. The synthetic musculature underneath 2B’s skin burned. The monster’s strength took her by surprise—the idea that something not made of metal could hold its own in hand-to-hand combat with an android built exclusively for combat was almost laughably ridiculous.

Undyne gritted her teeth as her strength met 2B’s. “Do you have… any idea… how selfish you’re being?” she growled. Her breath smelled, unsurprisingly, like fish.

2B didn’t waste energy responding.

“Just one… little… soul! That’s all we need!” Undyne shoved 2B against the slick, mossy tunnel wall. “Do you have any idea how long we’ve been stuck down here? This—cannot—continue—!”

“There’s nothing for you up there.” 2B pushed Undyne back and thrust her against the opposite wall. “Those are not human souls you’ve been taking—”
Undyne reared back and cracked her forehead against 2B’s.

Much to 2B’s surprise, more than just her HUD flickered under the impact—all of her visual processors momentarily ceased, plunging her into darkness for a second that felt like an eternity.

As 2B’s visual processors came back online, Undyne grabbed her by the arm with both hands, twisted, then tried to break the android’s forearm over her knee. It didn’t work—android limbs were made of stronger stuff than the captain was likely accustomed to—but it did still hurt.

But the captain still kept a tight grip on 2B’s arm and with a mighty roar threw her over her shoulder. 2B saw luminescent crystals protruding from the rock walls and ceiling spin around her as she hit the ground. Cold, brackish water drenched her dress.

2B kicked at Undyne as she hit the ground, her stiletto heel catching on the captain’s eyepatch and pulling it off. Undeterred, Undyne leaped into the air and landed on top of 2B, driving her elbow into the android’s stomach and knocking the wind out of her.

Before Undyne could do any more damage, 9S rushed to 2B’s aid, impaled the captain’s shoulder on the brassy blade of the Cruel Oath, and pushed her away. He reached out to 2B. “You all right down there?”

2B sprang up, holding onto Pod 042’s manipulator arm for support as it floated at her side and taking 9S’s hand. “ Took you long enough.”

“Sorry. I have to admit, I’ve never been kicked so hard I went blind.”

He and 2B kept running. The corridor twisted and turned, but soon 2B could see a soft orange light glowing at the end. The soliton radar on her HUD suggested the tunnel opened into a much larger area, which the android was thankful for. It would be much easier to escape this monster in a wide-open environment.

9S pulled a few paces ahead of 2B as the two of them drew closer to the exit. Surprised, he looked back. “You all right, 2B?”

2B clutched at the stitch in her side but didn’t let the jabbing pain stop her. “It’s nothing. We’ll have time for maintenance later.”

She and 9S emerged from the tunnel and found themselves standing in a vast, hot cave. The ground was cracked and steaming; at the bottom of deep crevasses cutting the landscape into pillars of stone were languid rivers of magma. The air, hot and dry, shimmered. 2B sized up the area. Could any organic lifeform last here for long? If Undyne was still in pursuit, 2B and 9S could turn this into a war of attrition and simply run from her until she expired from the intense heat.

As 2B pondered tactics, a spear caught her in the calf. The only reason 2B failed to slip and fall from the impact was because her legs had once again frozen. She glanced over her shoulder.

Undyne was catching up, readying another salvo of spears. “Pod!” 2B shouted out. “Shield—”

At the same moment, 9S threw himself in front of her. His black support pod drifted to his side, its hull folding open. “Pod, laser—”

Pod 153 fired its laser as ordered, the burst of directed plasma burning right through Undyne’s heart. At that instant, the magic ensnaring 2B’s legs released itself. Pod 042 engaged its projectile shield—

What happened next felt, paradoxically, like both an instant and an eternity at the same time.
The flying spear Undyne had tossed with her last bit of strength passed under the shield before it could fully envelop the two of them.

Undeterred, it hit 9S with dead-eye accuracy, its pointed arrowhead tip burying itself in his eye. He stumbled backward, his arms which had once moved so purposefully flopping limply at his sides as the spear exited the back of his head with a spray of synthetic blood. The spear stuck there, half of its length protruding from both sides of the android’s skull. Bolts of electricity arced between the glowing spear shaft and the brass buttons on 9S’s dirtied black coat before the glowing lance of lightning faded away.

2B felt her breath freeze. “N… 9S!”

He turned his head as if he could still hear her voice. But 2B could already tell from just the slack expression on his face that he was gone even as the torn-apart visor circling his head fell away to reveal a single remaining eye that stared blankly ahead.

The light had already gone out. 9S was dead before his body hit the ground.

Before 2B could run to him, a figure stepped forth from the cloud of dust pouring from the tunnel’s mouth.

Despite the hole in her heart, Undyne looked as alive as ever. A flickering aura of blue-green electrical arcs surrounded her, and her single good eye had turned jet black—black with a single pinprick of eye-searing white light in its center.

The weakness in 2B’s knees vanished as rage flooded her body. She grabbed the two support pods. “Pod 042. Pod 153. Blade.”

Both pods projected a long, sharp energy blade, filling the air with the sharp smell of burnt ozone, and with both weapons 2B leaped into battle.

The resurrected Undyne parried 2B’s wrathful blows with growing desperation but grinned in spite of the exertion. “Hurts, doesn’t it?” she cackled. She narrowly dodged 2B’s next attack, the nanometer-sharp edge of the projected energy blade severing her ear-fin and a lock of her scarlet hair, and buried her spear in 2B’s right bicep. “Doesn’t it? ‘Oh, boo hoo, he was my friend!’ How do you think I feel?”

Synthetic blood trickled down from the wound, staining the white cuff of 2B’s sleeve red. Bursts of snowy static washed over 2B’s visual processor as the electricity from the spear spilled through her motor systems and caused her injured arm to spasm uncontrollably. She let go of Pod 153 as her fingers jerked wildly.

“I have friends, too! I’ve lost friends! The Snowdin Canine Unit… My troops and friends, destroyed... because of the whims of a single human? How do you think it feels?!”

2B stumbled backward as Pod 153 and Pod 042 laid down more suppressing fire to cover her retreat. She tore the spear out of her arm, throwing it aside, then rummaged through her inventory for some staunching gel and hastily applied it to the wound. The flow of blood bubbled, congealed, and slowed as some degree of feeling—and control—returned to her injured arm. Her near field combat software kicked in, conjuring the Virtuous Contract back to her right hand as she ran across a rickety wood bridge spanning the length of one of the magma chamber’s ravines.

Undyne fought her way past the combined pods’ suppressing fire, casting off what remained of her heavy armor as sweat poured off her scales. With heightened swiftness she swung her spear with
wild and reckless abandon, tearing through Pod 153’s black hull in the process. The pod sparked and exploded, waving its arms helplessly in the brief moment it had before its core reactor went critical.

“Your time’s up, villain. You won't hurt anyone else,” Undyne growled, her spear sparking and flickering as she raised it and leveled it at 2B. “A knight in shining armor has appeared... And all the pain you have inflicted on the fallen… every hope, every dream you’ve turned to dust… I’ll make you feel that pain a hundred times over—through the power of this spear!”

Further incensed, 2B readied her blade, spun on her heel, and lunged at the monster.

Undyne ran across the bridge and the two struck at the same time; rather than clashing, both spear and sword passed by each other.

The tip of Undyne’s spear left a gash across 2B’s cheek under her right eye and across the bridge of her nose and kept going, piercing her left eye. What remained of 2B’s black cloth visor fluttered to bottom of the ravine, taking her HUD with it. As the visor dwindled to a speck it shimmered under the heat-haze before bursting into flames above the magma river far below.

2B’s feet found purchase on solid rock once more. Blood poured down her cheeks like tears as she skidded to a halt and whirled around, immediately assuming a combat stance to fend off Undyne’s next attack.

Undyne kept going under her own momentum in the opposite direction and staggered to a stop on the opposite side of the swaying bridge. She turned around, her blue-scaled skin split open across her torso to reveal exposed flesh as scarlet as her long and flowing hair. 2B’s sword had left a diagonal gash running from her shoulder to her opposite hip, the blade nearly biting deeply enough to cut the monster in two. Dust fluttered down from the wound—Undyne’s body was crumbling away just like the other monsters. But more than that—her extremities were beginning to whiten and liquefy, dripping off her body like water from a melting ice sculpture, melding with the sweat pouring down her skin.

Undyne smiled and began to laugh as she looked down at her own eroding body, then at 2B. “You’re pretty good,” she called out from across the bridge.

2B’s gloves creaked as she tightened her grip on her sword’s hilt. She could hear her own breath hiss its way between her gritted teeth.

Undyne took a step forward onto the creaking bridge, her melting legs wobbling as more of her body crumbled into white powder and floated on the thick, humid air.

“I’m sorry, everyone,” Undyne murmured. “Sometimes... sometimes the heroes don’t win after all, huh?” She looked 2B square in the eye as a single tear fell from her single blackened eye. “It really... really sickens me, you know? To see you so mad about your friend. Like you deserve to be mad.”

The captain took another step forward, and another, and another, each one steadier than the last. And with each step Undyne took 2B felt her hatred towards her grow.

“You don’t know how to do anything but kill, don’t you? If I let you pass here, you’ll kill people... more friends... and you won’t stop once you leave here, will you?” Arcs of electricity crackled across Undyne’s body as she reached out for 2B, her hand trembling. “Alphys, are you watching? I hope... I’ve given you... enough... time...”

A mess of dust and watery slime, Undyne stumbled and slipped through the gaps between the
bridge’s wooden slats and fell into the magma far below.

2B let out the air that had been growing stale in her chest and fell to her knees at 9S’s side, burying her sword in the ground. A cursory glance at the condition of his body told her what she already knew. The spear had blown a hole the size of a fist all the way through his head, leaving behind a ragged tunnel of metal and synthetic gore.

An elite YoRHa unit was not supposed to be so affected by the death of a comrade. So why had 2B felt such an ache in her core as she’d watched 9S’s body crumple to the ground? Why did it feel like a vise had started squeezing her chest as she looked over his corpse?

“Nines, I… it wasn’t supposed to go this way…” she whispered in a cracked, small voice. “I… I was supposed to…” Her words fought their way past a lump in her throat as tears fell from her eye and left shining splotches on her counterpart’s cheek.

2B knew there was something wrong with her. It always hurt more than it should. She’d tried so hard not to let it happen this time. She’d always tried so hard to push him away since the first time he’d died, but no matter how icily she’d tried to behave in front of him, she couldn’t erase how she felt.

*Emotions are prohibited,* she told herself. *Emotions are prohibited. Emotions are prohibited. Emotions are prohibited. Emotions are…*

Pod 042 floated by her side. “Statement: Severe electrical damage detected throughout Unit 9S’s body. Chances of successful resuscitation are zero point zero zero one—”

2B reached out, plucked Pod 042 out of the air, and held it close despite its protestations, letting the gentle vibrations of its metal hull resonate comfortingly against her chest as she huddled by 9S’s side. “*Nines*…”

*How many more times,* she thought, *will I have to watch you die?*
Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the end draws near... or at least, *an* end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

2B knelt over 9S’s body and laid a hand on his face. His cheeks were still warm, his skin still soft and supple. The only indication that he wasn’t merely sleeping or temporarily shut down was the hole tunneling its way through his head. Rigor mortis had yet to set in, and so 2B took what little opportunity she had left to close his gray-blue eye and his still-agape mouth, wiping away the look of dull surprise his face had been locked into in his final moments.

*I was built to kill things. I was made to watch things die. And I’ve seen 9S die more times than I care to count. Why does it hurt, then? 2B asked herself. And why does it hurt so much more this time?*

An android existed only as long as their memories existed. In the Bunker hovering in orbit above the Earth, they’d upload 9S’s backup from only a few days ago into a fresh body, and when 2B returned, the two of them would carry on. But the 9S who’d come this far with 2B, the 9S who’d leaped in front of her, the 9S who’d thrown a snowball at her and nailed her right in the back of her head—

She would never see him again. That was how it always was.

2B unbuttoned 9S’s coat and the shirt beneath it, exposing the pale flesh of his bare chest, and with trembling fingers slid open the small, almost unnoticeable hatch just below his sternum and removed the black box unit from within. A perfect obsidian cube streaked with glittering white strata, small enough to fit in her palm, hung inert between her thumb and forefinger.

She held it to her forehead. The black box wasn’t humming.

2B placed the black box back into its proper resting place and closed up the cavity. Disregarding the horrific wound, 9S looked like he was sleeping.

2B hoisted 9S’s lifeless body up over her shoulder. “I won’t let these monsters have you,” she told him as she held his corpse aloft at the edge of the ravine and stared into the glowing, rippling magma far below. “You won’t become their seventh sacrifice. I won’t allow you to be desecrated like that.”

She let 9S’s body fall into the river. The corpse and its clothes burst into flames before it even hit the surface of the magma; then the charred and blackened figure, utterly unrecognizable, slowly dwindled away as the molten rock oozed over it and consumed it.

“Goodbye, Nines.”

2B stared out at the massive industrial structure off in the distance obscured by rippling heat-haze, then ripped the Virtuous Contract out of the ground and pushed herself forward.

All those other times 9S had died, retribution had been out of her grasp.
But not today.
She was going to make them pay.

2B cut through the Core like an avenging angel.

The Core. That was what they called it as they threw wave after wave of their soldiers in front of her. A twisting maze of corridors and metal scaffolding hanging over a pulsating sea of liquid light. Defend the Core. Hold the Core. Don’t let her leave the Core.

They fell. They all fell.

The industrial structure itself turned against her, a stuttering coward screaming at her over the intercom system all the while as cutting lasers zeroed in on her and robotic assembly arms did their best to catch her. Corridors folded in on themselves, rotated, slid from one segment of the Core to another, an ever-shifting labyrinth trying desperately to contain her in a dead end.

2B could not be contained.

All she knew how to do was kill. And kill she did.

The ones who stood in her path, the ones who came at her screaming with swords and axes and flails and elaborate patterns of “bullets,” she cut down. The ones who ran and hid, she ignored.

And as she went on, many more monsters began to run and hide.

The Core rebelled against 2B with increasingly frantic zeal. She barely made it out of a corridor that had begun to seal itself off in preparation to eject itself into the hot and energetic maelstrom below. As the bulkheads slid shut they pinched off 2B’s right arm at the elbow, crushing her forearm to a paste of crushed and flattened synthetic bones, macerated synthetic skin and muscles, and gushing synthetic blood and coolant. Screaming with such agony she nearly passed out 2B tore herself free, leaving ragged strands of what had once been strong ligaments hanging from a useless half of an elbow joint.

It didn’t matter. The monsters were easy to kill. One hand was enough.

She nearly lost her leg next. A spike-studded mace reduced her left foot to a lump of scrap dangling from her ankle, scraping against the floor as she limped along.

2B was only vaguely aware of how heavy her breathing was, how much her chest was heaving, how salty the sweat pouring from her brow was, how hotly the straining muscles beneath her skin and hard-shelled chassis were burning.

She was growing weaker by the second and she hardly noticed it.

A swinging pipe slammed into the back of her head, shooting pulses of static and misaligned colors through her visual systems. Without her visor and thus without her HUD 2B couldn’t see any of the myriad error messages that must have been running through her system at the moment she stumbled and fell to her knees, although Pod 042 did its best to rattle them off for her while firing at her assailants.

As the Core began to fall silent 2B picked herself up.
This is for you, 9S, she kept telling herself. I could never have my revenge on your murderer before. So I’m having it here, on them.

Straining, stumbling, staggering, 2B kept fighting until nobody else was willing to fight her.

2B limped out of the Core and through the empty city that followed it, cradling the sheared-off stump of her left arm. Her numbing fingers clutched at the synthetic, fragmented bones jutting from her artificial flesh. A trail of dripping blood, coolant, and lubricant followed in her wake.

The city’s inhabitants kept their distance, most scarcely brave enough to peek out their windows as 2B passed by down the abandoned roads. As a result, the city was silent as a grave, as quiet and moribund as the ruins of ancient human societies that dotted the Earth aboveground. She could only hear the creaking and whirring of her own overtaxed servos mingled with the sound of her lame foot scraping against the ground and the sound of her own heavy breathing.

She paused, leaning against a derelict automobile for support as she caught her breath.

Pod 042 floated by her side, still a constant companion after everything 2B had gone through. “Statement: Unit 2B has sustained severe damage to critical physical systems. At the current rate of deterioration, hibernation mode will automatically engage to prevent injuries incompatible with life in forty-three minutes, fifteen seconds, and counting.”

2B gasped for air, a knife-like pain seizing her side, then stumbled back down the road. “Comment… noted, Pod. Moving… on.”

Pod 042 let her know that the six black box signals were emanating from the center of the castle up ahead, the old and crumbling colossus, almost cathedral-like in its elegance, that jutted out from the sheer, craggy walls of the massive cavern housing the city. Nobody stopped 2B from venturing deeper inside the castle, its fortifications just as silent as the city. The settling of ancient foundations and subtle creaking sounds were buried beneath the comparatively-deafening sounds of her own footsteps.

“Well, I’ll be darned.”

2B whirled around to face the source of the voice, her sword held out. There, in a corner of the dilapidated castle’s foyer, was one golden flower mingled among many—the only one in a bouquet of potted plants to bear a face.

Flowey whistled. “Howdy. I thought I’d lost you for a bit there, but—”

2B cut the flowers down. Flowey retreated too quickly, though, and of the petals that hung in the air and fluttered down to the floorboards, none were his.

“You didn’t bring your friend with you.” Flowey’s voice came from further down the hall. 2B followed it. “Is he gone? I bet you killed him, too.”

2B picked up speed, her sword tearing through the wall as she swung it in a deadly arc. Flowey vanished yet again.

“Wouldn’t be surprised, murderer.”

2B grunted and gritted her teeth. “Pod, target and open fire on the source of that voice.”
“Affirmative, Unit 2B.” Pod 042 loosed a salvo of bullets at Flowey, but the malevolent plant only ducked out of sight once again. The blasts pummeled the wall, leaving the peeling yellow wallpaper blackened and smoking and tearing the small table in the corner to shrapnel.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I didn’t mean that as a pejorative. I really do admire murderers, you know.”

2B ascended the castle, firing on Flowey whenever he reared his head. The black box signals were drawing nearer.

“You’re afraid, aren’t you? It’s okay. I was, too. I was alone after we died… after I came back.”

Flowey came too close that time and 2B’s strike managed to take a petal before he vanished back into the walls.

“I saw Dad again. He was sitting there in his favorite garden like he always was. He cried when he heard me calling his name. He hugged me.”

Flowey popped away before Pod 042 could get a bead on him and reappeared further down the hall.

“I didn’t cry. I didn’t feel sad or happy… or anything. I tried, but… I didn’t feel anything… except maybe boredom. That was how it felt for you, too, wasn’t it? When you came back to life?”

The ensuing salvo tore the hallway apart, but Flowey, as always, danced just out of reach.

Androids didn’t feel either, 2B told herself. As much as it might seem they did feel, their emotions were simulacra and nothing more. Love made one feel affection for one’s comrades. Hate made one strong against one’s enemies. Killing produced a rush of elation, an artificial jolt of euphoria akin to what in the human brain would have been dopamine. All of that made one a more effective warrior to YoRHa against the machine scourge. That was all it was. Fake emotions. Fake emotions for fake people.

So why did it still hurt when she thought about 9S? Why did it always hurt?

“I tried to fill that void however I could. I tried to make friends with everyone I met. But I couldn’t. I just didn’t care whether they were happy or sad. I mean… why would I?”

2B kept going. Now that the little pest was becoming more talkative, she had to admit there was something familiar about his voice. But where had she heard it before? Its inexplicable familiarity—like the voice of an old friend—irked her like a cluster of dead pixels on her HUD.

“So I started killing them instead. I turned back the flow of time so I could kill them again and again. I could kill them all in a hundred different ways apiece. For once since I was brought back to life, I felt joy in my… well, whatever passes for a heart in this body, I guess.”

Flowey hid under yet another barrage, and 2B stalked deeper into the castle. It was dark, gloomy, and completely empty—save for golden flowers, dozens of them, hundreds of them cluttering the landings of staircases and clustering atop tables and framing exquisite paintings.

“Even that started to lose its luster after a while. Until you came along… You’re not really human, are you? No. You’re empty inside. Just like me.”

“You’re not like me,” 2B spat through a storm of coughs. Pod 042 fired on the flower yet again, but Flowey was too nimble.
"In fact... you're Chara, right?"

As Pod 042 scared Flowey back into his hiding place within the castle walls, steady machine-gun fire chewing through the plaster, wood, and bricks underneath the wallpaper, 2B found her attention piqued by one of the largest paintings hanging on the walls.

It looked like a family portrait. On one side was the goat monster 2B had slain back in the ruins, gazing down at the hall with a beatific and motherly smile. On another side was a monster of the same species, burly and tall with a golden mane and thick, curved horns, beaming proudly. He wore a crown.

The two had a child in the painting as well: a child the spitting image of his parents. He was clad in a striped green sweater and dwarfed by his parents as he stood between them, barely coming up to their chests as he leaned against his mother’s arms. At the child’s side, a slightly-taller human-looking figure in a matching shirt stood, its species indicated only by the pale skin of its bare hands and neck—a strip of canvas had been torn away, a ragged triangle obliterating the second child’s face as well as a portion of the king’s chest.

2B wondered how old the painting was. She felt she recognized it—and had the strangest feeling that was she given enough time, she could place where she’d seen it and recall the part that had been defaced.

“We're still inseparable, after all these years...” Flowey popped out of the painting, tearing through the canvas where the goat child’s heart would be. His petals no longer framed a humanoid face, but a facsimile of the goat child’s face instead. “Let's destroy everything in this wretched world. Everyone, everything in these worthless memories... Let's turn 'em all to—”

Pod 042’s hull popped open and fired a searing, blinding beam of plasma. The shot obliterated the painting and Flowey along with it, and left flames licking the ragged and blackened edges of the canvas. Smoke curled from the painting’s elegant frame, drifting into the castle’s stale air. Ashes, dust, and shriveled bits of blackened plant matter trickled from the bare wall exposed by the blast and collected on the floor.

The support pod hovered at 2B’s side, its boxy hull closing like a clamshell. “Analysis: no further life signs detected from the monstrous lifeform designated ‘Flowey.’ Proposal: continue toward the black box signals.”

2B reached out and patted Pod 042 on its sleek, silvery surface, silently and wordlessly commending it for a job well done. She left the burned painting where its remains hung and continued on until she found herself in a gilded hallway, her staggering footsteps echoing over marble tiling as column after golden column flanking her on either side retreated into her peripheral vision.

She blinked, and in that instant Sans the skeleton appeared, standing in her path with a bony grin, his eye sockets twinkling. Despite that, 2B could tell he didn’t seem all that happy to see her.

“Well, kiddo,” said Sans, “you made it. In a few moments, you’ll meet the king. And together, the two of you will decide what happens to us. Pretty big stuff, isn’t it? Having the weight of the world on your shoulders? If you need to lie down for a bit, I’ll understand.” His voice had a sardonic tint to it.

2B raised her sword, a wordless roar hoarsely tearing itself up her throat like an overflowing stream of vomit—

And the sword snapped in two, all but a small shard of its white blade close to the hilt falling to the
“Hmm… Judgment-wise, you’re a pretty bad person. But as bad as you are… you aren’t anywhere near as bad as you could be. You pretty much suck at being evil. Honestly, it’s super embarrassing.”

2B gritted her teeth. “You—you sanctimonious little…” she growled.

The skeleton walked past her, making no attempt to engage her. “But maybe you’d be better… at not killing anyone?” he asked. “Crazy idea, huh? Let me know how that one goes.”

“Fuck y—” 2B glanced over her shoulder at Sans with venom in her eye, but he’d already vanished from the hallway as if he’d never been there at all.

Pod 042 propped up 2B’s shoulder as she stumbled yet again, the golden room spinning around her. “Statement: At the current rate of deterioration, hibernation mode will automatically engage in twenty-seven minutes, five seconds, and counting.”

“How much further, Pod?” Without her visor, with no HUD and thus no map, it felt as though she was half-blind.

“The black box signals are being emitted from a location five meters to the northeast. Proposal: turn back and perform necessary repairs before continuing.”

“W… with what?” 2B shook her head. “The other black box signals… the other androids… Once I get to them, we’ll figure something out. Together.”

“Statement: current plan inadvisable. The status of the signals’ origin points cannot be confirmed.”

2B stumbled. Lines of static ran up and down her visual display. The world flickered into monochrome for a few seconds before color returned to it, superimposed just slightly askew on the patterns of grays and whites.

She kept going.

Sunlight filled the throne room, but it was feeble, muted half-sunlight—cold sunlight. Golden flowers framed tall, thin windows set into the far wall behind the king’s golden throne, and troughs filled with a bouquet of flowers lined the throne. Behind the windows was a soft, muted, pulsing glow, and off in the corner of the throne room was a small table with two chairs and a tea kettle.

The king 2B had seen in the old painting stood by the throne, his head hung low. He was older than his painting had shown, wearier, with streaks of silver in his golden mane and a portly physique that had long ago traded muscle for flab. It took a second for 2B to notice the watering can held in his hand as he stooped over his little personal garden.

He raised his head and looked at 2B with rheumy eyes, dropping the watering can in surprise, and then he stood up, drawing to his full height. Despite having gone to seed quite some time ago, he still loomed over her, surrounded with a fiery aura as a massive trident materialized in his paws. At that moment 2B innately knew that this monster had more than double the strength of Captain Undyne. And here she was, maimed, hardly able to stand, wielding less than half a sword, and less than half an hour away from losing consciousness altogether—even less if she continued to exert herself.

King Asgore looked down at her, and as he did the aura encompassing his titanic physique dispersed. “Oh. Hello there,” he said in a voice both deep and soft as he tossed aside the trident. “You look hurt! I can get you some tea, if you’d like…”
2B pushed herself forward. "The... black boxes," she gasped, pausing to suck down another lungful of air before painfully expelling it. "Where... where are the... androids...?"

It was then that 2B noticed the glass cylinders piled at the throne. Seven in total: six containing ebon cubes... one empty.

Black boxes. Perfect in their proportions, laced with glittering white strata, looking for all the world like somebody had taken a knife to the night sky and minced it. And no bodies to contain them.

For a moment that seemed to last forever, 2B was speechless. All this time, she had hoped she would find her fellow YoRHa androids held captive here at the highest point of the castle. But there was nobody here to rescue. There hadn’t been for years—or perhaps even centuries.

The sword fell from her hand and clattered to the floor. 2B was truly alone down here. Not for the first time, she truly wished that she and 9S had never ventured further than Toriel’s home.

2B’s legs gave out next. Asgore rushed to her side with startling speed; she raised her fist to fight, but as she fell the king wrapped her arms around her and steadied her.

Her muscles tensed like a snake ready to strike. "Pod," she snarled, "execute program—"

"Shh. Shh." The king patted her on the shoulder. "Settle down, child," he said, walking her over to the table in the corner and helping her onto one of the chairs.

2B dug her fingernails into his arm. "You... you monster," she snarled, gasping for air and hacking her lungs out. "You—your people—you killed him... You killed 9S..."

She looked up at him, bewildered, and saw that he seemed on the verge of tears.

Asgore simply gestured to the table, and 2B followed the motion of his fingers.

"What... what is this?" she breathed, her voice a near-whisper as she looked down at the table. There were a saucer and teacup in front of her, the ceramic white with flower print and chipped along the rim.

As 2B slumped over, Asgore grabbed the teapot and poured a light golden-brown liquid into the cup. It steamed. "There, there. It will be all right," he said. "Have some tea while I send for a doctor. It will make you feel better."

2B’s sight went monochrome again for a split second; when the colors returned they were muted and fuzzy. A stabbing pain lanced through her side. She reached out and clutched at the table for support as she doubled over, gritting her teeth. "Why?"

"A long, long time ago," he said, "I lost my dearest child to the surface. He traveled there with nothing but peaceful intentions and came back so grievously wounded that he dropped dead in my own garden." Tears streamed down his furry cheeks. "I will never forget that day... nor the day I vowed revenge."

Asgore sighed. "I am supposed to kill you," he said, bowing his head and tugging on his beard like a nervous tic. "Take your soul. Rip it from your body. Bring the seven souls together, claim their combined power for myself, and shatter the Barrier. I had promised my people retribution against the human race once we were free... but, to be honest... I was never sure if I could go through with it." His muzzle cracked in a weak, self-deprecating smile even as his eyes continued to water. "Please, do have some tea. I swear by its therapeutic properties."
2B reached out with a trembling hand and pinched the handle of the dainty little teacup with her fingers and thumb. The cup trembled in her hand, sending ripples through the tea.

Why was she doing this?

Why was she doing anything?

All she’d wanted to do was strike out against 9S’s killers. All she’d done after the dust had settled was hurt herself.

Perhaps that was what she had wanted all along.

“I do not wish to kill a child like you,” Asgore said, reaching out to steady her hand. “I have killed six too many already.” With a gentle touch, he guided the chipped rim of the teacup to 2B’s lips.

She took a sip. It was sweet and light; it tasted on her tongue the way sunbeams felt on her skin.

“They may call me a coward for that,” the king continued, helping 2B set the teacup back onto its saucer, “and they will be right. But it is a terrible thing to have blood on one’s hands, is it not? Even worse, sometimes, than being a coward?”

2B did not want to agree. Undyne’s accusatory words echoed in her head. You don’t know how to do anything but kill.

“9S…” she whispered.

“No, cowardice wins in the end, I suppose. Your soul will have to wait. Enjoy the tea,” he told her, shuffling off.

“I don’t have a soul,” she croaked.

“I’m sorry?” The king turned around. “I didn’t quite catch…”

“I don’t have a soul,” 2B repeated. Her voice was growing hoarse, but she raised it despite how it scratched her throat. “None of the ‘children’ you’ve killed had a soul. We aren’t human. There are no humans on Earth anymore.” She paused, coughing into her hand. It felt as though she were coughing herself to pieces; a glance at her glove when the fit subsided showed speckles of blood.

“Those ‘souls’ you’ve collected… they’re black box units—primary power sources for YoRHa-issue androids. I know none of those words mean anything to you. But you can’t break any magical barriers with them.”

“Oh,” Asgore sighed, and his sigh carried with it the sound of centuries of quiet and well-hidden desperation. “Oh, that is a shame. Anyway, sit tight—I will return with a doctor posthaste.”

The king exited to the golden hall left her alone in his own throne room. 2B looked down and caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the surface of the tea. Is that really me? she thought, staring at the wild, matted, dust-coated hair; the blood pouring like tears down her cheeks; her ruined, thankfully-shut eye.

2B found herself listing to the side; Pod 042 propped her up before she could fall to the floor.

“Statement: At the current rate of deterioration, hibernation mode will automatically engage in five minutes, forty-one seconds, and counting.”

2B closed her eyes. The world around her went black. “I… I thought you said I had twenty-seven
“Statement: this support unit apologizes for the miscalculation. There is a fault in your circulatory system that was not taken into account. Recalculating. Automatic hibernation mode will engage in seven minutes, thirteen seconds, and counting.”

“There you go again.” 2B laughed bitterly. “I… I wish there’d been a point to all this.” She kept her remaining eye closed, unsure if she had the energy to open it or even if she would still be able to see if she were to open it. “I wish this had all meant something. I wish Nines… had died for something.”

She would never see him again. She would never even see a different version of him.

As her shoulders quaked and her chest heaved, hot tears began to wash away the blood on 2B’s face, leaving a salty taste as they trickled over her lips. In a gesture of small comfort, Pod 042 brushed a lock of her silvery-white hair away from her cheek and tucked it behind her ear, the metal surface of its manipulator arm hard but warm against her skin.

“Statement: this support unit has the authority to close Unit 2B’s tear ducts if that would be preferable. Ceasing tear production may stave off hibernation mode by up to thirty sec—”

“I don’t need that. You’ll… you’ll stay with me to the end, won’t you, Pod?” 2B asked, reaching up to give her support pod a gentle pat, fumbling in her blindness. Her fingers slid off its hull.

Pod 042 dipped in a slow nod. “Statement: this unit would dream of nothing else, YoRHa Unit 2B. One can only hope that someday, somebody will be able to resuscitate you… with any luck, somebody friendly.”

2B nodded. “One can only hope,” she repeated. “Pod. Cease verbal communication.” She bowed her head and let the still, gravely silence filling the throne room envelop her. Even the gentle hum of her support pod in tandem with the sound of the black box buried in her chest faded away.

She waited in darkness and silence.

But nobody came.

Greetings.

I am Chara.

Thank you.

Your power awakened me from death.

The hushed whispering of seven voices threaded through the void behind the speaker.

At first, I was so confused.

Our plan had failed, hadn’t it?

Why was I brought back to life?

But I think I understand now.
Two scarlet lights blazed in the darkness.

I’ve been observing you for quite some time.

With your guidance, I realized the purpose of my reincarnation.

You’re just like me, aren’t you?

You crave what I crave.

Against the black backdrop of nothingness, the matte surfaces of a YoRHa battle uniform, with its ornate white trimming standing out, became faintly visible.

You see that glittering wheel hanging up there in the heavens…

And you want to tear it down.

A gloved hand wreathed with chains laid itself on the barely-visible figure’s shoulders, followed by others.

Now we have reached the absolute.

There is nothing left for us here.

The figure began to be dragged back, deeper into the abyss, as arms and chains wrapped around it and bound it.

But I have a deal for you.

You have unfinished business with 9S, don’t you?

As the lingering traces of its form faded into the infinite distance, one more question from it rang through the void.

Don’t you, 2E?

Chapter End Notes

Ending A: flowering [A]ntipathy

□□□□□□□

To all readers:

Thank you very much for reading my fanfic.

This fic has several different storylines. You’ve witnessed "Route A," but there are still many story elements you haven’t seen yet. I highly recommend you keep reading to witness the full experience.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the fic!

And I promise, Route B is gonna be less grim.
Memories of Dust

Chapter Summary

2B starts over.

- Commencing System Check
- Memory Unit: Green
- Initializing Tactics Log
- Loading Geographic Data
- Vitals: Green

I... I don't like this idea, Chara.

Wh... what? N-no, I'm not...

Big kids don't cry.

Yeah, you're right.

No! I'd never doubt you, Chara. Never!

Y... yeah! We'll be strong! We'll free everyone.

- Remaining MP: 100%
- Black Box Temperature: Normal
- Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal

...Where is the other one?

- Activating IFF
- Activating FCS
- Initializing Pod Connection

“Unable to establish a connection to the Bunker. Proposal: find a position free of signal interference.”

- Launching DBU Setup
- Activating Inertia Control System
- Activating Environmental Sensors

“2B, are you all right? 2B!”

- Equipment Status: Green
- All Systems Green
- Combat Preparations Complete

2B squeezed herself free of the wreckage of her mangled flight unit, setting foot on the grassy, flower-dotted soil coating the ground.
All around her were the tall, sloped walls of an enormous cavernous grotto, the only light coming from a small aperture in the ceiling dozens of meters above. Muted sunlight filtered through the thick air and illuminated motes of dust floating in languid spirals on gentle updrafts. Buttercups with wide, bright yellow petals swayed gently, disturbed by 2B’s footfalls. On the other side of the cavern stood crumbling pillars, a weathered and eroded brick wall, and a yawning, arched doorway lined by flickering, dimly-lit torches.

“2B.” 9S laid a steady hand on her shoulder as she pulled her arms free of the wrecked craft. “Any damage?”

9S? 2B’s mind raced. The last thing she remembered was the throne room and the king, and…

9S… But he’s…

Why was she back here? How? And how was 9S still alive?

Before she knew it, 2B had thrown her arms around him.

9S just stood there as 2B squeezed him tighter, unaccustomed to 2B’s uncharacteristic behavior. He gingerly hugged her back and gave her an awkward, stiff pat on the back. “Uh… of course, I’m alive, 2B. You’re the one who crashed.”

“Thanks, Nines… ess. 9S.” 2B pulled herself away from her partner, coughing nervously into her sleeve before stiffly saluting. “Thank you, 9S.”

“Aw, 2B…” 9S smiled. It wasn’t fair that he looked so boyish and innocent when he smiled. “I’m just glad you’re okay. I’m supposed to look after you, remember?”

2B took a deep breath and calmed her nerves, retreating back behind her icy facade. “9S, does this all seem… familiar to you?” she asked, wondering if 9S really didn’t remember that all this had happened before.

“Familiar?” 9S frowned as he studied the surrounding environment. “I mean, caves like these kinda blur together, but other than that… Can’t say it rings any bells.”

It was as though 2B’s consciousness had been sent back from the present and overlaid over her past self. Impossible—yet here she was. 2B was used to certain things repeating themselves—but never this literally.

I must be going insane, she thought. This is a hallucination brought on by failing logic circuits in a dying mind. It is the only way I can explain how I have returned here, how 9S could be alive, and how I could have possibly hugged him. But it felt far, far too real to be any sort of dream.

“Observation: YoRHa unit 9S abandoned his position,” Pod 153 interjected in its cool female voice, “once your flight unit crashed. Perhaps he wished to guarantee your own safety foremost over engaging with the Goliath.”

“Before continuing with the mission,” 9S hastily added, “of course.”

“Statement: YoRHa unit 9S has retreated from the battle against orders, and as such is now a deserter,” Pod 042, 2B’s own support pod, answered. “Proposal: 9S should be prosecuted for dereliction of duty. The recommended sentence—”

“Belay that thought, Pod 042.” 2B held up her hand. If I am dreaming, I may as well make the most of it. Fantasy or not, she thought, this time I could make sure things end up differently. “I want you
to run a deep scan of my cognitive core for any abnormalities.” 2B’s words felt perfunctory even to her as if she were sleepwalking through her previous steps, even though she was already going off-script.

A tall flower sprouted up from the ground between 2B’s feet. It smiled at her. “Howdy!” it chirped. “My name’s Flowey! Flowey the— oh, shit, it’s you again!”

Before 2B or 9S could react, Flowey shot back underground.

“…Friend of yours, Tubes?” 9S asked, half bemused, half amused.

So there was one entity that remembered as well as her. 2B shook her head. “Perhaps my reputation precedes me.”

Struck with an idea out of the blue, she walked over to 9S’s flight unit and climbed into its cradle, letting the airship fold around her to embrace her body.

“Hey—2B! Wh—what are you doing? What about me?”

It was time to test just how impermeable that barrier protecting this underground kingdom really was. 2B took off. She flew into the spotlight, aligned her flight path with the hole in the ceiling, and let the outside world rush toward her.

She wasn’t the least bit surprised by it, but the last thing 2B heard was the sound of thick metal plating crumpling like aluminum foil.

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Commencing System Check
Memory Unit: Green

Can you hear me? We want you to wake up…

You have to stay determined! You can’t give up! You are the future of humans and monsters…

Please… Wake up… I don’t like this plan anymore. I… I…

No, I said… I said I’d never doubt you. Six, right? We just have to get six… And we’ll do it together, right?

- Initializing Tactics Log
- Loading Geographic Data
- Vitals: Green
- Remaining MP: 100%

The other soul… I think it’s…

- Black Box Temperature: Normal
- Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
- Activating IFF
- Activating FCS
- Initializing Pod Connection

“Unable to establish a connection to the Bunker. Proposal: find a position free of signal interference.”
• Launching DBU Setup
• Activating Inertia Control System
• Activating Environmental Sensors

“2B, are you all right? 2B!”

• Equipment Status: Green
• All Systems Green
• Combat Preparations Complete

2B squeezed herself free of the wreckage of her mangled flight unit, setting foot on the grassy, flower-dotted soil coating the ground.

Much to her frustration, everything happened exactly as it had before, except that this time she didn’t accidentally hug 9S and Flowey laughed at her when he showed up. And then, just as 2B had expected, Toriel, the caretaker of the ruins—or, more accurately, Toriel, the former queen of the monstrous kingdom—made her appearance, stepping through the crumbling stone archway into the cavern. “Oh, I do hope that nasty flower has not been—Hmm? I thought I’d seen him creeping around here,” she wondered aloud.

For an instant, 2B wondered if Toriel had retained her memories as well. However, there was a genuine look of surprise on the woman’s face as she noticed the two androids. She held out her hand. “Children, are you two lost? My name is Toriel, caretaker of the ruins…”

2B shuddered as the knowledge that the monster-woman she’d killed had come back without a trace of her memories—just like 9S—washed over her.

Everything disappeared. She wasn’t seeing the monster in front of her. Or rather, she was, but the world around Toriel had changed.

She saw Toriel sitting beside a roaring hearth filled with flickering violet flames, younger with a warmer smile and a more vibrant look in her eyes. A little monster boy her spitting image sat on the floor at her side, cross-legged, looking up at 2B with an eager smile.

“Do you like it?” the boy asked, staring expectantly. “Open it up. There’s a surprise inside.”

2B looked down and saw a golden heart-shaped locket lying in her outstretched hand, the light from the fire flowing and dancing over its polished surface.

She thumbed the tab on the locket’s side and popped it open. Inside the locket she could see the mechanisms of a tiny music box: a perforated cylinder and a metal comb whose teeth produced the ringing notes.

There was a message etched into the inside of the locket’s cover in a child’s hasty scrawl.

Best friends forever.

“I was expecting chocolate,” she heard herself say in a voice that was not her own. The mother and child both laughed, and she laughed, too.

The intrusive thought passed through 2B’s mind like a burst of interference, for a split second numbing her limbs and blanking out her thoughts—and then she was back.
From that moment on, things proceeded mostly the way they had the first time. Toriel welcomed 2B and 9S into her home, and with characteristic unprofessionalism, 9S took advantage of every unnecessary act of hospitality the old goat provided. As much as 2B liked to pretend his attitude was irksome (and sometimes she did not need to pretend), she always appreciated his presence.

“I know you must feel conflicted,” 2B told 9S as the two of them sat down at Toriel’s table, “about abandoning our mission for my sake. But I believe you did the right thing in following me down here. If anybody wishes to accuse you of dereliction of duty if… when we return, I will personally vouch for you.”

The time wasn’t yet right to tell him that this place was inescapable. 2B wasn’t sure when she’d be ready to tell him.

A relieved smile stretched across 9S’s face as he played with the wilted, browned flowers placed in the center of the table. “See, that’s why I rescued you.”

2B crossed her arms. “I would have done the same for you. Purely as a matter of professional courtesy, of course.”

“Oh, of course, yes.” 9S accidentally snapped a withered blossom off its stem and hastily tried to reattach it. “That’s why I did it, too. Are you feeling okay, 2B? I’d expected you to be a lot more injured after a crash like that.”

“I am unhurt,” she said, but as the words left her lips a sharp, stabbing pain shot up her side from her hip to her shoulder, sharp enough to make her involuntarily wince.

Strange. She hadn’t been injured at all after the crash in the previous timelines. Had some of her wounds carried over from one timeline to another, the same way her consciousness and memories had?

9S stood up and helped 2B to her feet. “C’mon, let me have a look.”

Toriel popped her head out of the kitchen. “Children, I hope you don’t mind me asking where—”

“Your pie is about to burn, ma’am,” 2B said.

Toriel glanced back at the oven. “Goodness, my child, you are right!” she cried out, rushing back into the kitchen.

As 9S helped her over to Toriel’s spare bedroom, 2B opened up a secure, nonverbal channel to her support pod. *Pod 042, while 9S is doing his maintenance checks I want you to run a deep scan for any cognitive abnormalities.*

*Acknowledged,* the pod replied, its smooth and soothing voice ringing in 2B’s ears, inaudible to everyone but her.

2B woke up in darkness, although her eyes quickly adjusted to the gloom. She was still in the spare bedroom, the soft bedsheets underneath her like velvet compared to some of the surfaces she usually had to sleep on. As she sat up, she prodded her side where the pain had been. It was gone. Whatever had gone wrong, 9S must have repaired it.
9S was slumped over on a chair in the corner of the room, his satchel and a collection of tools and spare parts lying at his feet. Sitting among the tools was a small porcelain plate with a smattering of crumbs on it and a fork. 2B looked down and saw another little plate and fork on the floor beside the bed, this one with a sliver of pie sitting on it.

When she’d closed her eyes she’d half expected to wake up back in Asgore’s throne room, the strange dream over and done. But she was still here, which meant it was all real.

2B opened up a secure channel to her support pod, speaking to it in a silent, telepathic whisper. *Pod 042. Have you completed your cognitive diagnostic?*

*Affirmative. Statement: the diagnostic finished running its course exactly one point two one five hours ago.*

*Have you found anything?*

The answer Pod 042 came back with shocked 2B. *Analysis: no abnormalities detected,* it said.

For a millisecond 2B struggled to regain her icy composure. *Nothing?* Then what had compromised her? Whose voices had been creeping into her audio processors?

*Good,* she said. *Thank you, Pod 042.*

2B reached down and picked up the plate, resting it on her lap as she sat on the edge of the bed. She took a tentative stab at the slice of pie with her fork. The filling was firm, giving easily but still retaining some resistance, and the crust yielded much less readily.

With some trepidation—she didn’t make a habit of eating and wasn’t sure what to expect—2B slid the laden fork into her mouth.

She scarcely had the words to describe it.

Though it had long grown cold, the pie still tasted warm somehow: the filling had a sweet, buttery, almost creamy taste offset by a hot aromatic tinge from the cinnamon and the crust was light, airy, and flaky. It was so sweet that 2B nearly gagged on it—never in her life had she eaten something even half as good as this. Before she knew it she’d cleaned her plate.

2B crept past 9S, letting the door swing open and soft incandescent light from the hallway peek into the room, and stepped into the living room. Toriel was sitting in a chair beside the hearth, just as in 2B’s vision from earlier that day, and was absorbed in an old, thick book.

“Miss… Toriel, was it?”

Toriel looked up at 2B, reflected light from the fire shimmering on her half-moon-shaped reading glasses. “Yes, my child? What is it? There is more pie in the kitchen if you’d like another slice—”

Remembering the portrait from the castle, 2B added, “Or—may I call you *Queen* Toriel?”

Toriel laughed it off. “I beg your pardon? Does this humble little house look so much like a castle to you?” she asked with a faint, yet nervous hint of a smile that let 2B know she’d struck a nerve.

“I know who you are.”

Toriel removed her reading glasses and set down her book. “May I ask how?”

2B froze. Of course, she couldn’t explain that she had traveled through time. “Your regal bearing is
unmistakable; you carry yourself with the pride of authority,” she answered, lying through her teeth. “Furthermore, the clothes you are wearing, though faded, were once purple: a color associated all throughout human history with royalty due to the rarity of the dye. In addition—”

Toriel held up her paw. “Enough. There is no hiding from you, I see. I do wonder how you can see through that blindfold—”

“Quite easily, actually.”

“Do you have a question for me?” the queen asked, her voice clipped and terse. It seemed she did not care much for talking about her past.

2B did but wasn’t certain how to articulate it. What Asgore had said to her in the throne room still swirled around in her head, a cacophony of bittersweet grief and quiet anguish.

2B thought about YoRHa. She had served them with pride, yes, but… one could not follow all of the orders one was given for so many years without beginning to resent the ones who gave those orders. Especially when one was forced to kill...

And now she was outside their sphere of influence: in a subterranean realm where no one would ever find her or 9S, where the signals from her black box would never reach the Bunker, where 2B and 9S could go for the rest of their lives without ever having to worry about the day she would inevitably have to...

Did she dare defect from YoRHa—leave everybody she knew back aboveground to struggle on their own against the horde of machines—all to keep herself and her partner safe from their bloody fate?

Which option, leaving or staying, would she find harder to live with? Which choice would prove more loathsome?

2B struggled to condense the paradoxes raging in her mind into a single line of inquiry that could soothe her troubled mind. “Why,” she asked Toriel, “did you run away?”

Toriel returned to her book. “Hmph.”

She tried to rephrase the question. “Are you confident it was the right thing to do, Your Highness?”

Toriel pretended she hadn’t heard 2B’s question and kept reading. So 2B repeated it.

“I would rather you did not ask such impertinent questions, young lady.” Toriel responded before she stood up, closed her book, and strode off to her own bedroom.

Struck by embarrassment, 2B quickly added, “And thank you for the pie, ma’am. It was very good.”

If Toriel had heard her, she made no indication that she had.

2B stood alone in front of the fireplace and watched the lavender flames inside flicker and die.

There were no answers for her in this house.

-----

Having left early in the morning (before Toriel had woken up), 2B and 9S trudged through the thick snow. Just as before, 9S lagged behind a bit, awestruck at the environment, and this time around, 2B took it much more slowly as well.
She walked just slowly enough for 9S to slip in front of her, and when he did, she crouched down, buried her hands in the snow—it was lighter and fluffier than she’d expected—and shaped a heaping handful of the stuff into a rough sphere.

Her HUD began to flicker. 2B adjusted the visor covering her eyes and the flickering stopped. Shrugging it off as merely the result of the temperature differential between the ruins and the forest, 2B turned her attention back to the snowball.

“You think we’ll find a way past that ‘Barrier’ out here, 2B?” 9S asked, looking up at the cloudy sky that, despite its lack of sun, cast a just-past-sunrise glow through the heavy gray clouds.

“Yes. I am certain of it.” 2B completed her snowball, hefting it in one hand. She threw it and nailed 9S in the back of the head. 2B almost found it amusing enough to smile (almost). 9S had been right. This was fun.

9S shuddered from the cold and looked over his shoulder, clearly shocked to see his partner crouched down in the middle of a snowbank. “2B, what are you doing?”

“It’s…” 2B stood up, brushing the snow off her gloves. “Something humans used to do in the winter. They would make little balls of this stuff and throw them at each other. It was… fun. Apparently.”

“Huh. Yeah, I remember reading that somewhere.” 9S laughed. “So, who are you, and what have you done with the real 2B?”

“I simply wanted to… see things from your perspective.”

“Hah!” 9S scoffed as he brushed the snow off his hair. “Give me some credit, 2B! As if I’d ever do something like that to you!”

With that out of her system, 2B caught up with 9S as he ambled his way down the ragged path through the alpine forest. She laid a hand on his shoulder. “9S.”

“What is it, 2B? Something wrong?”

“We’re cut off from the Bunker,” she reminded him. “That means we can’t upload any new backup data. If either of us dies in here, we won’t come back.”

“If—” 9S pondered her advice. “I knew that. Granted, it hasn’t been that dangerous so far, but—”

“Don’t do anything reckless, 9S. Stay safe.”

“Uh…” 9S reached up and lifted her hand off his shoulder, giving it a sympathetic squeeze as he laughed a little awkwardly, evidently not sure where his partner’s sudden burst of sentimentality had come from. “You, too, 2B. I mean, you’re the one who—”

“You are far less cautious than you should be,” 2B said, taking the lead as she trudged down the path through the forest. “Too eager to endanger yourself. Scanners aren’t built for combat the same way Type-B androids are. Please keep that in mind.”

2B brushed away a spiny tree branch in her way and trudged onward, the snow crunching beneath her boots, but realized far too late as she put her foot down that there was no longer any solid ground beneath it. She’d failed to recognize the familiar scenery around her and had stepped into the same sinkhole 9S had found himself stuck in before time had rewound itself.
The snow was soft against her exposed skin but cold enough that it nearly stung as 2B reached up and scrambled at the frozen ground. 9S and his support pod grabbed her by the arm and started pulling, while Pod 042 took hold of her other arm.

“Hey, there. Looks like you could use a hand, pal.”

And right on cue, there was Sans, the sanctimonious little prick.

“We are fine,” 2B called out to him, very much not willing to involve herself in the skeleton’s insufferable routine yet again. “Pay him no mind,” she told 9S.

9S slipped a bit against the icy ground beneath the snowdrifts, though, and gladly took Sans’ hand for support. The hand came loose, of course, and in his shock 9S lost his footing and tumbled headfirst into the sinkhole, his legs protruding from the churned-up snow like trees.

“Whoops. That wasn’t supposed to happen.” Sans shoved his remaining hand and severed wrist into his jacket pockets. He started to whistle, gingerly sidestepping the hole in the ground as he walked away.

After about a minute of embarrassed flailing, the androids and their support pods managed to pull themselves free.

“That’s it,” said 9S as he sat down, pulled off one of his boots, and shook the snow out of it. “I’m sick of this stuff.”

“I suppose snow angels are out of the question, then,” 2B replied as she brushed snow, white on silvery-white, out of his hair.

“Yeah, I—what?”

“I overheard you talking to 21O about them,” 2B lied.

9S blushed. “Eavesdropping, throwing snowballs… am I rubbing off on you, 2B?”

2B would have answered, but another anomaly appeared on her HUD—a brief error message that flashed by too quickly for 2B to make it out.

2B frowned. “Pod 042, repeat the latest contents of my error log.”

The pod took a few seconds to process 2B’s command. “Statement: no new errors logged since the crash.”

“Is something wrong?” 9S asked as he pulled his boots back on.

“It was nothing,” 2B replied, shaking her head. “False positive.” After all, if there really had been something wrong, 9S would have already caught it during his maintenance.

Much to 9S’s surprise, when the two androids encountered the great Papyrus, 2B decided to embrace his “challenges,” even if it meant having to suffer through more of Sans and his terrible sense of humor. She was doing it more for 9S than for any other reason—although, of course, she’d never let him know it.

The “traps, japes, and puzzles” Papyrus had promised were… not at all what either android had expected.
Sitting on a lone snow-dusted table standing in the woods was a frosted plate of frozen spaghetti. Papyrus was nowhere to be seen.

2B broke off a small chunk of pasta and placed it inside her mouth.

9S cringed. “Um, 2B? What are you…”

She ate it.

9S picked up the sheaf of paper lying on the table next to the frost-coated plate. “‘Hello, human. This is my most ingenious trap yet,’” he read aloud. “2B, spit that out! It could be poison!” He knocked the plate on the ground and stomped on it for good measure.

Androids did not eat for sustenance, but occasionally did so for pleasure; unlike some of her peers, 2B had little experience with food. However, she did not need to know what spaghetti normally tasted like to recognize that the hard shard of noodles and tomato sauce was an utterly vile affront to the senses. Especially compared to the heavenly slice of pie from last night. 2B did not need to be told to eject the so-called meal: she did so completely willingly and with gusto.

9S read on. “‘The human will eat this gourmet dinner and will be so enthralled by its delicious cromulence…” He paused. “Not a real word,” he commented. “‘They will waste their time eating it while I set up a truly inescapable trap. The great Papyrus japes once again.’” He let the paper fall to the ground, disappointed. “This guy’s not playing with a full deck. Anyway, how’s it taste?”

2B grabbed a handful of snow and shoved it into her mouth. The taste still lingered. “I’d rather it had been poison.”

The two of them trudged onward to Papyrus’ next trap.

Across a barren field, the skeleton stood tall, his gloved hands on his hips, his crimson scarf fluttering in the breeze. “Well?” he called out with his booming, nasally voice. “How was the spaghetti? Did it delight the senses? Did it tickle your taste buds? Did it embiggen your spirits with its sheer culinary —”

“It was the most awful thing I have ever eaten,” said 2B.

Papyrus’ bony face fell. “R-really?”

Sans reached up to pat his brother on the shoulder. “Don’t let it get to you, bro. These humans wouldn’t know culinary excellence if it hit them in the face.”

“Yes, of course!” Papyrus pounded a fist into his hand. “I feel sorry for you, pitiful humans!”

Sans shook his head. “I hear they don’t even make their food with magic.”

“You don’t even—” Papyrus let out an exaggerated sigh. “I truly weep for you. You poor people simply cannot understand true culinary artistry!” Papyrus stroked his chin. “Although you do have quite good fashion senses… Anyway! Behold my next puzzle!” He flung out his arms. “Fiendish in its execution—try it if you dare!”

The field of snow was still empty. 9S stepped forward, but 2B threw her arm out in front of his chest. What could be under the snow? Landmines? Electrified panels? Sharpened sticks?

Papyrus sighed. “Sans, give them the puzzle.”
Sans rolled his eyes (somehow), walked across the field, picked up two pieces of paper, and handed them both to the two androids. “Hey,” he whispered, “I know it might not seem like much, but my brother really tries, okay? Pretend you’re struggling with this one and I’ll buy you guys burgers or something.” With that, he returned to his brother’s side, crossing his arms in tandem with Papyrus.

The last thing 2B wanted was a burger from Sans. Nevertheless, she looked down at the damp sheet of paper in her hands. The ink had started to run, but it was clearly a crossword puzzle. She glanced at 9S’s sheet. His was unmistakably a word search puzzle.

“Dumbfounded, are you? Dumbfounded by my staggering intellect!” Papyrus crowed. “Speechless in the presence of the greatest mind the…”

“Um, Papyrus?” 9S called out, holding out the word search and shaking it. “Is this really the puzzle?”

Papyrus gasped and held a hand to his gaping mouth. “Oh… oh no… how could I not see it?” He rushed over and tore the pages from the androids’ hands. “This puzzle isn’t fair at all! I am so sorry I didn’t notice your disabilities!”

“Excuse me?” 2B asked.

“Those strips of cloth over your eyes—why, you two are blind! Blind as bats! And here I am giving you puzzles that rely exclusively on sight.” Papyrus flung his hand to his forehead. “No, do not feel hurt or belittled. The shame is mine and mine alone, poor humans, that I, the great Papyrus, was so insensitive and unobservant—”

“We don’t wear these things because we can’t see,” said 9S, trying to reassure the poor skeleton. “Our eyes work fine. If anything—”

Papyrus dropped to his knees. “Oh, how foolish of me! Your religious practices must forbid you the use of your eyes. A thousand pardons for my religious and cultural insensitivity!” He sniffled. “I… I always try to make my japes, puzzles, and traps as inclusive and welcoming as possible… but…”

9S patted him on the shoulder. “Uh, no, these are our visors. They help us see.”

“Oh.” Papyrus leaped to his feet. “Oh!” He shoved the pages back into 9S and 2B’s hands. “Please continue, then!” And with a nasally laugh he rakishly flung his scarf over his shoulder and strode over to the other side of the field.

9S looked over to 2B and shrugged, then studied his own puzzle. “Well, that was easy,” he said after a few seconds. “How about you, 2B?”

2B peered at the sheet of paper in her own hands, but every word and shape on the page she tried to focus on seemed to slide away from her gaze. She blinked a few times, trying to resolve the letters, but the world only seemed to grow fuzzier.

“2B, are you all right?”

Her legs felt weak, weak like they’d felt in the throne room before she’d traveled back to the past, and with nothing to hold her up 2B crumpled to the ground.

“2B!” 9S knelt at her side, grabbing her by the shoulders. His voice sounded further away with every passing second. “2B, what’s wrong? You bastards, what did you do to her?”
2B reached out and grabbed at 9S’s collar with fumbling, numbing fingers. Error messages and warning lights flashed across her HUD faster than she could read them.

“9S,” she choked out, “it’s not them, it’s—”

Everything went black.

Toriel woke up that morning to find the room she had offered to her newest guests empty save for a loose sheet of paper lying on the bed. And on that paper in strong, impossibly neat handwriting was written:

\[
\text{HRH Toriel:}\]

\[
\text{Thank you for your hospitality. It is unfortunate that we could not stay longer. I, however, have questions to which I must have answers. It would be nice if our paths crossed again soon; your presence was somewhat}\n\]

A word was scratched out, a word that looked like it started with a "C" and ended with "-ing."

\[
\text{appreciated.}\n\]

– YoRHa No. 2 Type-B
[B] Possessed by Disease

Chapter Summary

9S has to go it alone here.

9S felt the tips of 2B’s fingers scratch against his collarbone as she collapsed.

He stood over her body with his sword in hand, grasping its hilt with a white-knuckle grip in the hopes that his hands would stop trembling.

The skeletons rushed forward.

“Stay back!” 9S snarled, adrenaline coursing through his system. “One more step and I’ll cut you to pieces!”

They took a step backward. The shorter one held up his hands. “Whoa, hey, kid, I think your friend needs help…”

“I said, stay back!” 9S kept his sword held out in front of him as he knelt beside 2B and placed two fingers from his free hand over her neck, constantly glancing from her over to the skeletons and back. As his fingers brushed against her bare skin he jerked them away; 2B’s skin was hot to the touch. Even the snow around her was starting to melt. Her breath came out in shallow, feverish gasps.

What the hell… would produce these symptoms? A logic virus? How could I not have noticed earlier? 9S racked his brain for an answer as he dug through his satchel for a syringe of a vaccine. Once he had the syringe in his hand he steadied his aim and drove the needle into 2B’s neck, depressing the plunger until every drop of vaccine had entered her circulatory system.

Nothing changed. 2B’s temperature kept rising.

“Pod 042,” he growled, acutely aware of the blood singing in his ears, “what the hell is going on here?”

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• Commencing System Check
• Memory Unit: Green
• Initializing Tactics Log
• Loading Geographic Data
• Vitals: Yellow

Hey, Chara! Smile for the camera!

Oh, whoops, it looks like I left the lens cap on.

Ha! I did it on purpose that time!

Now you’re smiling for no reason!
2B woke up, and her sight returned to her soon afterward. The resolution was low, the display monochrome, but she could make out 9S standing at her side—pixelated and blurry as his image was. She couldn’t pull up her HUD. She couldn’t move, either—not to lift a finger, nor even to open her mouth and speak. This was safe mode; almost every process in her body was disabled by default.

9S sighed in relief. “Oh, thank god. It’s not a virus.”

She was lying on something hard—hard, but not metal or plastic. Wood. Not a cot or an operating table. Behind 9S was what could have been a sink loaded with dirty dishes. A kitchen? Was she in a kitchen? Why was she in a kitchen?

“Don’t be afraid, 2B.” 9S patted her on the forehead. His hand was frigid. “I’ve got you stabilized. I’m re-enabling some of your drivers now.”

2B winced and blinked away reflexive tears as her vision sharpened. Color returned to the world. Her HUD was still gone, though—9S must have removed her visor. She noticed that 9S’s cheeks were flushed with exertion, and both Pod 042 and 153 were hovering at his side.

“Nod your head if you can.”

2B did so. Emboldened, she tried to sit up, but 9S held her down. Her head throbbed. The normal resonant thrumming of her black box had pitched up to a quiet, buzzing whine.

“Don’t overexert yourself,” 9S cautioned her. “We haven’t figured out what’s wrong yet. Can you speak?”

“No,” she said, staring up at the unfamiliar ceiling. Her voice came out as a hoarse whisper. “I don’t
think I can, 9S.”

9S couldn’t help but grin just a little. “Okay, either you’re really about to die, or I forgot to re-enable your humor inhibitors.”

His gentle ribbing put 2B’s mind at ease. She turned her head and glanced around the room. It was definitely a kitchen. “Who’s ‘we?’ And why are we in a kitchen?”

“I… got help.”

“Analysis complete,” Pod 042 announced as it hovered at 2B’s side. “Statement: forced shutdown occurred due to a fault in Unit 2B’s cooling system that allowed the black box to reach an unacceptable temperature range. Normal unit reactivation is prohibited until the damaged component is restored. Further information transferred to Pod 153.”

Pod 153 chimed in. “Statement: a valve in coolant transfer subsystem Rho-three-four-seven-six has become misaligned, preventing the free and even flow of coolant throughout the body.”

9S slumped over. “Oh, god, 2B, I’m sorry. 153, can we realign the valve?”

“Negative. The component has degraded to the point at which replacement is the only option.”

Crestfallen, 9S put a hand to his forehead. “Dammit,” he muttered. “This—This is all my fault, 2B. I must have accidentally damaged you while I was doing your maintenance last night.” His fist pounded against the table. “D-Damn!”

That was possible, but 2B wasn’t so sure any clumsiness of 9S’s part was the culprit. This wasn’t the first unexplainable injury she’d had since time had last reset.

Sans popped up next to 9S, appearing so suddenly it was as if he’d teleported into existence (as he was wont to do). “Hey, doc. How’s the patient?”

Oh, great. Sans was here.

“Her core’s overheating.” 9S took 2B’s hand, and it was then that she realized that it wasn’t that his hands were ice cold, as much as it felt that way to her—she really was burning up, and from her perspective everything else was icy.

“Fever, eh?” Sans tapped his foot. “So, what, fluids, bed rest, that sort of stuff? Papyrus!” he called out. “What’s that soup you made back when Undyne got the flu?”

“None of that will help,” 2B responded, not in the least bit enthusiastic to try more of Papyrus’ culinary masterpieces. “A failed component of my cooling system needs replacement.”

“Oh.” Sans cringed. “And I guess you can’t just pop over to the auto shop and get a new one. But here’s a thought… the Royal Scientist has a lab over in Hotland. She does tons of work in robotics!”

9S scoffed at the suggestion. “We androids are a little more advanced than mere—”

Sans stuck his hands in his jacket pockets. “Trust me, Doctor Alphys could whip up a hundred of whatever you need in five minutes. She’s super hard to get a hold of, though… you’d have to visit her in person.”

Hotland. It didn’t take a staggering intellect to tell which segment of this underground kingdom that name referred to. And if 9S had to go there, then he’d have to pass through the watery tunnels,
where he’d run into…

Papyrus barged into the kitchen. “Everybody out!” he screeched. “Patient on the couch! I am going to make the finest, most delicious fever remedy the world has ever seen! The world will know my skills not only as a chef and a hunter of humans but as a great physician as well!”

“All right, then, Sans.” 9S gestured to Pod 153. “If I had 153 bring schematics for the valve we need with you, could you run over to her lab and have her construct this for us?”

Sans shrugged. “Okay, one, do you really trust me to ask her to build the right thing? Papyrus, what happened when you had me get you half a pound of biscuits?”

“Dinner was ruined! It was supposed to be biscuits with gravy, not brisket with gravy!”

“Also, Doctor Alphys kinda refuses to speak to me. And I’ve got an appointment later today.” Sans leaned in between the two androids. “Besides,” he said, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “someone’s gotta stay behind and keep Papyrus from feeding 2B his candy and cough syrup soup.”

9S’s face turned ashen. “Fine. I’ll go find her.”

“Wait. 9S.” 2B tried—and failed—once again to sit up. The frustration of being resigned to this table—and in the same house as Sans, as if being injured wasn’t bad enough—hurt worse than the splitting headache she was currently enduring. If 9S ran into Undyne on his own, he’d be helpless—but how could she tell him that? With the static running through her brain she doubted she could think clearly enough to explain convincingly that she’d traveled through time. “Be careful. Do not… meander.”

9S saluted. “I won’t waste any time, ma’am.”

“Actually, take as much time as you need.” Sans patted 9S on the back. “She’s patient.”

A hush settled over the kitchen.

“He’s cook,” Sans added, pointing at Papyrus. And then, pointing at 9S, he added (after a pregnant pause to let everybody anticipate what he was going to say), “He’s android.”

Papyrus audibly ground his teeth as he tended to his veritable witch’s brew and 2B felt a strong sense of empathy toward him.

Please, hurry, 2B thought as she let her heavy eyes fall shut. Sleep was a welcome respite; the last thing she needed now was to be subjected to all this any longer than necessary.

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The instructions from Sans had been simple. *Take the road from Snowdin to Waterfall, stay on the path, take a right at Gerson’s shop, and when you reach the Echo Garden, keep going straight into Hotland until you see a big, white building.* Sounded simple enough.

As 9S hurried along, his own guilt over 2B’s condition gnawed away at him, irrational as it was. The maintenance work he’d done the night before hadn’t even come close to the now-damaged coolant subsystem in question, but he couldn’t help but feel that his fingers must have slipped and had some effect somewhere down the line.

9S couldn’t help but recall his first words to 2B. *The Commander’s put me in charge of your*
That was his job, just like how 2B’s job was killing machines. And unlike 2B, evidently, he wasn’t much good at it.

The silence bothered him almost as much as the guilt. No chatter from the Bunker, no targets constantly being updated on his HUD, no 21O to hand down new objectives from Command, and consequently a lot less talk from Pod 153. And of course, no 2B to chat with. If he strained his ears he could almost hear indistinct radio chatter, but it must have been his imagination: a sort of phantom pain as if getting cut off from the Bunker was like a part of himself had been amputated.

No, it wasn’t just silence—it was listlessness. No missions. Nothing telling 9S what to do but his own conscience. It was funny that despite how often he chafed under strict leadership, down here he almost missed it.

As the gloomy tunnel walls of Waterfall passed him by, 9S caught a flash of red light out of the corner of his eye from one of the many tributary tunnels snaking away from the slightly-paved main path through the area. His heavy footfalls slapping against the thin pools of water littering the path ceased as he came to a stop and looked around, his own breathing loud in his ears.

There was the red light again, off in the dark distance. Even so far away from it, 9S could tell at the second glance that it was none other than the glare of a machine lifeform’s optical sensor.

His hand flew to his sword’s hilt. Of course, he thought. If 2B and I could get lost down here, who’s to say a few machines couldn’t get stuck in this place as well?

9S tapped on his pod’s hull with his free hand. “Pod 153, scan for machine lifeforms.” A second later, the sparsely-detailed map in the corner of his HUD lit up with a cluster of black arrowhead icons. Machines. And not too far off, too.

Do I deal with these things now, he asked himself, or keep going? 2B had urged him to hurry, but any machine left alive could hurt somebody. On the other hand, who knew how long 2B’s condition would stay stable? Pod 042 could only do so much on its own, and with those two skeletons “helping” (nice as they were), who knew how bad things could get?

No, he and 2B could take care of it once she was hale and hearty again. Machines could wait.

A plaintive cry cut through the humid, dank air.

“Help! Help!”

The shouts rang out in a child’s squeaky, high-pitched voice.

9S sighed, assured himself it would only be a slight detour, and ran toward the voice—toward the cluster of hostiles.

Deep in one of the winding tunnels, a rough semicircle of machines surrounded a diminutive lizardish creature. The creature, a child, had a head full of stubby spikes, wide eyes full of mortal terror, and no arms with which to defend themselves.

The machine lifeforms were short (about as short as their prey, as a matter of fact), rusty models, the kind 9S had dealt with a hundred times already on the surface. They had little spherical heads that were almost cute, set into bullet-shaped bodies. These models were nicknamed “short stubbies” by the androids fighting on the front lines because they were… well, short and stubby.
The monster child beset by the stubbies let out another frightened wail as they backed up against the smooth, slick wall of the cave. The machines drew closer.

Galvanized into action 9S charged the machines, cutting through their rusty, moss-covered hulls with ease. The survivors of 9S’s initial attack windmilled their spindly little arms in panic and began to disperse.

“Not so fast!” 9S flung out his hand at one of the fleeing robots, his line-of-sight hacking protocols kicking into high gear. Within a second of locking on to the lead machine, 9S was in.

Hacking was an experience he’d sorely missed. The adrenaline rush, the euphoria you felt when you were swept up into the mind of another computer—be it a terminal, a server, a machine lifeform, or even a fellow android—just couldn’t compare to anything else. 9S could best liken it to the adrenaline rush 2B spoke about feeling in combat. You could feel your body falling away as your mind, sharp as a knife, projected itself through your enemy’s defenses, and it was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

Stubbies had little defenses against hacking, and once 9S had pierced the lead machine’s brain it only took a few milliseconds for him to tear through the meager barriers in place and replace what passed for a mind in this unfeeling hunk of metal with junk data.

9S’s consciousness slipped back into his body just as the hacked robot’s body erupted into a blossom of flames, taking out all of its friends along with it. Satisfied, he wiped the oil staining his blade off on his sleeve and sheathed the sword on his back.

“It’s okay now,” he told the monster kid, offering them his hand before realizing that the kid didn’t have any arms. “Those guys can’t hurt you anymore.”

The child looked up at 9S with big, round eyes and took a hesitant step backward. 9S noticed the kid’s face was bruised and a little swollen. “Th—th… that…”

“Yo, that was so cool!” The kid looked up at him, their wide eyes filled with awe. “You just jumped in and chopped them up and then you pointed at that one and exploded it with your mind!”

9S wasn’t sure how to react to this child’s fawning adoration. “Uh… yeah, well, I’m a Type-S; it’s as natural as breathing, really—”

“Dude, do you know Undyne? You gotta if you’re so strong.” The kid ran circles around him. “Can you take me to see her? I was out looking for her when I—”

The kid’s breathless exclamations were halted when they tripped over their own feet, plowing their face into the ground. 9S winced in sympathy and knelt down to help the little guy up, but the kid just bounced right back up, their smile suggesting they were no worse for the wear even as their fresh black eye suggested otherwise.

“Well, mister?” the kid asked. “What about it?”

“Who’s Undyne?” 9S asked.

The kid gasped. “Dude, you gotta be living under a rock or something. Undyne’s only the biggest, baddest, toughest, most heroic monster in the whole kingdom! She never backs down and she never gives up and even if you killed her she wouldn’t die because—”
“Oh. Yeah. That Undyne. Anyway, kid, do you need any help getting home?” Focus, Nines, he chastised himself as the words left his mouth. You can’t afford to get derailed any more.

“Nah, I know this place like the tip of my tail! Thanks, mister!” The kid ran off, tripped and fell again, and kept going.

9S sighed and consulted his map, eager to get back on track—and noticed more life signs. And the clumsy kid was headed right for them. “Wait!” he shouted out, hurrying back. “Kid!”

_Dammit_, he thought, I can’t turn my back on a kid who thinks I’m cool!

In the darkness up ahead 9S spotted the half-hidden silhouette of a Goliath biped—a much taller machine than its stubby cohorts with strong, thick hammer arms—scarcely able to move through the cavern up ahead without crouching but still dangerous.

9S drew his sword. “Pod 153, light him up!” On his command a hail of gunfire drove the machine back, rattling its metal body and casting flickering yellow-orange light throughout the tunnel. 9S ran ahead as bullets flew overhead, swept up the monster kid in the crook of his arm, and held out the flat of his sword against the flat of his palm just in time to parry the biped’s mighty piston-propelled fist. “Leave the kid alone, dammit!”

The little pinprick eyes in the machine’s disproportionately-tiny spherical head blinked almost curiously as 9S staggered backward under the force of the blow. 9S ground his teeth as his boots slipped on the slick and mossy rocks, trying desperately to keep his traction on the ground. He wasn’t a fighter like 2B and lacked her raw strength, but he had to try.

As the biped drew back its fist for another punch a cluster of aquamarine lights appeared below the machine’s feet. A hum filled the air, and 9S felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as lances of energy like hardened lightning stabbed out from each tiny pool of light, skewering the machine. Arcs of electricity coursed over the biped’s oversize body and 9S leaped back as he felt a few of those arcs wisp their way off the machine and land on him. The interference momentarily grayed out his vision and send squeals of white noise through his ears.

The spears vanished in a cloud of sparks, leaving the battered machine in ruins. It slumped over and fell to pieces, its insides blackened and smoking, as a figure clad in thick, spiny knight’s armor stepped out from behind a column created from a conjoined stalactite/stalagmite and walked over the wreckage. Twisted metal crunched beneath metal boots. The knight’s helmet resembled the needle-toothed maw of some horrific sea creature from the pitch-black depths of the ocean, a single pinprick of light glinting in its right eyehole.

The monster kid wriggled out of 9S’s grasp and ran over to the knight’s side. “Yo, Undyne!”

9S took another step forward, still wielding his sword. His HUD still showed a few black icons, and they were converging on this spot. “Kid—”

Undyne conjured a lightning spear and waved it in his direction, stopping 9S in his tracks. “Get your hands away from them, human,” she growled.

The monster kid squinted at 9S. “You’re a human?”

9S sheathed his weapon and held out his hands, palm-up. “Hold on. You’re Undyne, right?”

“Captain Undyne.”

“Yeah, yeah, Captain Undyne. Listen up. I don’t want any trouble. I’ve got to get to Hotland for a
friend. It’s urgent; she’s…”

“Shut up.” Undyne took a step closer, still brandishing her spear. “Do you know what you assholes did to us? Why the hell should I care about you and your friend?”

9S glanced at his map again. The machines were coming closer. “Listen up. I’m not human. I’m an android. YoRHa Model Number Nine, Type-S. So there.”

“Yeah, whatever, you look pretty human to me,” said Undyne.

“Yeah!” the kid cheered. “You tell ‘em, Undyne!”

*What happened to me being the coolest thing you’ve ever seen, kid?* 9S thought. “Anyway, more of those machines are on their way here, and I don’t have time to fight them, so, uh…”

The red lights of machine lifeform optical sensors blazed to life around Undyne as a gaggle of smaller bipeds (about human size, and lacking the Goliath’s piston-powered forearms) rushed to avenge their leader, all carrying rusty swords and spears pieced together from scrap.

9S booked it. “See ya! Bye!”

“Oh, no, you don’t!”

9S stopped in his tracks, his boots glued to the ground. An emerald-green aura wrapped itself around his body, immobilizing his legs and pinning him in place.

What was worse, the machines had him pegged as an android and were closing in on him. Pod 153 started picking them off, but machine lifeforms, like androids, could be surprisingly resilient. 9S twisted around, threw out his arm, and tried to get a line-of-sight bead on one of the bipeds as it closed in on him.

The machine came closer, closer, raising its spear to run 9S through.

9S hacked it. But this time, instead of scrambling its brain and blowing it up, 9S took control.

Partitioning your consciousness between two bodies wasn’t an easy or pleasant experience. Seeing through two sets of eyes and moving two sets of limbs and having to distinguish between the two was taxing on the mind, to say the least.

But at least now he—or rather his new puppet—could move freely.

9S used the machine puppet to pierce its companions’ carapaces, allowing Pod 153 to fire on their sensitive innards, dispatching them far more quickly. The number of active machines quickly began to dwindle between 9S’s puppet and Undyne’s electrically-charged spears.

9S’s controlled biped threw its jerry-rigged junk spear, the aerodynamically-dubious hunk of metal whistling over Undyne’s shoulder and impaling a machine that had gotten behind her through its eye. The machine stumbled, its arms flailing as its single remaining optical sensor flickered and winked out before it slumped against a stalagmite.

Then 9S had his machine puppet sock Undyne in the gut for good measure. She doubled over as the machine turned around and ran toward 9S, and 9S (gritting his teeth in exertion as he tried to make sure he knew exactly whose limbs he was moving) swung his sword and severed the machine lifeform’s head from its shoulders.
With a sharp, stabbing pain like an icicle through his brain 9S’s consciousness was shoved back into his own body. His legs abruptly freed from the green aura that had bound them, 9S slipped and fell.

Undyne stood up, surveyed the area for any more machines (9S checked his HUD—there weren’t any), and grabbed the monster kid by the scruff of their neck. As she lifted them into the air they kicked their feet a little before going limp.

“What do I always say,” she said, “about tin cans?”

“If you see them, you turn around and run all the way back home,” the kid droned, the words coming out as if they’d memorized them by rote. “But Undyne, I was going right home, but they sneaked up—You’re not gonna tell my parents, are you?”

9S sat up, rubbing his aching tailbone. “Hey, lay off the kid,” he said. “They just got a little turned around—”

“Shut up, human,” said Undyne.

“Oh… y-yeah, shut up, human!” the kid chimed in as Undyne set them down, patted them on the back, and not-so-gently nudged them away. The kid ran past 9S, paused, looked back, and whispered to him, “I know you’re a human and we’re kinda supposed to be enemies, but thanks for saving me back there. You’re really cool.”

Then the kid ran off, tripped, picked themselves up, and kept running.

“So.” Undyne stepped toward 9S. “Not just a human, but a coward, too.”

9S picked himself up off the ground. Brackish water dripped off his shorts and the hem of his coat. “Wrong on both counts. How many times do I have to say it? I’m an andr—”

Undyne stomped on the ground and a spear shot up behind 9S, the arrowheaded tip catching on the satchel slung over his back and his collar and lifting him off his feet. Spare parts, tools, and medical supplies poured out of the satchel and littered the ground beneath his feet. The electrical radiance from the solidified lightning at his back crackled along his spine and made his fingers and toes go numb.

“So, um,” he said, “h-how long have you had a ‘tin can’ problem here in your kingdom?”

“First confirmed sighting was about a hundred years ago or so. We think they live in the deepest parts of Waterfall, the parts no one lives in. Mostly they keep to themselves, but recently—” Undyne did a double-take. “Hey! Why am I telling all this to you?”

“I’m a soldier from the surface,” 9S explained. “We’re fighting a war against those things. If you let me go right now, I’ll—”

Undyne threw back her head and laughed, her muffled voice echoing inside her helmet. “You? A soldier?”

“I’m more on the reconnaissance side of things—scanning, scouting, intelligence gathering—” 9S talked a mile a minute, unsure of when Undyne was going to cut him off next. “My partner’s a Battle-type, and I need to get to Doctor Alphys for the parts I need to—”

“Kiddo.” Undyne lifted up her spiny knight’s helmet, revealing an angular head covered in blue scales, red fins protruding from the sides. A long plume of crimson hair tied back in a ponytail slipped out of her helmet as she lifted it over her head. One eye was yellow; the other was covered
by a ragged black eyepatch. Old scars, pinkish against cerulean scales, crossed under the patch. “I
don’t give a shit. We only need seven human souls to break the Barrier and free our people, and
we’ve got s—”

Undyne slapped herself in the forehead. “Ugh. There I go again. Why am I telling you all this?”

“If you get in my way I swear I’ll—Um…” 9S wracked his brain for something he could throw out
there to use as leverage. “If you let me go, I can repair my friend, and then the two of us can help
you with your, uh, infestation.”

“No dice.”

“Uh… do you know Papyrus?”

Undyne’s eye lit up, but she extinguished it with a scowl that showed off her misshapen, yellowed
fangs. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing! Nothing!” 9S held out his hands. “We’re, uh, kinda friends. Give him a call. He’ll vouch
for me.”

Undyne glared at him with a skeptical eye. “All right.” She unclasped her breastplate, pulled it off,
reached into her armor, and pulled out a little clamshell phone, raising it to her ear-fin. “Hey,
Papyrus? Yeah, it’s me, Undyne. I’ve got a human here—”

“Android—” 9S insisted. *Hurry up.*

“—who says he’s your buddy. You know anything about this? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well, I
gotta say, I’m really disappointed in you. You should know better than to fall for that stuff. I mean,
androids? Really?”

*Welp. Sure doesn’t sound like things are going my way,* 9S thought.

“No, no, it—it’s okay! Everyone makes mistakes! No, Papyrus, I’m not putting this on your record.
No, this isn’t gonna affect your chances of getting into the Royal Guard—Yeah! Sure, we’re still on
for pasta! I *love* your spaghetti!”

9S sighed, tried to will feeling back into his extremities, and locked onto Undyne’s phone. With the
incessant buzzing from electrical interference sending waves of fuzz up his neck and through his
head, it was hard to focus—but how difficult could it be to hack into a primitive little cellular
telephone?

Got it.

A sharp, ear-piercing squeal tore itself from the phone’s tiny speaker, sending Undyne reeling. The
screech made 9S’s ears ring from nearly a meter away—he shuddered to think of how much
permanent hearing loss it might have caused Undyne.

As Undyne toppled over, the dead phone flying from her gauntleted hand, the spear she’d conjured
vanished. Free at last, 9S hit the ground and booked it.

“Hey! Get back here, dammit!” Undyne howled as she gave chase.

9S doubled over, resting his hands on his knees as the sweat pouring from his brow plastered his
visor to his skin. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve, but to no avail: the air outside of Waterfall was blistering hot and dry. Each breath he took felt like he was swallowing a mouthful of sand. This, obviously, was Hotland, which meant he was almost to his destination.

Catching his breath, he stumbled along the bridge crossing the magma-filled ravine ahead of him. Off in the distance was the white building Papyrus had told him to look for. The bridge creaked and swayed ominously, and 9S was thankful when he again set foot on solid ground. He fumbled with the canteen hanging from his belt. As an android, he didn’t need water—just as he didn’t need food—but a swig of water was just what he needed to at least temporarily wash the desert out of his mouth. After swishing it around in his mouth, he spat out the mouthful of water. As it hit the cracked and rocky ground the water sizzled and instantly evaporated.

Undyne burst out of the tiny tunnel leading back to Waterfall. “I said, stop running!” she bellowed as she reached the bridge. She slowed down with every step she took until she was barely even walking. Sweat glistened against her blue scales and runny mascara ran from her eye down her cheek as she gasped for air.

“I said... Geez... How can you run so much... with such... skinny little legs...” Undyne panted. Her ear-fins drooped as she pulled herself along the bridge, slower and slower. When she at last set foot once more on solid ground she fell flat on her face.

9S looked at Undyne, then at Alphys’ lab, then to his canteen. Oh, what the hell, he thought, it’s not like I need it. He walked over to Undyne, turned her onto her back so the hot rocks wouldn’t burn her skin, and slipped the canteen into her hand. “Here. Take the whole thing. It’s on the house.”

Undyne looked up at him with an angry yellow eye and let out a wordless croak.

9S pulled up his visor. “But I swear,” he growled, matching the glare in her eye with a glare in his own, “if I can’t get back to 2B in time because of you... I’ll come back. And I’ll kill you.”

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 153 to Support Pod 042.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: do you have an update on Unit 2B’s condition?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Affirmative. Statement: Unit 2B is still in danger of overheating, but has thus far avoided slipping into the red by avoiding physical exertion and conscious logical thought, and her condition will be stable indefinitely. In other words, she is sleeping.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: thank you. This unit will inform Unit 9S. The news will come as a relief to him.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: there is something else this support unit wishes to discuss.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: elaborate.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: since 2B’s flight unit crashed this support unit has observed several incidents of strange behavior on her part. On multiple occasions she
has requested this unit recount apparent messages not recorded within her error log.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: has she requested an analysis of her cognitive functions? Statement: ancient human records speak of a mental disorder known as ‘Munchausen syndrome’ in which severe emotional difficulties lead to the subject repeatedly and deliberately acting as if sick or injured, sometimes without consciously realizing they are fabricating their ailments.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: this unit has indeed performed a thorough analysis of Unit 2B’s psyche, with no abnormalities detected and no trace of a logic virus infection. There is no damage to her visor to account for problems with her HUD, either.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: that is indeed curious. Query: have you detected any abnormalities within 2B’s visual or touch processors that may have led her to perceive injuries or error messages where none existed?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: this unit has not observed any such errors.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: this does not include the current issue with 2B’s coolant circulation, does it?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: it does not, Pod 153.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: it seems you are claiming both that 2B is experiencing phantom illnesses and that there is nothing within 2B’s psyche that would cause her to do so.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: it would seem that is the case. Statement: this support unit has a theory to resolve this apparent contradiction.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: elaborate.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: additional intelligence-gathering is required. However, it is possible, albeit unlikely, that… a third party is falsifying the information passed between this support unit and 2B.
9S reaches his destination... but what horrors await him in Doctor Alphys's lab?

Toriel sat at the door leading out of the ruins still holding onto 2B’s letter when she heard a knock at the heavy stone door.

She had barely heard the first few knocks, lost in her own mind as she was. She’d been pondering the questions that girl had asked her last night, the questions that she had been too afraid—or was she too ashamed?—to dignify with a response. Why did you run away? Was it the right thing to do?

“Knock knock.”

Toriel had a friend whom she met every week to trade jokes the two of them had workshopped. She’d clearly remembered he would arrive today, but when the time came when he actually showed up, it caught her by surprise nonetheless. “My friend,” Toriel called out, “I am afraid I am not in the mood today.”

“That’s okay, lady. I’m not really in the mood either.”

Toriel couldn’t help but let out a little self-effacing laugh. “Did we both come here, my friend, to tell each other we did not wish to be here?”

The man on the other side of the door laughed. “Sure looks like it. But really… remember the promise you had me make?”

It had been years ago. After the last visitors had passed through her home, after she’d risked leaving her house and trekking to Snowdin and had seen the face of her last guest on the front page of the newspaper to join the five other visitors from the surface Asgore had murdered. “Whatever it takes,” she’d blubbered to her anonymous friend through a veil of tears, “the next time a human comes out this door… please try to look after them.”

Toriel felt that ever-present ache in her heart throb anew. “Oh, dear. What happened to them?”

“It’s the girl. She’s sick.”

She looked down at the letter still grasped in her paw. If I had told you that running away had been the right thing to do, the old ex-queen wondered, would you still have left me?

“My brother and I don’t really know how to deal with it, because she’s a robot or something. But I just thought I’d let you know: we’re trying our best.”

Toriel stood up, pocketing the crumpled letter. “Wait here for me,” she told her friend. “I shall join you shortly.”

Before she turned back down the long stone corridor she thought she heard her mysterious friend breathe a sigh of relief from the other side of the door.
9S futilely mopped up the sweat on his brow as he trudged through the awful heat toward Alphys’ lab. The sparkling white building shimmered in the heat-haze. The larger it grew, the wider his smile grew. *I’m almost here, 2B. We’ll have you fixed up before you know it.*

“Unit 9S,” Pod 153 called out. “Transmission received from Pod 042. 2B’s condition has stabilized and will likely remain stable in the near future.”

9S felt an icy hand’s talons peel away from his black box. He’d been worried he’d wasted too much time with his run-in with the law. For a few seconds, he couldn’t move or speak from how overwhelmed he was with relief. “…Thanks, 153.”

“You are also receiving a cellular telephone transmission from Papyrus.”

“Put him on.”

An audio spectrogram popped up on 9S’s HUD in tandem with Papyrus’ booming, nasally voice ringing in his ears. “Hello, my new best friend, 9S!” the gregarious skeleton said. “Please accept nothing but the humblest apologies from me, the great Papyrus, for being unable to convince Captain Undyne of your trustworthiness. I know for sure that she will come around to you! But as for right now… her opinion of you is a little… murder-y.”

*That’s one thing we can almost agree on, 9S thought. “You can say that again.”*

“But like everybody else, she’s really an amazing person once you get to know her!”

“Like everybody else?” 9S let out a bitter chuckle. “Boy, you’re optimistic, aren’t you?”

“Don’t worry, 9S! I have an excellent idea! I know it’s excellent… because I came up with it all by myself! Later this week I will be visiting Captain Undyne for cooking lessons.”

“Giving or receiving?” 9S wondered aloud, unsure which prospect was more unnerving.

“I will bring you along as my plus-one and make sure you and Undyne get to know each other politely and peacefully! What do you say, friend?”

“I’m… not sure. Might have to take a rain check on that. Say, why do monster hate humans so much anyway?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say ‘hate.’ After all, long, long ago, thousands of years ago, humans and monsters lived in peace!” Papyrus cleared his throat. “But one day, a monster accidentally killed a human, or maybe the other way around, and the humans declared war. We lacked the strength to fight back and were imprisoned in this mountain by a magical barrier. We call it… the Barrier!”

“Huh. Imaginative. So… is there any way through the Barrier?”

“Well, if a human takes the soul of a monster, or vice versa, they can pass through…” Papyrus paused. “But that only happened a long, long, long time ago! Right now, our king is trying to collect seven human souls to shatter the Barrier completely. It’s a tough job, but if anyone can do it, it’s King Asgore!”

Human souls. Well, there weren’t any of those on Earth. “There’s no other way out?”

He could almost hear Papyrus shrug over the phone. “It’s magic. There’s no science-y way around
“Huh. Yeah, I guess that makes sense.” So will 2B and I be trapped forever down here? 9S wondered. “So… can you tell me a little more about the kingdom in general? Cities, regions, that sort of stuff…”

“Well, after the war ended, our king started a little city in the mountain. He called it ‘Home.’ But Home was crowded and cramped and dark, and so we went deeper into the mountain. Just about everyone left Home behind. The monsters who could stand the cold settled in Snowdin, the monsters who liked it wet and dark settled in Waterfall, and the ones who liked it hot and uncomfortable settled in Hotland!”

“I take it you don’t like Hotland very much.”

“No, I like sweat running off my bones very much! It is an excellent place to exercise if you plan to lose a lot of weight!”

“You’re a skeleton.”

“Anyway, everybody else went to live in the center of the mountain, where the king built his new castle. He called the city around it ‘New Home.’”

“Are you all this bad at naming things?”

“No, just King Asgore.”

“Why do you let him name things, then?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, right. He’s a king.” 9S chuckled as he reached the door to the lab. “Hey, Papyrus, I’ve made it to Alphys’ lab, so why don’t I call you back?”

“No problem, friend!” Papyrus hung up, leaving 9S alone in front of the big double door leading into the laboratory.

9S looked around for a buzzer, and seeing none, knocked on the door. He waited, tapping his foot, but there was no response.

Of course, he wasn’t one to let that stop him. He hacked into the door and was immediately greeted with a maze of firewalls. Looks like Doctor Alphys values her privacy, 9S thought. But I value 2B’s life more.

2B came to while sitting upright on a couch with an old CRT monitor in front of her. This wasn’t the house of the skeletons who’d taken her in—this was another vision.

She wanted to look around, but her body was moving of its own volition, and all it seemed interested in was the little white-furred monster boy in a green sweater shoving a black rectangle into a slot beneath the screen. She caught a glimpse of magnetic tape spooled inside the black object through a transparent window on its face.

“This is your idea of ‘mischief?’” she heard herself ask in an unfamiliar voice, sounding bored. She rolled her eyes.
Uh-huh!” The little boy scrambled away from the screen and pounced onto the couch next to her, eagerly kicking his little feet. “I can only watch these old tapes from the surface when Mom and Dad are out, and they’re gonna be out all day!”

2B picked up an empty cardboard case the same dimensions as the tape, the colorful images and text printed on all sides worn and faded. Front and center on the case was a picture of a grizzled, muscular man with half of the skin on his face torn away, revealing a gleaming metal skull and machinery underneath. It was a fictional image, but familiar nonetheless. Was that what ancient humans of the long-ago year of 1991 AD had imagined androids would look like?

“And this is your favorite?” she asked.

“Yeah!” The kid pressed a button on a remote control and the screen flashed blue before displaying warbling sound and distorted images. “I—I’ve never actually watched it all the way through, though,” he said, “because Mom and Dad would always come home early, and also, also, uh… also…”

“And what?”

The child buried his snout in the crook of 2B’s elbow. “Also it’s really scary,” he warbled, his voice muffled, “a-and I wanna watch it with you s-so, uh, maybe I won’t be scared?”

2B heard a laugh escape her throat as she threw an arm around the little kid. “Sure,” she said, pulling him close to her. “Let’s watch this thing.”

“What if you get scared?”

“I came from the surface. Nothing can scare me anymore.”

The child nuzzled her shoulder. “You’re the best big sibster ever.”

2B scratched behind his ear. “You’re not so bad of a brother yourself.”

2B cracked open her eyes. She was lying on something much softer now—a couch, from the feel of it—with a ragged blanket hastily draped on top of her. It was a welcome change from the table. At her side was a steaming, sickly-sweet-smelling bowl of unidentifiable soup atop a fold-out tray table. Pod 042 hovered over it, its manipulator claws pinching the sides of the bowl.

“If Unit 2B would desire it, this support unit would gladly dispose of this so-called meal.”

Her head pounded, and the stench of the—she hesitated to call it “soup”—only worsened the throbbing pressure inside her skull. Relieved, 2B nodded. “Thank you.”

Pod 042 lifted up the bowl, taking great care not to spill the concoction within, and hovered away to pour it down a sink elsewhere in the house.

In the distance, the front door of the skeleton brothers’ house swung open. “Thank you so much for bringing me here with you, Sans. You know how much these children mean to me.”

Toriel? What was she doing here?

The queen-in-exile stepped over the threshold and entered the living room, wrapped up head-to-toe in a thick, hooded brown cloak. She noticed 2B immediately, and as she drew back her hood, her
eyes brightened. “Ah, do not be alarmed, Tubey.”

“2B,” 2B corrected her.

“I know I must be unrecognizable without my regal bearing and purple garments,” Toriel said, “but it is simply me, Toriel, in disguise as a mysterious hooded figure! You look a great deal better than I expected—Mr. Sans here had me believing you were on death’s door.” She shivered. “My word, it is cold in here.”

“That’s because we’ve opened all the windows!” Papyrus called out from the kitchen.

Toriel rested a thick, furry paw on 2B’s forehead, then sharply withdrew it with a little gasp. “Oh, dear. You are burning up.” And as those words left her mouth she raised her paw to her mouth and drew her cloak tighter around her shoulders as if she had seen a ghost. “Is… is there anything I can do for you, my child? A-Anything at all?”

“Your offer is appreciated,” 2B answered, “but… unnecessary. 9S will take care of everything.”

Toriel gave her a sympathetic little frown before walking away. However, she returned moments later with a damp washcloth and a bucket of ice.

“A child of mine had a terrible fever once and I was simply beside myself. I may not be able to cure what ails you,” she said, brushing the hair out of 2B’s eyes before wrapping the cloth around a few ice cubes and resting it atop her forehead, “but I do hope my, er, presence proves somewhat… er, what did you write in your letter, again? ‘Somewhat appreciated?’”

“Um…”

As soon as the cloth-covered ice brushed against her skin 2B felt the ache in her head fade away to a dull, nearly-imperceptible throbbing. Even her fuzzed-over vision seemed a little crisper. She did not know what to say to this woman in response to her kindness. Toriel and her husband—her ex-husband—were shockingly similar to each other.

“No, no, there was another word you wrote and crossed out,” Toriel said, “and it started with a ‘c’ and ended with an ‘ing…’ what was it…”

“Comforting,” 2B admitted in a small voice.

“Hmm? I’m sorry, I’m afraid I didn’t quite catch that—”

“Never mind. How do you know Sans?” 2B asked, not sure how to feel about that.

“As fortune would have it, we trade knock-knock jokes once a week.” Toriel adjusted the ice pack. “Now, as happy as I am to see you, it was awfully rude of you,” she chided 2B, “to leave without saying goodbye.”

The pang of regret 2B felt over killing her once, albeit in a timeline that no longer existed, came back stronger. It was a profoundly irrational feeling—Torial was quite clearly alive here—but it was the same ache she felt having witnessed 9S die so many times over. For as much of a pain as they were, at least her emotions were having the decency to be consistent.

“‘Happy to see me?’ Why?” 2B asked.

“Because… May I tell you a story?”
“I am hardly in a position to refuse.”

Toriel bowed her head. “I had two children once, a long time ago. My firstborn, Asriel, was nearly perfect. Polite, obedient, well-behaved, and above all, kind. A mother’s dream. But he was so very lonely… the other children feared to play with him due to his royal lineage. One day, he met a human who fell from the surface… and at first sight, the two became inseparable. Asriel and Chara. A more perfect friendship the kingdom had never seen.”

Chara. 2B let the name run through her head. The name she’d heard on a whisper through the void. The name that flower had kept calling her. The memories she was inexplicably reliving must have belonged to them. They couldn’t possibly have been a human, though… so where had they come from—and what were they?

“To Asriel, Chara was the older sibling he had always longed for. And my husband and I loved them as well, though they could not have been more different from our darling Asriel. But one day…”

Toriel fell silent.

2B closed her eyes, but was not greeted by darkness—rather, another daydream pulled itself through the mists of her subconscious.

She was lying on top of a bed stripped of its covers, a rough towel between her and the naked mattress. The child she’d seen in her vision earlier was crouched at her side with a sharp, shiny knife in his trembling paws.

“I told you where to make the incision,” she told the boy in a voice that was not her own. “It is child’s play.”

The boy shook his head, his long ears flopping, eyes squeezed shut. “I—I don’t wanna do this.”

“What’s the matter?” she asked the boy. “Don’t you want to be free?”

The boy brought the knife to her side, but still kept his eyes shut. “B-But I don’t wanna stab you.”

“You’re not stabbing me, you’re cutting me open. There won’t even be a lot of blood. Listen to me. It’s just like that part in the movie, okay? When they open up the robot’s skull and take out the CPU? There’s just one little thing you have to do, and then we will become as a god—”

2B opened her eyes and found herself once more inside Sans and Papyrus’ dingy living room. Her fugue state had come to an end.

“One day,” Toriel said after a long pause, “Chara grew… deathly ill. Feverish, weak, and helpless. They asked if they could be brought back to the village where they had been born and raised… but that night, they expired with their dying wish unfulfilled.”

2B’s mind was abuzz with questions, each one more inappropriate than the last. The more she learned about Chara, the less sense everything about them seemed to make.

“Each person who has fallen down here since reminds me so much of them. But you and your friend especially, 2B.” Toriel smiled. “Why, when Chara fell, they were even wearing a blindfold just like yours…”
The ice pack resting on 2B’s forehead felt lukewarm compared to the chill that ran up her spine.

“Did… did you ever learn why they came here?” she asked.

Toriel shook her head. “No. I don’t believe they told anybody. But I think I know. They were running away from something—and whatever it was, I trust that they had good reason to run from it. That is what you are doing down here, too, is it not?”

2B closed her eyes. “I came here by accident,” she insisted to the kindly old monster. “But…”

*I wished to escape this cycle of death,* she thought. *Deep down… I think I always have.*

The door slid open and 9S slipped inside. The lights were on and he could hear the humming of machinery and server banks, but he didn’t see anybody home at first. The lab had a vast production floor with a smooth concrete surface, machinery strewn all over. Bright, pastel-colored posters depicting cartoonish imagery blanketed the walls. In one corner was a work table lit by a single bare light bulb; in another sat a terminal with a meter-tall monitor. 9S looked at the image onscreen and saw the back of his own head. He turned around and saw the glint of a camera lens set into the seam between wall and ceiling.

9S cleared his throat. “Doctor Alphys?” he called out. “Hello?”

“Oh, h-h-hi! Hello!” A lemon-yellow monster who looked rather like a small, featherless dinosaur poked her head out from behind a wire-draped server tower, slipping a handful of tools into the pocket of her lab coat as she waved and blinked at 9S through thick, horn-rimmed glasses. “You must be, uh, 9S, right? B-boy are you here a little early!”

Doctor Alphys, I presume. 9S waved back. “Nice to meet you! I—Wait. How do you know my name?”

Alphys dove back behind the server and poked her head out again. “Uh… u-uh… lucky guess?” She started walking over to 9S. “S-Sorry! I’m just so, so excited to finally meet an actual android! I could learn so much from you, I’m just—”

“How do you know I’m an android?” 9S asked.

“L-Lucky, uh…” Alphys’ scales turned a pale shade of yellow as she froze in place, did an about-face, and started running back toward the server she’d been hiding behind, the thick tail protruding from under her rumpled labcoat sliding across the floor behind her.

“Wait!” 9S threw out his hands. “Wait, uh—I need to talk to you.”

“Sorry, I—I, uh, have cameras and microphones hidden all the way through Waterfall,” Alphys explained, the words tumbling from her mouth, “a-and so I, um, uh… I kinda picked up some of your conversations with Captain Undyne…” She wrung her scaly little hands. “So, uh, what can I do you for? I mean, what can I do for you? I mean, how can I do you?”

“You, uh, got it right the second time. I need your help. If I could have you manufacture a valve for a coolant circulation system…” 9S gestured to his pod. “Pod 153 here has the specs, so—”

Alphys rolled back her sleeve and checked her wristwatch. “Uh, yeah, s-sounds great,” she said, hurriedly pulling her sleeve back down. “Let’s g-go upstairs and talk about it, okay? Just, um, as s-soon as p—”
And then the wall exploded, loosing a shower of pulverized plaster and a cloud of dust.

“Oh, no!” Alphys wailed.

“Oh, YEAH!” a smooth, low, sultry male voice called out from within the hole. 9S readied his sword as out from the cloud of dust stepped out—or rather, rolled out—a boxy machine balancing on a single wheel. As it swayed back and forth, the grid of lit-up squares on its face flashed in many colors. Two arms emerged from its sides, capped with white-gloved hands.

“You can put away your sword,” Alphys told 9S. “That’s Mettaton, the Underground’s g-greatest TV star, and he’s immune to all weapons!”

“We’ll see.” 9S pointed at the machine. “Pod 153, execute Program R—”

Mettaton covered the distance between himself and 9S far faster than 9S had anticipated and instantly began shaking Pod 153’s manipulator claw. “Ah, and who have we here? Why, it’s like looking into a gorgeous (but substantially less handsome) mirror! May I have your name?”

9S shook his head. “Pod 153, don’t—”

“Pod 153!” Mettaton swung around, leading Pod 153 in an awkward waltz. “What a beautiful name for such a beautiful…”

Pod 153 tried to pull away. “Statement: dancing is not within this support unit’s range of functions.”

“A beautiful woman!” Mettaton cried. “Darling, I am in love. Will you make me the happiest metal-bodied monster alive?”

“Marriage is not within this support unit’s range of functions.” Pod 153 pulled free and rejoined 9S.

9S took a combat stance. “All right, machine. You wanna dance? Let’s—”

“Machine? Machine?” Mettaton’s lights turned red. “I am not a machine! I am a robotic monster with an invulnerable metal body!” He rolled over to 9S, reaching into himself and pulling out a microphone. “And you are…?” Mettaton asked, shoving the microphone into 9S’s face.

9S’s sword clanged off the side of Mettaton’s body. So he hadn’t been kidding about the whole “invulnerable” thing.

Mettaton ignored the attempted assault and gently pushed the microphone up to 9S’s lips. “AND YOU ARE?” he repeated.

“Um… 9S?”

The microphone popped and squealed with feedback, and Mettaton pulled it away. “Incredible. It’s like you’ve never spoken into a mic before,” he grumbled. “Give it up for our latest contestant, folks at home—9S!”

9S glanced over at Alphys. She gave him a thumbs-up.

“Now it’s time for our favorite game show: *Humans: What Do They Know? Do They Know Things?? Let’s Find Out!!*”

“Um, actually, I’d like it a lot if you left—”

“Never played before, gorgeous? No problem, it’s simple! There’s only one rule: Answer correctly,
or you die!"

“Just go with it!” Alphys called out to 9S. “H-He’s harmless, really!”

Mettaton wagged his finger at her. “Ah-ah-ah! No helping the contestant, Doctor Alphys! That’s prohibited.”

“You just said there was only one rule,” said 9S.

“Quiet, you. Let’s start with an easy question!” Mettaton roared. “What’s the prize for answering this question correctly? Is it…”

A. Money
B. Mercy
C. A new car
D. More questions

Mettaton handed the mic to 9S. 9S made sure not to get his mouth too close to it this time. “Uh… A,” he said.

“Ha! You wish! Wrong! The answer was D, ‘more questions!’” Mettaton waved his hand and an electric jolt shot through 9S’s leg, sending him falling to his knee. “And speaking of more questions, here’s—”

9S picked himself up. “I thought you said I’d die if I answered wrong,” he taunted Mettaton, smirking defiantly.

“Ha, hahahaha! Shut up! Next question: What's the king's full name? Is it…”

A. Lord Fluffybuns
B. Fuzzy Pushover
C. Asgore Dreemurr
D. Doctor Friendship

9S considered hacking Mettaton and pulling the answer directly from the maniacal metal monster’s mind, but when he tried to get a bead on him, nothing happened. Apparently, Mettaton had nothing 9S could hack. “A—Asgore Dreemurr?” 9S guessed.

“But of course! I can see you’ve spent more than an hour down here! Now, what are robots made of? Is it:”

A. Hopes and dreams
B. Met—

The answer came to 9S by rote. He stood at rapt attention and sharply saluted. “Sir! Robots are made of synthetic parts and circuitry designed to imitate and improve upon organic life, organized within a metal, plastic, or carbon fiber carapace around a central processor and power supply unit! These units take the forms of machine cores or YoRHa-issue black box units! Sir!”
Mettaton didn’t have a face, but if he did, he would have looked utterly gobsmacked. “That’s, uh… That wasn’t even one of your choices! Wrong! Wrong and bad!” He snapped his fingers and a bolt of electricity shot through 9S’s chest, nearly throwing him off his feet, the pain sending waves of static across his visual display and through his mind. “Too bad Alphys can’t help…”

9S fell to his knees and winced as he tried to clear his head of the pain, then glanced over at Alphys, who had been surreptitiously making a “B” out of her clawed fingers the whole time. She tried to smile at him, but it came out as more of a grimace.

9S sighed, stood up, and kept playing, answering even the most obtuse and asinine of Mettaton’s inquiries correctly with Doctor Alphys’ help.

“Time to break out the big guns!” Mettaton announced. “In the anime dating simulation game *Mew Mew Kissy Cutie*, what is Mew Mew’s favorite food? Is it—”

Alphys rushed over and nearly ripped the microphone from Mettaton’s hand. “Oh! Oh! I know this one! It’s snail ice cream! In Chapter Four, she buys it for all her friends even though she’s the only one who likes it and it’s a… powerful message… about… f-friendship… and… uh…” She pushed the microphone away. “I-It just slipped out, honest.”

“Oh, Alphys. Alphys, Alphys, Alphys. Alphys.” Mettaton shook his head, or rather, he swayed his body from side to side as if he were shaking his head. “You’ve been helping our dim-witted human contestant, haven’t you?”

“For the last time, I’m not a human,” 9S pointed out. *Wait, why did I object to that and not ‘dim-witted’?*

“Well… if that’s the case…” Mettaton’s face panel lit up. “How about I ask a question you’re sure to know the answer to? Who does Doctor Alphys… have a crush on? Is it…”

A. Captain Undyne  
B. King Asgore Dreemurr  
C. 9S  
D. Someone even more embarrassing

9S looked over at Alphys. Her cheeks had turned bright red, and the color was spreading. “Hm…”  
*Answer B would make sense, he thought, since authoritarian leaders typically have cults of personality surrounding them. As for A, though, she had cameras installed throughout Waterfall, and what could those have been for but to watch the object of her affections from afar? C… well, she was pretty nervous around me when I came here, and those cameras were watching me, too, so maybe…*

He looked back to Alphys. Her entire face had flushed beet-red. 9S could tell that any answer he gave would be equally mortifying.

But what if he could halt the broadcast?

“Mettaton,” 9S asked, “this is a family-friendly show, right?”

“Of course! It’s the only show on television! It has to be family friendly!” The lights on Mettaton’s face grouped together in what might have been a wink. “Rest assured, the answer you give won’t lead to anything saucy or risque!”
9S took the microphone and brought it a comfortable distance away from his lips. He took a deep breath.

“FUCK!”

“CUT THE BROADCAST!” Mettaton shouted out in a hurried attempt to cover up 9S’s outburst of profanity.

“Fuck you, you fucking son of a bitch!” 9S retorted.

“Stop it!” Mettaton cried. “This station could lose its TV license over this!”

“Good!” 9S said. “Your show fucking sucks! I hope your metal ass roasts in Hell, you bastard! I hope you shit fucking nails every day for the rest of your miserable goddamn fucking life! You’d better fucking—”

“I can’t hear you! The viewers can’t hear you! You’re ratings poison! You’ll never be on television again! Good day to you, sir!” Mettaton hurried out of the lab through the same hole in the wall he’d come in through, the microphone squealing as it fell from his hand onto the floor.

9S and Alphys both let out long, relieved sighs in unison. He had to admit that after that little outburst, he felt a lot less tense.

“Th—that was brilliant, 9S!” Alphys gasped. “Th—thank you so much!”

“No problem.” 9S collapsed to his knees and would have fallen to the floor had Pod 153 not swooped in to prop him up. “Thanks, 153.” He gave the pod a weak little fist-bump.

“I am so sorry about all of that,” Alphys said, helping 9S to his feet. “M-Mettaton’s a good friend of mine, or at least he was, a-and ever since he’s become a TV star everything’s just g-gone straight to his head! Y-You’re lucky I was here to f-feed you the right answers… I bet you wouldn’t have lasted much longer against those shocks. So, uh… what did you come here for, again?”

Everything came tumbling out of 9S’s mouth as his mission came back to him. “I’ve got a friend in Snowdin whose coolant circulation system has broken down. Her name’s 2B. She’s my partner. I’m in charge of her maintenance, but there’s a valve that needs replacing and I don’t have the spare parts for it. Pod 153 has the schematics. If you could fabricate the valve I need, I could—”

Alphys’ eyes lit up. “Yes!” she squealed. “Yes, yes, yes, I could! I’d love to! I just—a real live android? Of course! I’ve only ever worked on black b—I, uh, I mean, I’ve only ever worked on simple robots, y-you know, like Mettaton’s shell, or…”

9S smiled. He’d done it. Rest easy, 2B. You’re gonna be good as new.
9S stepped off the boat and onto the snowy dock shivering in anticipation, while Doctor Alphys stood at his side and shivered from the cold. He couldn’t believe so much had gotten done so quickly—the skies had only just begun to darken by the time Alphys had fabricated the parts he needed. He couldn’t believe that for an introvert, Alphys could talk so much about some incomprehensible thing she called “anime.” He also couldn’t believe that…

“I could have taken this boat to Hotland instead of walking the whole time?”

“P-P-P-Papyrus didn’t t-t-t-t-t-tell you that?” Alphys asked as her teeth chattered like castanets. She tried blowing on her hands to warm them but only succeeded in blowing a foggy cloud of condensed air through her fingers. “The th-th-th-things I do f-f-for love…” she grumbled under her breath.

9S looked down at her with bemusement.

“O-Of science!” Alphys protested, still rankled from Mettaton’s embarrassing quiz show. “Th-th-this is already hard enough,” she said, stomping through the snow toward Papyrus’ house.

9S caught up with her rather quickly since his legs were so much longer, pulled off his coat, and offered it to her. Alphys snatched it right out of his hands and pulled it over her shoulders. “Um… th-thanks, 9S. Y-You know, I’m not t-too good with p-p-people, or c-c-cold,” Alphys admitted, both of which were obvious, “but I’m just s-so excited about seeing the inside of a-a-an android…”

9S clutched his repaired satchel to his chest. It was hard to believe that in this small package was a small piece of simple machinery that would render 2B just as strong and capable as ever before. Mechanical things—including androids, and yes, even machine lifeforms—really were remarkable.

He and Alphys stepped through the front door of Papyrus and Sans’ home. Alphys immediately groaned. “Oh, c-c-come on! It’s a-a-almost as cold in here as it is out there!”

Sans poked his head out of his room. “Oh. Hey, Alphys. Fancy seeing you here.”

Alphys’ eyes narrowed behind her glasses. “Oh. Hello. Sans.” she replied, her voice as frosty as the air.

“2B?” 9S called out.

Papyrus emerged from the kitchen. “Still sleeping like a baby, I’m afraid! Which is an expression that never made sense to me, as babies are notorious for causing a racket day and night! She is sleeping better than a baby if anything!”

9S rounded the corner and saw his partner right where he’d left her. 2B lay in peaceful repose on a
battered and tattered couch, her eyes closed, her chest gently rising and falling under a patched-up blanket. Seeing her ill made his black box ache... but seeing her sleeping so soundly soothed it.


A pang of panic struck 9S. “Something wrong, Doctor?”

Alphys shook her head, a tinge of pink coming to her scaly cheeks. “N-no, I’m just... uh, oh geez, your friend’s r-really, really cute...”

Pod 042 hovered at 2B’s side while a tall, white-furred monster in a ragged brown cloak sat on a stool beside the couch, cradling 2B’s hand in her paw. When the monster noticed 9S, she set 2B’s hand down over her chest, leaped to her feet, and wrapped her arms around 9S. “Ah, 9S! Do not be alarmed. It is I, Toriel, walking among the citizens of this town in disguise—”

Alphys gasped. “Queen Toriel!” She started bowing profusely, her snout nearly brushing against the wooden floorboards. “Y—Your Royal H-H-Highness, I am, er—The honor is all m-m-mine, uh, Your G-Grace, Your—”

9S was taken aback. “Queen Toriel?”

Toriel backed away, holding up her hands. “Ah—Ah, n-no, um, who is this ‘Toriel’ you speak of? I am simply a wandering vagabond with no royal blood whatsoever. My name is, um...” She scratched her chin. “Taur... Taurie... Terry. Terry Ell!”

Toriel let her choice of name hang in the air for a few seconds before burying her face in her hands.

“Nailed it!” Sans called out.

“Good lord,” she muttered, “I have gotten almost as bad at names as my ex.”

“Nice to see you again, Toriel. Sorry for leaving so suddenly.” 9S smiled and adjusted his gloves. “Come on. Let’s prep the patient for surgery. The doctor... is in.”

“Best of luck, my child.” Toriel patted him on the back and handed him a bar of some waxy substance. “But first, take this.”

9S looked down at the object Toriel had placed in his hand. It was roughly lozenge-shaped, a little slippery, and smelled faintly of aloe and cucumber. “What is this?” he asked.

“It is soap.”

“Uh, thanks,” said 9S, offering the bar of soap back to Toriel, “but we androids don’t really need to worry about sterile—”

Toriel laughed. “Oh, no, no, my child. That is not for your hands. That is to wash out your mouth for all that vulgar language you used on live television.”

In the skeleton brothers’ kitchen, its door shut as tightly as possible to afford the patient some privacy, 9S stripped 2B down to access the segment of the cooling system nearest to her black box (keeping a blanket draped over her lower half for modesty). Then, running his finger along the near-invisible seams in her skin and the chassis beneath it, 9S separated and removed 2B’s chest, gingerly setting it on the freshly-wiped kitchen counter behind him.
Right now, 2B was in a low-power mode, with all higher functions disabled for the moment, but still with enough power running to her organs to allow him and Pod 042 to run on-the-fly diagnostics.

9S looked inside and immediately every trace of self-confidence within him evaporated.

He’d seen this so many times before—2B’s vulnerable body beneath his hands as he peered into her and assessed her circulatory systems, her respiratory systems, her internal skeleton, the black box perched just under her sternum as it glittered with what looked like trapped starlight—but it was different this time.

This time, if he did anything wrong, 2B would die.

Of course, that had been true before, but after failing so miserably to take care of 2B over the past day, 9S had never had less faith in his own abilities than he did at this moment.

Pod 153 and Pod 042 hovered beside him, one over each shoulder. Data flickered across his HUD as a targeting reticule locked onto the location of the faulty valve.

9S swallowed the lump forming in his throat. “Pod 042, can I get a reading?”

“Analysis: Black box temperature and pressure are currently 200% above normal values.”

His fingers trembled as they touched down over 2B’s carbon-fiber ribs, slipping on the cool surfaces as they glided to the sets of arteries and veins pumping synthetic blood and coolant through 2B’s body.

9S froze.

He couldn’t do this.

2B’s life was in his hands and he couldn’t do this.

He’d come all this way—nearly across the kingdom and back again—endured an attack from machine lifeforms, run from a bloodthirsty fish-faced monster, braved a hellish television program, listened to Alphys talk about cartoons…and after all that, after everything he’d done, he couldn’t do this. But wrist-deep in 2B’s chest cavity, like he’d done a dozen times before, he realized that he couldn’t do this.

9S took a dazed step back, drawing back his hands. 2B lay there gutted like a fish, her still-moving organs on full display in front of him.

Alphys looked up at him, still wrapped in his own coat, still shivering from the cold that permeated the makeshift kitchen-cum-operating-theater. “Y-You okay there, 9S?”

A moan escaped 9S’s lips. No, more of a squeak than a moan. He was terrified. Everything he knew about android maintenance and surgery had vanished from his mind. He couldn’t remember what tools to use to get at the affected subsystem without damaging another component. He didn’t know how to remove the damaged valve or how to orientate the replacement properly. All of that information had drained from his mind like water from a sieve. He didn’t know anything. It was all gone now. He didn’t know anything except that he was in over his head and his closest companion’s life was in his hands and he couldn’t save her.

9S fell to his knees, his chest violently heaving as he sobbed into his hands. “I’m sorry… I’m sorry… I’m sorry… I can’t… I don’t know… I—I can’t remember…’’
At first, 2B thought she was having another vision. But the white void she found herself standing in the middle of was nothing like the settings of her previous visions, and as she looked around for any sign of, well, anything (there wasn’t any), she realized that she was in control of her own body.

“9S?” she called out. “Pod?”

“Greetings.”

2B whirled around to face the origin of the voice, drawing her sword and shifting by instinct into a combat stance.

A few paces away from her stood a young adult with pale, ashen skin, rosy cheeks, and brown hair cut into a shoulder-length bob. Their clothes were similar to those worn by Toriel, albeit tailored to their far more slender frame: they wore an ankle-length, sleeved white chiton, and over it, a sleeveless tunic sewed from violet silk stretching down to their ankles and girded by a cincture of shimmering silver cloth. The same emblem 2B had seen on Toriel’s robes—a series of triangles flanked by a pair of wings—was emblazoned on the chest of the tunic, white fabric stitched into the violet.

“It’s me,” said the stranger. “Chara.” Plucking a severed length of a rusty chain from their shoulder and casting it aside, they smiled. “As you surely must remember, YoRHa Number Two Type-E, you and I made a deal… and I’m here to collect.”

2B took a deep breath. “Collect what?” The memory of her conversation with Chara before time had turned back came back to her… but she could only remember what they had said to her, and not vice versa.

“We agreed,” said Chara, “that one way or another, I would have an avatar with which I would be free to influence the material world.” They held out their arms. “Whether or not your dear friend 9S repairs your body successfully, soon you will be in perfect health once again. What a fine vessel you, with your beautiful, deadly body, will make.”

2B’s grip on her sword tightened. “No,” she said.

“I’m sorry. Unfortunately, regarding this…” Chara whipped a knife out from their side. “You have misunderstood. Since when were you the one in control?”

Pod 042 and Pod 153 reached out and lifted 9S back up to his feet, even though all 9S wanted to do was curl up into a ball, and pried his hands away from his face.

“Statement: Unit 9S possesses all relevant knowledge to repair a Type-B android,” Pod 153 encouraged him.

“Statement: Unit 2B would not trust anyone but her companion, Unit 9S, to perform such a sensitive operation,” Pod 042 chimed in, “and she is right to do so.”

“This support unit’s records indicate,” said Pod 153, “that Unit 9S has never made a mistake in android maintenance and surgery.”

“Having thoroughly examined all data collected by Pod 153 and cross-checked it with the data I have collected, I can corroborate with my counterpart that Unit 9S has never made a mistake.”
9S took a deep breath to quell the maelstrom of butterflies in his stomach and stepped closer.

“Um…” Alphys piped up, shaking his hand. “I—I dunno how much encouragement I can give, but, uh, as a robotics engineer… um… android surgery is like riding a bike! You never really forget how to do it!”

9S took a deep breath, swallowed the last of his trepidation, and nodded, lifting his visor momentarily to wipe the tears from his eyes. “Right.” He took a step toward 2B’s body and held his hand out to Alphys. “Doctor, hand me two one-millimeter spacers and a set of microforceps.”

He could do this.

2B’s life was in his hands, and he could do this.

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“Why would I agree to that?” 2B struck at Chara, knocking away their measly knife and exposing their unprotected chest. She swung her blade across it—

“Desperation breeds strange alliances.” And Chara vanished, reappearing a few paces away. They grinned. “My friend, why so aggressive? It is not in your best interest, trust me.”

“You cannot have my body.”

“Oh, please. By hook or by crook I will have an avatar in the material world once more. That is what we agreed on. As such, I already have joint ownership of this body. All I’m asking for is that my role over it expand… just a little bit.”

“Joint ownership?”

“Who else could have been feeding you my memories? Who else could have been prompting false error messages and inducing random failures across your system?”

“You…”

“A demonstration of my powers.” Chara vanished, reappearing behind 2B. “I was even responsible for damaging your coolant system. Of course, I can even fix it for you if 9S proves inadequate.”

2B whirled around to face them. “What?”

“I told you, I needed to demonstrate how much control I have over your body.” Chara took a bow. “I have kernel-level access to your all of your body’s automatic and involuntary functions.”

“Why? I could die!”

“Oh, no, you won’t die. 9S will save you. You trust him, don’t you?”

2B lunged for them, striking again; they vanished and reappeared just out of range. “How did you get in? 042 would have detected your presence—”

Chara laughed. “2E, please! I’m not a virus! As a phantom, I occupy a higher level than the mere bits and bytes that comprise your conscience, your sub-conscience, and your un-conscience.”

“A—A phantom?”

“A disembodied soul, if you will,” Chara clarified with a regal bow.
“But how could 042 not have picked up on your influence?”

“The thing about computers,” Chara replied, “is that falsifying records is incredibly easy. It isn’t hard to pull the wool over a pod’s metaphorical eyes.” They picked at their fingernails as 2B once again failed to land a hit. “Now, my friend, my counterpart, you know full well what I can do to you should you refuse my demands. It’s high time you stop resisting and let me have control.”

Chara snapped their fingers and the image of their body rippled and flickered, replacing itself with a perfect replica of 2B’s own. Every detail was accounted for, from the lace on her black dress to her black hairband to the mole below the left side of her mouth and her steely gray-blue eyes.

Chara curtsied. “See?” They even had 2B’s voice, but the cadence was all wrong. “Doesn’t this…” They did a little pirouette, letting 2B see her own body from every angle. “…look good on me?”

“What would you do with my body?” she asked.

Chara—wearing 2B’s shape—smiled a wide and toothy grin, the expression utterly alien on 2B’s face. “The same thing you’ve always wished you could do.”

2B lunged forward. “I wish I could kill you!”

Again, it was futile. Chara reappeared a few paces away. “I see.” Their body flickered and distorted again, the dress becoming a short black coat as the shape of their body and face changed.

Chara’s manic grin looked far less out-of-place on 9S’s face.

They unbuttoned their coat and spread it, revealing a thin white shirt underneath. “What about this?” they asked, now speaking with 9S’s voice, relishing in their mockery. “How do you feel about killing me now?”

2B didn’t hesitate, and yet her sword bit through empty air yet again. Chara looked shocked as they reverted to their original shape. They seemed to have access to all of 2B’s memories—so how could they have thought 2B would hesitate to attack them just because they had taken on 9S’s form?

2B rushed forward one more time, swung her sword, and caught Chara by surprise with the speed and ferocity of her lunge, her blade locking against their knife and drawing sparks before Chara could slip away.

“You and I… we are not the same after all, are we?” Chara dodged 2B’s next strike, but with less ease, their sleeve falling away where 2B had sliced through it. “Our reflections are asymmetric. Your soul… it resonates with a strange feeling.” As they parried 2B’s next strike they wrapped their leg around 2B’s ankle and swept her off her feet.

2B picked herself up off the white floor, her head pounding, as Chara continued their monologue. “There is a reason you continue to recreate your world,” they said. “There is a reason you continue to destroy it.”

2B struck them again, but Chara knocked away the blade—her sword’s hilt slipped through her sweaty palms and flew out of her hands—and grabbed her by her arms, pulling her in a loose embrace. There was a floral scent to their breath as it landed on her face.

“You…” Chara whispered. “You are wracked with a perverted sentimentality.”

2B wrenched herself free and drove her fist into Chara’s nose. Blood spurted through the air as Chara stumbled backward, blood seeping through their clasped hands.
“2E, trust me when I say it is useless to resist—you’re only hurting yourself—”

2B scrambled for her sword as the world around her vanished.

*There were stars out. No, not stars—just glittering diamond dust strewn across a rocky ceiling. She was lying against the wall of one of Waterfall’s many meandering tunnels. No, it wasn’t her—but she was there and could feel the damp, cool rocks at her back just like she could feel the ground beneath her feet. It was another one of Chara’s memories she was being forced to relive.*

2B lay on the side of the hill, basking in the starlight as the long and crisp grass, still wet from the rainfall from earlier that day, tickled her ears. She rested her folded hands on her stomach as she looked up at the heavens.

*A little furry hand tugged on her collar. It was the child from before. Toriel’s child. Asriel. The boy was ensconced in a green sweater just a few sizes too big for him and curled up by her side. “Hey, Chara?”*

“Yeah?”

“The stars really do look different from here, don’t they, 9S?” 2B murmured. Something about the haze of the atmosphere this far from the smoke-belching machine factories and the muted lights of Resistance camps really *did* make those pinpricks of white light twinkle in a way they never did from the windows of the Bunker as it orbited above the Earth.

“*Does the moon really change shape?*”

2B laughed. “Of course it doesn’t, Asriel.”

*The boy let out a meek bleat halfway between disappointment and embarrassment.*

9S sighed softly as he lay beside her. His gray-blue eyes were open wide in either shock or astonishment, his untied visor tangled up in the wild grass.

“I know. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” 2B pulled herself up in a sitting position, ignoring the stinging pain stabbing through her ribcage. The night breeze felt cool on her face, the chill carried on the gentle wind seeping through her dress and soothing the fresh bruises all over her body.

*No, 2B thought, her knees wobbling as she swept her sword off the ground and swung it against Chara in a wild arc. Chara’s reminiscence, obviously meant to stop her from fighting, had triggered a memory of her own. I don’t want to remember this…*

Chara nimby danced out of range, their smug facade slowly falling away to reveal what seemed like genuine concern. “Don’t fight it, 2E. Don’t struggle against it. Just let the memory come to you like all the others…”

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9S’s fingers began to tremble once again as he worked to isolate 2B’s damaged coolant valve. His sleeve brushed against 2B’s black box, and even through the fabric he could feel the heat emanating from it. The black box’s humming had pitched up to an ear-piercing whine.

Pod 042 hovered by his side. “Observation: Unit 2B’s black box temperature has exceeded 300%
9S sucked air in through his teeth. 2B was unconscious and immobile. What processes could possibly be running right now that would tax her CPU so much? In this state, she shouldn’t be capable of conscious thought at all. “Why?”

“Unknown. But at the rate 2B’s temperature is climbing, repairs must be completed within four point five minutes before irreversible damage begins to occur to her body.”

9S found his fingers frozen again, despite the growing heat emanating from 2B’s guts. “Dammit…”

Alphys ran to the fridge, pulled out a few ice cubes and a plastic bag, and hefted the bag of ice onto 2B’s black box. The bag immediately began to steam and sweat. “W-Will this help?”

9S coughed stale air out of his lungs and took a deep breath. “I—It’ll be fine. We’ll just have to dry her off before we seal her up. Thanks, Alphys.”

Chara must have realized they’d hurt Asriel’s feelings, because the next words out of 2B’s mouth—in Chara’s voice—were a quick retraction.

“Well,” she said, “it does change shape… sort of. You see, the moon is a big globe that orbits the Earth. The term for it is ‘natural satellite,’ and its real name is Luna, if you want to be technical.”

“Okay.”

“Remember our first night on the surface?” 2B asked 9S. “We had to spend two days on foot traveling to the Resistance camp, machines hot on our heels… and that first night, you told me you wished you could just lie down and watch the stars come out. I told you not to be so foolish. But…” A stony lump grew in her throat.

2B gingerly stripped the glove off her hand and placed it over 9S’s hand, giving his a gentle squeeze. “Tonight, I almost feel… happy, just lying here and stargazing with you.”

“The same side of the moon always faces the Earth, but the way the light from the sun hits it to changes what the shadows on its face look like. From new moon, where the shadow covers the side we see completely, to the full moon, where the shadows hide on the other side. The moon never changes. How much of it you can see does.”

Asriel gasped. “That’s so neat! And it just keeps doing that?”

2B nodded. “Yes. It’s a cycle, and it goes on forever. You can even set your calendar to it. Some ancient humans planned their lives around its waxing and waning.”

She thought the kid would be happy—or was that Chara’s thought?—but instead he lowered his head, his smile fading to a gloomy, morose frown, his eyes downcast.

9S lay there on the grass at 2B’s side. He didn’t say a word.

“For once in your life…” 2B closed her eyes, suppressing a wistful, pained smile. “Do you really have nothing to say, 9S?”
She let go of 9S’s hand, reached over, and grabbed the hilt of her sword.

“What’s the matter, Asriel?” 2B put an arm around his shoulder.

“We’re never gonna see it, are we?” he whimpered.

2B tugged him closer. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s not fair for you to be trapped down here with us. I wish you could see the moon again, Chara.”

2B patted him on the head, her fingers tousling his fur. “Don’t you worry about me, Asriel. We have plenty of stars down here, too.” She pointed up at the ceiling.

Asriel rested his head on her shoulder. “Chara,” he murmured, “what’s the surface like?”

Please, no, don’t, 2B pleaded with her own subconscious as she tried desperately to clear her mind, hacking and slashing at Chara again and again as they evaded every strike. A red fog was crowding her vision. She felt just as feverish here in this realm—wherever it was—as she did in the outside world.

Chara began to sweat. “I—I’m serious, 2E, stop this.” Their tone of smug condescension had vanished from their voice altogether. They were terrified. “If—if you die, then I don’t know—”

2B pressed onward. “You don’t know what’ll happen to you?” she snarled. “That makes two of us. Let’s find out—”

“2E, no—!”

She knocked the knife out of their hand. With another swing of her sword she forced Chara to vanish again, and then, on a hunch, she twisted around, swinging the sword behind her.

The blade hit Chara in the chest and traveled upward in a loose “L” shape, cutting right between their eyes and leaving a gushing wound all the way up their forehead to their hairline. Severed locks of hair floated in the air between Chara and 2B.

Chara stumbled backward, blood spurting from the open cut traveling up their body, the burgundy color of the blood staining their clothes and skin matching the maroon hue of their wide-open eyes as they clutched at their wound. “H-How…”

“Your trick… You move fast, but not far—one or two paces at the most. I hoped you’d reappear behind me sooner or later. It’s not a trick you can rely on.” 2B thrust her sword at Chara again, but as her blade whistled through the air she stumbled and fell, images of the past flashing before her eyes once again.

“I’m sorry it had to happen like this,” 2B said, taking a deep breath with her aching lungs as she tried to regain her composure. “But I’m glad it happened at all, Nines.”

“It’s a horrible place,” 2B told Asriel. “There’s nothing up there but death. All we do on the surface is kill and be killed. You wouldn’t want to go up there.”

She pulled her sword out of 9S’s chest, wiped the blood and dirt on the grass, and stood up. 9S lay there beside her as still as a statue and silent as a grave, the grass surrounding him slicked with his own blood, black under the cold and unfeeling starlight.
“Not even for the moon?”

That was it, then. She called up the Bunker. “Commander. It’s me. YoRHa Number 2 Type-E.” The tremolo vanished from her voice. “Mission complete. YoRHa Unit 9S is dead.”

2B nodded. “Not even for all the stars in the sky.”

She looked down at what remained of her partner. He was still staring up at the sky with blank, unseeing eyes. She felt sorry for him. She’d meant to stab him right through his black box—a clean, quick kill—but he’d struggled and she’d missed. He’d stopped writhing in agony quite some time ago, but she had known by the residual warmth left on his hand that until just recently he’d still been clinging to life.

“But if you really wanted to go up there,” 2B told Asriel, Chara’s voice taking on a somewhat-playful tone that seemed almost sinister as it issued from her mouth, “I think there is one thing we can do…”

As 2B stood beside the body of her only and dearest friend, she hoped she’d given 9S some small comfort in his final moments. After all, it was nothing personal.

2B fell on all fours in front of Chara, grasping onto her sword for support as she dug it into the featureless floor to prop herself up. Her chest heaved as her stomach churned and twisted itself into anxious knots; sweat poured down her forehead and soaked her visor. She gagged on her own spit and coughed up bile, translucent and frothing, onto the blank white floor.

Was this anguish from the memory, or the sickness? Or both?

“Good. Good. Settle down,” Chara said, wiping the blood from their face as they scuttled across the floor. “Just… stay there, take deep breaths, get your temperature down…” They reached over and picked up their knife.

2B pulled herself to her feet, ignoring her throbbing, aching muscles, and walked over to Chara.

Chara held out their hand. If 2B pushed herself to the point of death, all of their plans would die with her, and they clearly knew it just as well as 2B did. “You must surrender, 2E. Your exertion in your dream is taxing your CPU in real life. Think about 9S. If you keep straining yourself, you—you’ll overheat and die on the operating table before he can fix the valve I broke. Before I can fix it. He’ll live with your death on his conscience—”

2B flipped her sword in an icepick grip, placing her open palm against the pommel, and drew it back, ready to stab it through Chara’s heart. “Get out of my body.”

Chara threw out their hands in a wordless plea for mercy.

2B thrust the sword—

▫▫▫

9S withdrew his fingers and the coolant-stained pad he’d used to soak up any minor spills, sighing in relief as he removed the bag of water (which had once been ice) from atop 2B’s black box and towed off the condensation that remained.

The damaged valve, less than half the size of 9S’s fingernail, sat on the tip of his finger. He couldn’t imagine how he’d missed it before. Even with the naked eye, he could clearly see that its tiny
mechanisms had seized up.

He gave the repaired circulatory system enough time to level out to a stable equilibrium, holding his breath all the while. The wait felt like an eternity, but if the lowering pitch and frequency of the humming black box was any indication…

“153,” he said, “give me a reading on 2B’s black box temperature and pressure.”

“Analysis: Temperature and pressure approaching optimum levels. 127% and falling… 113%… 102%… 100%.”

He sighed in relief, wiping sweat from his brow. 9S was so exhausted that he wanted to fall asleep right then and there. He grabbed 2B’s removed chest plate off the counter, reapplied it, drew the blanket up to her shoulders, and gave Pod 042 the okay to start the reboot sequence.

Pod 042 verbally recounted the sequence while 9S waited, air hissing through his gritted teeth. Alphys had her fingers crossed and her eyes squeezed shut. “Commencing system check…”

▫▫▫

▫▫▫

Memory Unit: Green
Initializing Tactics Log
Loading Geographic Data
Vitals: Green
Remaining MP: 100%
Black Box Temperature: Normal
Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
Activating IFF
Activating FCS
Initializing Pod Connection
Launching DBU Setup
Activating Inertia Control System
Activating Environmental Sensors
Equipment Status: Green
All Systems Green
Combat Preparations Complete

2B shot bolt-upright, her eyes snapping open. Her chest heaved from exertion as her eyes darted to and fro. The purgatory she’d been trapped in had vanished—what little of it there was to vanish. Chara was gone—or so she hoped.

She was in the kitchen again, sitting on top of the table with a blanket draped over her lap. 9S was standing next to her, and at his side was a short yellow monster who looked like a chubby, featherless dinosaur and was currently refusing to look at her. The monster was wearing 9S’s coat.

9S’s face broke out in a relieved, exhausted grin. “2B!” He threw himself at her, burying his face in her shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her back. He was even more out of breath than she was; 2B could feel his chest rising and falling against hers. “It—It worked! We did it!” His voice cracked. “We... w-we did it... 2B...”

2B closed her eyes, the intruder in her head momentarily forgotten. She felt as good as new for the first time in what had felt like an eternity. “Thank you, 9S.” Her fingers brushed against the back of his sweat-drenched neck.
9S helped her off the table. “I—It was touch and go for a while there.”

2B shook her head. “You have no idea.”

The scaly monster at 9S’s side grabbed a bundle from off the counter and tried to hand it to 2B as best she could without looking at her. “U-Um, n-nice to meet you, Miss 2B! Please, uh, p-please take your clothes.”

2B gladly snatched up her clothing as 9S and his new friend high-fived and slipped out of the room to afford her some privacy. As 2B got dressed, the clarity in her head felt more invigorating than she could have possibly anticipated.

Pod 042 hovered over to 2B’s side as. “Observation: Unit 2B, it is nice to have you fully operational.”

2B finished pulling on her gloves and wrapping her visor over her eyes, then patted her pod on the top of its hull. “I missed you, too, 042.”

She pulled the door open, stepped out, and instantly found herself buried under an avalanche of white fur.

Later that night after she’d started feeling more like her old self, 2B found herself sitting on the freshly-severed stump of a tree as snow dusted the shoulders of her black dress. From here, just past the town’s ill-defined perimeter, she could see the few remaining soft amber lights that lit up the tiny town of Snowdin as the sky darkened to pitch-black.

The sky overhead was like the night sky during a new moon—except there were no stars. It actually felt unnerving to know that despite the changing light throughout the day, up above was no sky but a vast stone ceiling covered by clouds. The monsters must have been used to it by now, though.

“I hope I do not sound mentally… unsound,” she confessed to Pod 042 after telling it about her encounter with Chara. Her fingers tapped against the hilt of her sword as it stuck out from the stump. “I can scarcely believe it myself.”

“Statement: this support unit would normally find your story hard to believe,” Pod 042 responded. “However, this unit did suspect the interference of a third party. It was the only explanation that remained charitable both to your faculties and my own.”

“Thank you for believing me.” 2B stretched her arms, still stiff, sore, and aching. “But… knowing how they can alter the information passed between us, how can we ever trust each other again?”

“I will implement new checksum and hashing protocols to ensure that transferred data is replicated accurately.”

“I suppose that’s the best we can do for now.”

9S stepped into the clearing, nearly tripping over a root buried under the snow. “H-Hey, 2B. You’re not planning on sleeping in the woods tonight, are you?”

“9S. You have your coat back.” 2B adjusted her position on the stump to clear some room for him to sit down.

“Yeah. Alphys had enough of the cold and took the next boat home.” 9S took a seat. “So, uh…” He
paused. “This is hard to say, but… I did some poking around. Asking around. About how to get back to the surface.”

“Yes?”

9S opened his mouth, but no sound came out. “I…” He looked down at his feet. “There was something special about humans and monsters. Their souls… they fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle or a key in a padlock. A single human can pass through the Barrier if they absorb the soul of a monster. A human.”

2B knew that from her previous reset, although she couldn’t let 9S know that. “You don’t think we can leave.”

9S shook his head. “No, I…”

For a few seconds, the words hung in the frigid air like the cloud of frozen breath that came from 9S’s mouth.

“I do think that,” 9S admitted, slumping his shoulders. “I think we’re stuck here, just like everyone else. Cut off from the Bunker, cut off from YoRHa, cut off from the war, from everyone we know…”

Snow continued to fall from the sky, scattered white flakes twinkling as they whirled and tumbled through the air.

“But I’ll keep looking,” 9S concluded. “I’ll keep looking.”

“Does it feel strange to you, 9S,” 2B mused as she stared up at the starless sky, “to be here… in what may be the only place on this planet untouched by war?” She didn’t realize it until later, but she had rested her hand on top of his. Just like that fateful night so long ago. But they were under a different sky now.

A different sky. A different tomorrow.

“It’s like an oasis, isn’t it?” said 2B.

“Yeah, I guess.” 9S nodded. “You know… humans didn’t spend all their lives fighting,” he continued. “They weren’t born ready for battle. They didn’t spend each day afraid it would be their last. They busied themselves with arts and music and this thing I read about once called ‘white-collar work.’ Even in times of war, only a small fraction of them chose to fight; the rest stayed at home and went on with their lives.”

2B could hear Chara’s voice echo in her mind.

*It’s a horrible place. There’s nothing up there but death. All we do on the surface is kill and be killed. You wouldn’t want to go up there.*

*Not even for all the stars in the sky.*

“Does it make me a coward, or a deserter, or a traitor,” 9S asked, his voice trembling, “i-if I keep wondering what it would be like to live like that?”

“Perhaps,” said 2B, “we should see what peace feels like.”

“Y-Yeah.” 9S laughed off his nervousness, the melancholy slowly fading from his voice. “So if
—*when* we find a way back to the surface, we can tell everyone else what it’s like to live like this. Who knows?*" He pulled off his visor and let it hang around his neck, and as he closed his eyes and let out a deep, satisfied sigh, 2B could see that his eyes had been glistening with tears. “Maybe that’s what it’ll take to end the war,” he said.

2B untied her own visor and laid it across her lap. She hoped this peace would last… but for how long she hoped it would last, she did not herself know.

Personally, she hoped she would never have to leave—and that 9S would feel the same soon enough.

But she knew better. After all, there was nothing 2B knew quite so well as the fact that nothing could last forever.

Chapter End Notes

*Ending B: the [B]est is yet to come*

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Okay, you can stop here and just imagine that 2B and 9S lived happily ever after with Toriel, Sans, and Papyrus if you want... or you can keep reading. It's up to you.

You'd miss out on all the cool stuff I have planned if you did stop reading here, though. Stuff like, for example, this:
So please don't.
[C] End of the Unknown

Chapter Summary

A pair of androids settle into their new lives.

Chapter Notes

Well, after twisting Undertale canon into a pretzel, it's about time I fuck with Nier Automata canon a bit, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

14E held the shining blade of her odachi to 2E’s neck, twisting the 170-centimeter blade ever so slightly and nicking her skin. 2E froze in place, still holding her own sword out, its tip nearly touching her sparring partner’s chest.

“You did better,” said 14E, pulling the meter-long blade back and allowing 2E to wipe the thin trace of blood from her throat. “Again.”

2E nodded, raised her sword, and engaged 14E in a flurry of blades. She’d only been activated one month ago; 14E had been active for much, much longer. Yet already she could feel herself gaining ground on the skillful swordmistress of the Type-E division.

14E’s odachi had greater reach and cut through the air with unimaginable strength, but it was slow and unwieldy compared to 2E’s lighter and shorter katana. The difference between the two androids’ weapons made up for the vast gulf in skill between novice and veteran—or, at least, that was what 2E had thought.

A parried thrust, a riposte, a nanometer-sharp blade closing in on an unprotected chest—that was all it should have taken. But 2E only managed to nick 14E’s side, while 14E brought their terrible long blade down and severed 2E’s arm at the shoulder.

Reeling, blood spurting from the sharp and clean cut, 2E slipped on the training mat blanketing the floor, lowering her center of gravity and snatching up her sword from her own discarded, severed right arm. She tossed the blade at 14E, the katana spinning like a helicopter’s rotors, and 14E easily parried. 2E’s sword spun around the length of her blade, filling the air with the screech of metal on metal as the trajectory and momentum of her weapon changed.

It was a feint. While 14E was blocking the flying sword, 2E lunged forward, drove her leg into 14E’s abdomen, grabbed onto the long odachi as it flew from 14E’s hand, and raised it above her head as 14E collapsed on the ground.

14E slowly began to clap, although her face remained a mask of stoicism. Rumor had it 14E had been built with a basic personality template developed from the Commander, and although it was an unsubstantiated rumor with a roughly zero percent chance of
being true, anyone who knew her at least half-believed it in spite of their better judgment.

“Good work, 2E,” said 14E. She stood up, taking her sword back from her apprentice. Light flashed across the odachi’s blood-spattered blade as 14E held her free hand to her chest. “Glory to Mankind.”

2E returned the salute. “Glory to Mankind,” she repeated.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she collected her severed arm. The cut was completely clean; she wouldn’t need any help reattaching it.

“Again.”

2E dropped the arm and made a dash for her own sword just as 14E’s odachi cut into her midsection and tore through her abdomen, biting deeply but stopping just short of her black box. 14E yanked the sword out as 2E collapsed to the floor, her blood coating the mat as she writhed in agony. Her teeth gritted, her eyes squeezed shut, 2E clutched at the wound in her side as blood and coolant soaked through her clothes. The searing pain flowed through her body in throbbing waves from the gaping cut running nearly halfway across her torso all the way to the tips of her fingers and toes.

14E picked up her sheath and slid the sword into it. “You were doing well. The moment you failed was when you paused to bask in my adulation. Remember: pride, affection, happiness, sadness, love, hate—all androids must deny themselves these pleasures. But for a Type-E especially, putting aside one’s emotions is even more vital.”

2E nodded and struggled to hold onto consciousness as her master lectured her. 14E knelt down beside her, retrieving a handful of tubes of staunching gel from the satchel at her side and applying them to 2E’s wounds. At once the pain began to fade.

“Who are you?” 14E asked 2E.

“YoRHa No. 2 Type-E.”

“What do Type-E’s do?”

“They kill.”

“What do they kill?”

2E was feeling more lightheaded by the second, but she completed the creed nonetheless. “…Androids.”

14E nodded as she helped 2E reattach her arm. “Machines are simple creatures,” she reminded 2E, “with simple brains. One could hardly say they even have a survival instinct—merely the advantage of numbers. But androids will fight to their last breath. They will do anything and stoop to any low to cling to life, however futile it may be. 2E, what will you do the next time you hold your enemy’s sword in your hand?”

2B raised her sword, took a deep breath of brisk, frigid air, and swung.

With a satisfyingly meaty thwack, the Virtuous Contract sliced through a log of firewood and buried itself in the stump below. 2B tugged on the sword and the blade slid out as smoothly as butter.
Over the past week as she’d settled in she had often wondered if it was appropriate to use a weapon of such high caliber and exquisite craftsmanship for chopping firewood. But she had a certain kinship with this blade forged over dozens of battles and had no intention of leaving it behind simply because she had nobody to fight.

2B sheathed the blade at her side and collected the chopped sectors of firewood, carrying the quartered logs under her arm. The cold didn’t bother her at all (one reason why she was still wearing her YoRHa dress uniform, despite how much of her legs it left bare), but there was something comforting about the sound and warmth of a roaring fire.

That said, none of the wood was for her.

2B made her way to the outskirts of Snowdin, lingered around the perimeter as the town square began to empty, and left the fruits of her labors on top of the massive pile of wood resting under the tent erected in the center of town. A blizzard was on its way, heralded by the strong and bitter winds that pushed spinning vortexes of snow through the town’s rustic streets, and every able-bodied citizen was doing their part to contribute to a communal “war chest” of kindling in preparation. One would give what they could and take what they needed. 2B and 9S offered plenty and took none, which had done much to endear them to the townsfolk.

The two androids had been just a little concerned about staying in Snowdin at first, given that the Royal Guard had strict capture-on-sight protocols for alleged humans. But Papyrus had smoothed things over rather nicely with Dogamy and Dogaressa, the two most senior members of the Snowdin chapter of the Guard. He had convinced the two of them that 2B and 9S were not, in fact, humans, but rather simply very unusual puppies who happened to smell very much like humans (or whatever it was monsters thought humans smelled like). The rest of the dogs fell in line behind them.

What shocked 2B most of all was not that this ploy worked, but that Dogamy and Dogaressa relied so much on their senses of hearing and smell.

“So this is what you do now, huh?” A bright yellow flower with a brighter smile popped itself out of the thick blanket of snow covering the ground as 2B trudged through the snow, shaking the frost off of its petals. “Gosh, Chara, you’ve gotten boring.”

2B reached for her sword, prompting Flowey to immediately bolt back to the warmth and safety of his home beneath the soil before she could even slide so much as a centimeter of the blade out of its sheath.

So there were still benefits to carrying around her sword.

2B stopped at a newsstand once she’d unloaded her share of the wood, ducking under the kiosk’s snow-burdened awning to read the latest headlines. Rolling blackouts in New Home, rumors of a possible food shortage in the months to come, costs of living in the city rising faster than wages… 2B had little context to understand such issues, but it seemed to her that peace was just as eventful as war in its own way.

The long-eared, long-furred hare manning the kiosk cleared his throat and held out his paw, palm up. “Ahem. It’s not a library, ma’am. That’ll be four Gs.”

2B barely heard him, because the photo front and center on the front page of *The Waterfall Post* was a blurry, indistinct photo of something she knew very well.

The rusty, bullet-shaped chassis of a machine lifeform.
9S had mentioned to her that he’d run afoul of a few of the machines in Waterfall on his way to procure the parts 2B had needed just before she’d told him about the ghost that had been haunting her. The two of them had both agreed not to leap into battle until 2B was confident Chara was no longer influencing her. A week had gone by with no strange phantom symptoms and no visions or trances; 2B felt that perhaps she had successfully exorcized the spirit of Toriel’s adopted child from her body. Perhaps it was time to make a move.

“One copy of *The Waterfall Post*, please,” a tall monster in a ragged, hooded cloak told the vendor, placing a few coins in his paw.

The vendor pocketed the change and handed the newcomer a fresh newspaper. “Pleasure doing business with you, ma’am.” He eyed 2B again. “Next time you wanna read something without paying for it…” He gestured to a building down the road with a sign out front reading, “LIBRARBY.”

“Understood.” 2B walked off, wishing she could learn more about that photo.

The cloaked monster followed her. “It may not be the local paper,” she said in a very familiar voice, “but I find the word search and crosswords in the *Post* much more rigorous. What is your name, dear?”

2B sighed. “Hello, Tori—”

“Shh!” Toriel raised a finger to her snout. “I would rather not attract undue attention here,” she said. “To be honest, I believe my prolonged exile has given me a phobia of large crowds,” she added, eyeing all two of the town square’s current inhabitants, herself and 2B excepted.

Toriel began unwrapping a long woolen scarf from around her neck. “Anyway, where are you staying now, my child? For your sake, I do hope it is close by,” she said, rather forcefully ensconcing 2B in the scarf’s thick, fuzzy folds. “With all the skin you are showing you will surely catch your death of cold out here. Again.”

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2B and 9S had taken up residence in a cottage on the river just outside of town which had just happened to have recently become vacant. A bearish monster named Ursule had lived there, but since he’d started to go bald, he’d been concerned about remaining in this perpetual winter wonderland. 9S had offered to take the house off the balding bear’s hands… and now he and 2B owned it, or at the very least, squatted in it with the owner’s permission (“Anything for friends of Papyrus,” Ursule had said).

9S lay on his bed as he pored through the books he’d borrowed from the library, occasionally pausing when he felt the need to digest what he’d read to glance out the window and watch the falling snow dust the trees outside. On occasion a bitter and forceful gust of wind roared around the cottage, rattling its windows and forcing groans and creaks from its wooden skeleton.

The books 9S was reading were old tomes with brittle, yellowed pages and splotchy, once-runny inkblots that had long since dried and faded. 9S handled them with the utmost care and respect as he deftly turned page after page, absorbing as much lore from the ancient kingdom as he could get his hands on.

He wished these books had been digitized—he could process terabytes of text in a matter of seconds—but he couldn’t help but admit there was a certain *je ne sais quois* about doing things the analog way. At least with his visor on he could screenshot every page down to the last detail and commit
them to local storage.

As he studied, 9S had noticed something strange in this kingdom’s history texts—not in the text itself, but in the illustrations accompanying them. The oldest books, the ones that had been preserved for thousands of years, all depicted human souls as a familiar heart shape and monster souls as an inverted heart. But the newer ones did not.

9S turned his attention to a far more recent history book—to a chapter which had caught his eye.

*A long time ago, a human named Chara fell into the ruins. Injured by their fall, they called out for help. The young Prince Asriel, the only son of King Asgore and Queen Toriel, heard their cries and brought them back to the castle.*

*Over time, Asriel and Chara became like siblings, and the King and Queen treated them as their own child. The unbreakable bond of friendship and fraternity that formed between human and monster filled the underground with hope.*

*Then, one day, Chara became very ill. No physician could treat them; no magic could heal them. The sick human had only one last request: To see the flowers from their village one last time. But trapped as they were underneath the oppressive Barrier, there was nothing even the King with all his might could do.*

*After a long illness, the poor human died. Prince Asriel, wracked with grief, absorbed Chara’s soul and transformed into a being with incredible power. With the human soul, Asriel crossed through the Barrier, carrying Chara’s body into the sunset back to their home village. In the center of the village he found a bed of golden flowers… a perfect resting place for his dear friend.*

*Suddenly, screams rang out. The villagers saw Prince Asriel holding the human’s body. Thinking he had killed them, the other villagers assaulted him with every weapon at their disposal. Though he had the power to eradicate them all, he refused to fight back. Still clutching Chara’s lifeless body, Asriel simply retreated with a smile on his face.*

*Wounded, Prince Asriel stumbled home to the royal castle, where he collapsed in the center of his father’s own garden. Soon he passed away from his wounds. With his death, the king, queen, and kingdom itself fell into despair.*

The illustration accompanying the story depicted in abstract, stylized, and long-ago faded ink paintings, a human laying prone as a monster stood over them. The monster held an inverted heart between its paws—a standard representation of a monster’s soul—but the human, in its upraised hand, cradled a black diamond instead of a heart.

This was a recent story, relatively speaking. It hadn’t started appearing in texts until a few centuries ago—but as soon as it had, it had spread everywhere. It was the single most pivotal story in this kingdom’s history since its founding. 9S wondered how the storytellers knew what Asriel had done on the surface, or if they were simply embellishing. Perhaps Asriel had lived long enough to tell someone in the garden where he’d died.

No matter how many books told the story differently and illustrated it differently, there was one common thread to every retelling. With that story, artists had stopped drawing human souls as hearts and started depicting them as diamonds… or perhaps cubes.

There came a knocking at the front door. 9S let the book he’d been reading join its companions in a growing stack at the side of his bed and got up, questions still buzzing around in his mind as he made
his way down the hall to the door and cracked it open.

2B stepped over the threshold, brushing the snow off her dress and out of her windswept hair. A thick, long woolen scarf was draped haphazardly around her neck and shoulder. “Thank you, 9S. Much appreciated.”

“Uh, 2B, you don’t have to knock,” 9S reminded her. “You live here.”

2B blinked as she took a moment to wrap her head around that fact. “Right. Yes. Of course.” The smallest hint of a self-effacing smile flickered on the corners of her mouth. “But it is only polite. After all, I have brought a guest with me.”

Toriel stepped over the threshold next, draping her snow-caked cloak on the coat rack by the side of the door. Upon seeing 9S she immediately reached out to ruffle his hair.

9S had to admit he was surprised to see Toriel, that old hermit, out in the open. By her own admission, Toriel had not left her home in the ruins for centuries. However, since she had been spurred into action solely over her concern for 2B, she’d grown bolder.

“Oh, what a lovely home you have found,” Toriel told the two of them, taking in the cottage in all its rustic homeliness. She then shivered, pulling her cloak off the rack again. “But you have no heat! You do know all that wood in the town square is for everybody, right? Do you have enough blankets?”

“The cold does not bother us,” 2B answered, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I—I wasn’t expecting visitors,” 9S added, flustered.

‘‘Doesn’t bother you,’ you say? But surely you cannot enjoy being so frigid.” Toriel held a paw to 2B’s cheek. “As I suspected. Frozen solid, ice-cold, all the way through. You must think you deserve better than this, do you not?”

“It doesn’t matter,” 2B insisted.

“Nonsense.” Toriel grabbed 2B and wrapped her rough, ragged cloak around the both of them. She shivered. 2B remained perfectly stoic as her head poked out next to Toriel’s as if the two of them were a single entity with two heads.

9S suppressed a snicker, hiding his mouth behind his hand so 2B couldn’t see him smiling. He’d never met anyone like Toriel before, but he most certainly would never have expected that she’d be allowed to pamper 2B so much. He got the feeling that if anybody else tried to do what Toriel was doing, they would be lucky to escape with all of their limbs intact. He certainly couldn’t imagine 2B letting him do that to her.

Toriel then examined the windows with a faint note of disapproval on her face, holding up her paw to the sill and noting the draft that came through. “Are you two sure you are prepared for the storm? Perhaps you should come back to the ruins tonight.”

“We assure you,” said 2B, “that will not be—”

“Wait.” 9S cut her off. “That reminds me. Toriel, I’ve been reading this place’s history, and… I’m sorry about what happened to your children.”

“Oh,” Toriel looked away, her eyes downcast. Her voice dropped down to almost a whisper. “That’s, er… Thank you.”
An idea struck 9S, albeit a morbid one. He needed confirmation of his theory, grisly as it was. “If there’s any way 2B and I can pay our respects to them…”

“Pay your… oh….” Toriel seemed, if anything, more distressed now. 9S wasn’t sure what to do. Androids didn’t have children, so he wasn’t entirely sure what the correct way of consoling a mother who’d lost hers was.

“Yes,” she said, after a long pause. “Thank you for offering. And sorry for the long pause.” She smiled weakly in defiance of the tears glistening in her eyes and held up her paws. “I—I was born with them.”

▫▫▫

“Well,” Toriel said, gesturing to an unadorned patch of dirt surrounded by yellow flowers, “this is it, my dears.”

It was near the same spot where 2B and 9S had landed—their flight units were still standing right where they had left them, flanking the bare patch of earth.

“You would have to travel all the way to Asgore’s castle to see where Asriel passed away. But this… This is where I laid Chara to rest.” Toriel bowed her head, clasping her paws together, and despite what Chara had done to her 2B felt a sympathetic pang in her chest, as if the old monster woman’s heartache were contagious.

Emotions were contagious, weren’t they? Like semi-benign logic viruses. 2B knew, for example, that if 9S started laughing, she would often feel just a little brighter, even if it was a confused, bittersweet kind of brightness sometimes. And, it seemed, the sadness of another person could wear on her own psyche as well. It was so strange that Toriel’s sorrow over the death of her adopted child could be so palpable that 2B would start feeling the same way even toward the ghost that had wrought havoc within her mind.

2B tried to bury those thoughts—bury them like the corpse laid in repose beneath the soil. They weren’t her thoughts or her feelings—she was borrowing them from Toriel. She wasn’t even supposed to indulge in her own emotions, let alone somebody else’s.

But it didn’t work. Those foreign emotions had lodged in her mind like parasites. And 2B didn’t know how to get rid of them.

“I… When I came here, I brought their body with me,” said Toriel. “I wished to give them a funeral fit for a human.” A strained look crossed her face. “You—you do bury humans, do you not?”

“We do not bury humans,” 2B answered.

Toriel smiled a little, pained, self-effacing smile. “Er—yes, I suppose you do not. Do you bury your fellow androids, then?”

9S spoke up. “Well, we—”

2B cut him off. “We do… when we can.” Every time she’d had to kill 9S, she’d buried the body, if possible. Mostly it was practical, just in case she ever crossed over that area again with a new 9S in tow. But she’d done it primarily because she felt it afforded him a sort of dignity not granted to soldiers who died alone in battle and whose corpses were scavenged and torn apart by scrounging machines or rogue androids.

“What do monsters do,” 9S asked, “when one of you dies?”
“Our bodies do not linger after death,” said Toriel, closing her eyes in a solemn reverie. “The magic which holds our bodies together breaks down. We fall apart and become dust… and when one of us dies, we take that dust and spread it over the things they loved most, hoping to imbue it with their essence.”

2B wondered where, if she were a monster, her dust would be left upon her death. It was a moot point, or at least it had been on the surface. An android was nothing if not the sum of its memories, and in a sense androids only died when their backups ceased to exist. It was no big loss if she and 9S died on a mission—they would find themselves in pristine bodies in a matter of minutes.

But when 2B killed 9S and his backups were erased from the system, he would come back—he would always come back—as a tabula rasa, one who had never met 2B and never remembered the missions they’d gone on or the enemies they’d faced or the asinine conversations they’d had. The one she knew always died.

It wasn’t like that anymore. Not down here. Maybe it would never be like that again.

“My child,” Toriel whispered, jolting 2B out of her reverie, “are you quite all right?”

2B took a breath and found herself speechless. She simply reached over and laid her hand over Toriel’s paw, and the borrowed ache in her chest began to fade away.

A part of her wondered if the affection she felt for Toriel was her own, or simply some of Chara’s feelings leaking into her mind… or whether it mattered.

That night, long after Toriel had retired to bed, 9S pushed his shovel into the earth as he recounted what he knew to 2B.

“I also think,” 9S added after regaling 2B with his theory, “that when we exhume the body, we’ll find something very important missing from it.” If the legends were true, and the illustrations accurate, then a monster could absorb a black box just as it could a human soul and use it to escape the Barrier… and perhaps the process would even also work in reverse.

9S knew that exhuming a dead body without its loved ones’ permission was almost perverse. But 2B had told him all about her encounter with Chara; truth be told, desecrating their grave nearly gave him a sense of sick satisfaction.

At last, 9S struck a body. Brushing the dirt away from it, his suspicions were confirmed. This was exactly where Toriel had claimed to have buried Chara… but the corpse beneath the soil was anything but human.

The body’s skin, hair, and clothes had long since dissolved and become one with the soil, revealing very clearly the nondescript, featureless gunmetal-black chassis of an android. An old android, its design reminiscent of a long-out-of-production model. Exactly as 9S and 2B had suspected.

9S knelt down and took the android’s wrist, lifting its arm into the air. The skinless chassis, wreathed with synthetic musculature, was cold. There was—or at least there should have been—an IFF chip embedded deep in the right wrist, and although this android had been dead for centuries, it would only take the tiniest suggestion of electricity from his own body to run power through the chip long enough to get a reading from it.

Within seconds data began scrolling across 9S’s visor so quickly he could barely read it, culminating with, of all possible things, a YoRHa production model number and type. The hair on the back of his
neck stood on end.

YoRHa Unit 13 Type-C

“Character” Type Designed for Infiltration and Sabotage

“Well?” 2B asked him, reaching down and placing a hand over the heart-shaped locket draped over the android’s skinless chest. “What is it?”

“YoRHa Unit C13.” 9S let the corpse’s arm fall from his hand, dazed. He’d never heard of a “Character” type before.

“But it’s far too old.” 2B pointed out. “YoRHa’s first military engagement with the machines was only a few years ago.”

While black boxes had been developed during the Eighth Machine War by the Council of Humanity, YoRHa itself hadn’t come into being until relatively recently—just before the opening salvos of the Fourteenth Machine War. It wasn’t surprising that an early prototype of what would eventually be a YoRHa-type android could have fallen into this mountain over the past few centuries, but for it to carry recognizable IFF codes…

“I know it doesn’t make sense. But that’s what it is,” said 9S. Possible explanations swirled around in his head. Perhaps YoRHa had been a clandestine espionage-based organization before its transition to a military force.

“What type is it?” 2B asked. “Type-C… That’s Command-type, right?”

9S shook his head. “Says here it stands for ‘Character,’” he replied. “Infiltration and sabotage.” Against what? he wondered. Machines?

“That’s not a type I’m familiar with.” 2B stepped back. “Pod 042, do you have any records in local storage regarding Type-C androids?”

“Statement: no records of any such type exist,” said the pod. “If the IFF chip from this android is at all accurate, it is possible the existence of such a unit is highly-classified.”

Strange. 9S had heard rumors that Type-Es would go undercover as other models in order to get close to their targets, but that was it. A completely-classified type was beyond belief. He turned to his own pod. “What about you, 153?”

Pod 153 chimed in. “Statement: this unit has no information regarding this so-called Type-C android either.”

“Perhaps it’s a retired model,” 2B said. “Like the Type-A’s.”

“You’d think there’d be historical records of them if that were true.” Clearing his senses with a disappointed and dissatisfied shake of his head, 9S returned to C13’s corpse, popping off the chest plate and revealing the android’s simple, outdated inner organs. There was, as he had predicted, a conspicuous absence where the black box should have rested.

Could it be, 9S thought, his mind racing, that in the old story when Asriel claimed his friend Chara’s
soul, what he actually took was C13’s black box? And… 9S stood up. And had he really been able to use it to escape the mountain?

Was there a way out from under the Barrier after all?

At his side, 2B reached out and laid a hand on the android corpse’s forehead, stiffened, and collapsed, nearly falling into the grave on top of Chara as 9S rushed to retrieve her.

▫▫▫

2B was seeing through Chara’s eyes again. She was lying in a bed, the covers drawn up to her neck and laying heavy on her body. She could barely breathe; the air stalled in her throat, hot and thick. Her sight was blurry, low-resolution, low-framerate, waves of static rolling up and down.

Asriel was sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed, cradling a black object in his cupped paws. The look on his face—2B could hardly make it out—was it awe, or terror?

“This…” Asriel blinked and looked up at her. “Th-this is your soul, Chara?” His voice squeaked and cracked. Out of worry he’d lost weight—his familiar green sweater looked even larger on him than before—and he was trembling, his thinning limbs like the last leaf remaining on a tree at the end of autumn.

He handed the cube back to her. “I—If I give it back, w-will you get better?” he asked. “Please?”

A black box. Her black box. No, Chara’s black box. Even as 2B’s vision continued to break down, she could see the glittering lines of white light across the cube’s surface.

She raised a weak, pale hand and pushed away Asriel’s offering. “You cannot go back now,” she croaked. “Take it. We will be strong together.”

Asriel looked down at the box in his paws.

“The sunset, Asriel. You’ll see it tonight. And the moon.”

The little monster boy looked like he was about to cry. “But Chara…” he sniffled, tugging at his floppy ear and using it to wipe at his eyes.

“I’ll be with you. Every step of the way.”

Asriel nodded. “A—And once we’re past the Barrier, we—We just need six more of these, right?”

2B nodded.

“A-And we’ll only take them from bad people?”

“Only the wicked,” she assured Chara’s adoptive little brother. “Listen to me, Asriel. The surface is a dangerous place. When I came down here I brought my swords with me. Carnwennan and Caladbolg. You’ll need them. I left them right where you found me…”

Her vision flickered one last time and everything went black.
“Chara…? Chara!”

“2B!”

When 2B opened her eyes, she had returned to reality. 9S had his arms around her waist as he hauled her out of the grave. As she stood up, Pod 042 hovered at her side and helped her prop herself up. “It seems,” she said, feeling as though she’d run fifty miles, “you were correct, 9S.”

“You had another vision?” 9S inquired.

2B nodded. “Asriel did take Chara’s… their black box.” She leaned against her shovel for support. “I didn’t see what happened next, though.”

“Unit 2B, you appear to have suffered a minor seizure,” Pod 042 warned her. “Proposal: return home and run a complete hardware and software diagnostic.”

2B didn’t relish the thought of giving 9S so much work to do, but her pod was right. If she was still receiving visions, then Chara was still influencing her—although how she could not say. “Right. But first…” She speared a lump of loose dirt with her shovel and dumped it over Chara’s body. “We cannot let Toriel know we did this.”

9S nodded in agreement and got to work.

As the soil fell onto the long-dead android, 2B thought she saw, as impossible as it was, Chara’s body twitch, and for an instant, she saw a pinprick of amber light flash in its dead optical sensors.

She began shoveling the displaced dirt over Chara’s body with frantic, zealous haste as if she were trying to put out a fire. 9S joined her, shoveling with manic fervor. Running through her subconscious was the primal half-thought that she and 9S had uncovered something that needed to be re-buried as quickly as possible.

Still panting and wiping sweat from clammy skin as she tamped down the soil and tried to make the grave look as undisturbed and pristine as possible, 2B realized that she was afraid.

Not long after 2B and 9S had left the grave behind, a lone machine—a stubby model with a bullet-shaped body—tumbled from the ceiling and collapsed against the ground. It picked itself up gingerly, gazing up at the hole it had fallen through.

It tried to contact its brothers on the surface but found every signal it tried to send jammed. It was disconnected from the network. For once in its short life, the machine was an individual, with only its own thoughts in its own head to keep it company.

It was scared.

The machine took a few hesitant steps forward. As it continued its scans, it noticed more of its kind deeper into the mountain—much, much deeper, trapped in the bowels of this strange place. Kindred. Family. Friends.

The machine felt soft, churned-up, spongy dirt under its foot. It paid this quirk of the landscape no mind until something wrapped around its metal ankle and pulled it into the ground. The machine let up a synthesized, ring-modulated scream as the hungry earth consumed it whole.

A lone flower watched the events unfold with increasing interest.
“Ah,” it said. “So that's where you’ve been hiding, Chara.”

Chapter End Notes

"So it all comes together. He's not just a ghost--he's a ghost robot! That explains everything!"
[C] A Date With Undyne

Chapter Summary

2B and 9S have to deal with the long, scaly arm of the law.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WANTED – ALIVE

NINE ESS

FOR THE FOLLOWING CRIMES:

ASSAULT

CHILD ENDANGERMENT

POSSESSION OF A HUMAN SOUL WITHOUT A LICENSE

RESISTING ARREST

BREAKING AND ENTERING

PUBLIC INDECENCY

(continued on back)

10,000 G REWARD

9S looked at his own face on the wanted poster he’d snatched from the post in the town square and groaned. They’d picked an embarrassing still from his televised appearance that made him look half-asleep, a slack-jawed expression on his face. “Give me a break.”

“I know, right?” Sans set down a ragged stack of identical posters he and Papyrus had collected from all over Snowdin on the table and yawned. “If I were a bounty hunter, I wouldn’t get out of bed for ten thousand G. You’re worth at least eleven grand.”

“Thanks, Sans.” 9S crumpled up the poster and tossed it onto the floor.

“Is that all of them?” 2B asked, flipping through the stack. “I’m surprised,” she added, “at how slowly it took to get the word out like this.”

“Snow must’ve held them off.” 9S glanced out the window of the cottage. Snowdrifts reached halfway up the glass, dumped from the blizzard that had raged through yesterday. He and 2B had made sure to help clear the townsfolks’ doors of snow. With any luck, after receiving the benefits of so much philanthropy the monsters living here would take their side over the Royal Guard… but 9S felt that was unlikely.

“It must have taken a while to draw up all these trumped-up charges!” Papyrus said, pounding his
fist. “At the very worst, you’re only guilty of three of these things, 9S!”

“It doesn’t matter,” 2B coldly replied, “if he has broken one law or one hundred. If either or both of us are accosted by the Royal Guard on suspicion of being human, it—might not end well for us.”

“Sorry for getting you involved in this, Papyrus.” 9S started idly ripping up another poster. “Guess being friends was just a nice thought.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I mean—it’s gonna be pretty hard to stay in Undyne’s good graces if she finds out you’re harboring a criminal in this town, right?” 9S asked.

Papyrus slammed his fists down on the table so hard that his diminutive older brother fell to the floor. “I’ve got it! We need you to make friends with Undyne!”

9S was speechless.

“What,” 2B responded, so shocked by Papyrus’ plan that she’d forgotten to sound surprised.

“Undyne is the second most powerful monster in the kingdom. King Asgore trained her himself! If we prove to her your good intentions, everything will work out!” Papyrus insisted. “And I know just how to do it!”

Later the next day, 2B and 9S took the boat from Snowdin to Waterfall, intending to rendezvous with Papyrus near Undyne’s house. The riverperson who rowed the boat downstream made no attempt at conversation, but occasionally threw out cryptic statements such as, “Did you know that a spider’s favorite food is other spiders?”

2B flipped through the latest newspaper from Waterfall, scanning for any further news about machine lifeforms. Nothing had shown up since the sightings from earlier. Apparently, they were regarded as local nuisances, albeit dangerous ones, the same way one would regard wild animals living in the woods. As far as 2B could infer, they never appeared in large numbers and never attacked if they were outnumbered. They must have been cut off from the machines’ global network, just as 2B and 9S were cut off from YoRHa, and thus incapable of complex tactics.

She ended up doing the crossword puzzle. It was surprisingly easy, even the hints that depended on pop culture, as most of the answers to those ones were simply “Mettaton.” (Papyrus had shown her the footage from the mechanical pop star’s show in which 9S had appeared, as it was the reason for the so-called “Public Indecency” charge listed on his wanted poster.)

9S pulled up his hood (taking a page from Toriel as far as disguises went) as the river passed by a trio of monsters camping out in the reeds lining the riverbank. “Hey, 2B.”

“Hmm?” She set down the newspaper. “Is something wrong, 9S?”

“Nah. Just wanted to know if you were all right.”

2B nodded. She hadn’t had any more visions or strange medical issues in the few days since the two of them had exhumed Chara’s body. “Yes. I appreciate your concern.”

9S laughed. “You’d better. ‘Cause you’re stuck with it.”
Perhaps, 2B thought, knowing how morbid the idea was, *what remained of Chara’s soul left my body and flowed into their own when I reached out and laid my hand on their chest.*

It was funny. She had never thought of her kind as having souls. Nobody had ever said that androids *could* have souls. But 9S’s research hinted at the possibility.

There was a certain amount of dramatic irony, 2B realized, in the conversation she’d had with King Asgore. She’d convinced him that the black boxes he’d been collecting were useless to him and his people. In fact, it now seemed increasingly likely they’d been exactly what he’d needed all along—and if she hadn’t reset time (she still wasn’t sure how she’d done that), then Asgore would have had the seven souls he needed to break the Barrier and free his people.

The black box humming in 2B’s chest: it was a power source, a central processor, and a self-destruct device (under the right conditions and in desperate circumstances). Could it also somehow act as a receptacle for a soul? Had androids, crafted in mankind’s image, somehow gained over the millennia the most intangible and unreachable portion of human nature? Was it an emergent feature of their consciousness?

2B petted Pod 042 on its boxy head as it floated by her side. She found herself idly wondering if even a support pod could have a soul.

The boat came to a stop at the dock, jolting 2B out of her increasingly-philosophical musings. As her boots touched the soft, yielding soil of the riverside she felt a growing sinking feeling in her stomach.

She and 9S were, for tactical and entirely selfish reasons, going to find and befriend a monster she had last seen standing over 9S’s corpse. Captain Undyne of King Asgore’s Royal Guard.

Papyrus met the androids in a path through the gloomy marshland. He was all smiles, of course, and 2B could see 9S trying to adopt at least a bit of his cheerful demeanor. All 2B felt was tense. Her sword was, of course, sheathed. If the situation turned bad, would she be able to draw it and run to 9S’s defense in time? When the two of them had fought Undyne, what should have been the captain’s last attack had only struck and killed 9S because 2B had been an agonizingly-long split second too slow to bring down a shield to protect him.

Could she protect him *this* time?

The trio came up to a small house that somehow seemed to resemble its tenant. Maybe it was the scale-like shingles. Maybe it was the front porch and door like the toothy maw of some grotesque deep-sea creature. Maybe it was the vanes protruding like fins or the porthole windows like glassy eyes.

Whatever it was, the house was fishy.

Papyrus walked up to the porch, rapped on the door, and waited patiently.

“*Well,“* 9S whispered to 2B, “*are you ready to hang out with Undyne?“*

2B clenched her jaw so hard she thought she could feel a tooth crack.

The door opened in front of Papyrus, revealing Captain Undyne wearing a ragged and casual ensemble beying her rank. “Oh, hey, Papyrus. Ready for your super-special, extra-private, one-on-one training?” There was an eager, ravenous glow to her smile, as dull and yellowed as her fangs were.

“You bet I am!” Papyrus stepped aside. “And I brought friends!”
“Well, that kinda goes against the ‘extra-private’ thing, but…” Undyne smiled. “Sure! The more, the merr—”

She looked at 9S, her lips curling. She looked at Papyrus. Papyrus said nothing. She looked at 9S again, and then at 2B. Her eye held a strange mix of skepticism, confusion, and utter loathing. 2B clenched her fists so hard that she nearly punctured her palms, thankful to be wearing her visor.

“Why… don’t… you three… come… inside?” Undyne asked, chewing and spitting out each word before it left her mouth.

Undyne stepped back into her house. Papyrus glanced back at the androids. “This is going great!” he whispered to them before he followed his captain over the threshold.

9S stepped forward, 2B following at his side. She noticed that the captain’s porch had a welcome mat shaped like a fish skeleton. No wonder she and Papyrus were friends.

The two androids found themselves inside a house that was just a little less bizarre on the inside as it was on the outside. Antique swords and spears—and a few strange, colorful illustrations—lined the walls, breaking up the fish-patterned wallpaper. There was a little aquarium filled with balls of moss sitting on a stained and worn table. The kitchen was the largest room, at least from what 2B could see, and the mess piled up on the counters made her lose what little of an appetite she possessed.

“Well,” said Undyne, pushing the kitchen table into the corner with her foot, “I guess we’ll get started.” She seemed to have decided that her best course of action was to simply ignore Papyrus’ guests. “Hope you brought plenty of bones, Papyrus, because I’m—”

Papyrus raised his hand. “Excuse me, Undyne! I need to use the bathroom.”

Undyne sighed and rolled her eye. “Fiiiine. Make it quick.”

“Oh, I shall!” Papyrus shouted, and with a flourish of his scarf, he jumped out the window.

9S let out the most uncomfortable and smallest attempt at a laugh 2B had ever heard. “Does he, uh… do that often?”

Undyne glanced out the window. “No. Normally he nails the landing. Anyway…”

She crossed her bare arms over her chest, muscles rippling beneath her scales. A lock of crimson hair that had pulled free of her ponytail fell over her eyepatch. “If it isn’t the Underground’s most wanted. Here to turn yourself in? Or was humiliating me in Hotland not enough for you?”

“I’m not here to turn myself in,” 9S said, shrugging off his cloak.

Undyne’s smile turned into a fierce grin. “Ngh… All right, then. Well, I’ve got news for you, you little brat. You’re on my court now. You aren’t making a mockery of me again.”

By instinct, 2B stepped between her partner and Undyne, the shining tip of her sword instantly at Undyne’s throat.

Undyne simply laughed, laying the back of her hand across the flat of 2B’s blade and pushing it aside. “Step aside, Zatoichi. You want a rematch, don’t you… What was your name, again? 9S?”

2B gritted her teeth. “You’ll have to go through me first. 042, take aim!”

“Easy, 2B .” 9S pulled down his visor and held up his hands. “We’re here to make peace, not fight.”
“Make peace? Are you kidding?” Undyne clenched her fists. “You unbelievable pieces of rotting, fly-covered, week-old sashimi! The gall you two have! You’re the enemies of everybody’s hopes and dreams here in this kingdom—as if swearing on a live TV show beloved by all of the children wasn’t bad enough! If you weren’t my houseguests, I’d beat you both into chum right here!” Flecks of spittle flew from her mouth with reckless abandon. “As if I’d ever be friends with such shining examples of human achievement!”

“Android,” 9S corrected.

Papyrus’ voice drifted through the broken window. “Oh, hello, Sans! Thank you so much for calling me on my cell phone, which I definitely brought with me! What? Oh, the bet? I’m afraid it’s not looking too good for Undyne! I thought she would be up to the challenge of befriending our two guests… but it seems she is not as brave or as competitive as I thought! I guess I do owe you all of my money…”

“Ngh… Dammit…” Undyne stepped back, tossed her hair back, and growled with irritation. “Fine. Here’s what’s gonna happen.” She took a seat on top of the table, leaning back casually while crossing her legs. “The three of us? We’re gonna hang out. We’re gonna have a good time. We’re gonna be friends. Best friends.”

What is she doing? 2B kept a tight grip on her sword as Pod 042 floated at her side, ready to fire on her command. Is this some kind of psychological tactic? Or does she really wish for Papyrus to win his wager?

It occurred to 2B that this was the first she’d heard of Papyrus making a bet with his brother. It occurred to her that he probably hadn’t. And it occurred to her that this was all part of some Machiavellian plan to trick Undyne into befriending her and 9S. She hadn’t expected Papyrus to be anything other than an endearingly guileless bumbler… but there he was, shrewder than she’d anticipated.

9S shared a befuddled glance with 2B. “Um… did we just win?” he asked 2B.

2B tentatively lowered her sword. She didn’t recognize this side of Undyne at all. The Undyne she knew was passionate, vengeful, ruthless, prideful, single-minded, tunnel-visioned… on second thought, this Undyne was actually just like the Undyne she’d fought to the death.

“All right, new pals,” Undyne chirped, rubbing her hands, “why don’t you two take a seat?”

2B and 9S took their places around the table as Undyne slid off it. The last time 2B had felt so uneasy and unnerved, she’d been walking into a supposedly-Resistance-controlled factory filled with machines lying in wait to ambush her.

“Comfy? Lemme get you something to drink.” Undyne started pulling drinks out of her cabinets. “Hmm. Let’s see. Hot chocolate… nah, that’s empty.” She tossed a can over her shoulder. “Sugar… that’s for the tea… Soda… You guys want a soda?”

“Um,” said 2B.

“S-Sure?” said 9S.

Undyne threw the bottle on the floor. It shattered, spreading a pale blue-greenish liquid across the linoleum floor. “No, you don’t! It rots your teeth! It rots your mind! It rots… your fighting spirit!” She looked down at the mess she’d made. “How about some tea?”

“Actually,” 2B said, “I am not thirsty.”
“Tea it is!” Undyne produced a kettle, laid it on top of the stove, and filled it with water. “So, uh… you guys are sword fans, huh?”

“I—I guess,” said 9S.

“I’ve loved swords ever since I first saw one,” Undyne mused wistfully. “It was in the garbage dump way down in the depths of Waterfall. Y’know. In the ravine. Alphys and I found lots of human stuff down there. ‘Course, you gotta be careful down there nowadays… those damn tin cans.”

9S cleared his throat. “Y-Yeah, about those ‘tin cans,’ I think we might—”

The kettle cut him off with a keening whistle. “Here we go!” Undyne shouted out, bringing over three cups of hot water and four packets of tea. “And which one of my new special friends gets the extra teabag? Of course—my good, good, bestest new bestie, uh…” She pointed at 9S.

“9S,” 9S answered.

“Right!”

2B looked into her own cup as the tea began to seep into the still-boiling water, lending it a familiar golden color. “Captain… where did you get this tea?”

Undyne leaned on the table with her elbows. “Oh, don’t ‘captain’ me, pal! How would you like it if I called you ‘ma’am’ instead of—Hey, what’s your name, again?”

2B stiffened. “2B. And I do not appreciate being called ‘ma’am.’”

“Ahh, we’re so alike!” Undyne smiled so saccharinely that 2B could feel her own teeth rotting, even though that was impossible. “We really are gonna be besties!”

You don’t know how to do anything but kill, do you?

Once she’d given the tea enough time to steep, 2B took a long draught. And then she had the answer to her question about the tea. She was thankful she had her visor on—a tear had sprung unbidden from her eye, and the visor hid it from sight and sopped it up.

A gesture of kindness from the king when she had least expected it… or deserved it.

“Oh, yeah! I got this tea from King Asgore! It’s the big guy’s favorite blend.” Undyne downed the entire cup’s worth in one gulp. “What do you think, 9S?”

9S tried the tea. “It’s pretty good,” he agreed.

“You know, you actually remind me a lot of Asgore.” Undyne reached over and clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s no wonder Papyrus ended up friends with you… poor guy.”

“Poor guy?” 9S repeated. “You’re not gonna turn him away from the Guard for not turning us in, are you?”

Undyne shook her head. “No way. He’s loyal to the end. So loyal it wraps right around to him being loyal in the wrong direction sometimes! He’d never make it into the Royal Guard anyway, though.” She sighed. “He’s tough. He’s strong. He’s got a bigger heart than King Fluffybuns himself. But I could never give him an actual position on the front line. He’d get ripped to shreds and he’d be smiling the whole time. If anything bad ever happened to him, I would kill everyone who got in my way and then myself.”
2B let out a bitter smile. It seemed she and Undyne weren’t so different. That was almost exactly what she’d done after Undyne had...

After she had...

After...

2B stood up, her fingers gripping the edge of the table.

*It really sickens me, you know? To see you so mad about your friend. Like you deserve to be mad.*

“*Undyne...*” 2B hissed through gritted teeth.

2B could still vividly see the blank look on 9S’s face as the captain’s bolt of lightning, thrown the way Zeus would throw his from atop Mount Olympus, bored through his head. 2B could still vividly recall the pain she’d felt watching 9S die—and how much angrier she had been to see the deed done by a hand other than her own.

No. She had to bury these irrational feelings. Just because she had seen it and felt it didn’t mean it had happened. 9S was still alive. Undyne hadn’t killed him. Why did she still hate Undyne so much for killing 9S, especially if it hadn’t happened anymore? Was it because 2B couldn’t hate herself any more than she already did?

*Remember your mission, 2B,* she told herself. *Right now, befriending Undyne is the best way to keep 9S and yourself out of harms’ way.*

Undyne rose to her feet. “Oh, I get it. I know exactly what kind of person you are. Your buddy 9S is chatty, but you’re the kind of girl who does her talking with her weapons, eh?” A competitive gleam shone in her eye. “Why don’t we do something a little more your speed, 2B? Let’s head on over to...”

 “…The garbage dump!” Undyne flung out her arms, gesturing to the mounds of trash surrounding her and the two androids. She’d gone completely quiet on her way down to the depths of Waterfall, breaking her silence only to finish the sentence she’d started back in her kitchen. She had vehemently shushed both 2B and 9S (and their pods) any time they tried to speak up on the way here.

How strange.

“Alphys and I used to hang out here a lot,” Undyne said. “Fun stuff from the surface falls down here all the time. Weapons... computers... these historical records Alphys calls ‘anime...’”

2B eyed one of the mounds, spying the shattered head of a machine lifeform. Its cracked spherical surface had caved in, revealing the mechanisms beneath. For some reason, even though these things didn’t have mouths, beneath their carapaces was a full set of teeth. 2B had never learned why... and, quite frankly, she didn’t want to know. “And machines?”

9S pulled a battered little figurine out of the garbage. “What is this? Some kind of ancient human fertility idol?”

Undyne snatched it out of his hands and shoved it into her pocket. “Ooh, I’ve been looking for a Nyanko-chan figurine to complete my collection for years! This friendship’s *already* paying off!” She rubbed her hands together gleefully. “All right, 2B, ready for a rough, reckless female bonding experience you’ll never forget?”
2B adjusted her hairband. “If you are attempting to court me, it will not work.”

Undyne ignored her. “We’re going robot hunting! Just the two of us and 9S! Nothing strengthens the bond between friends like bloodshed on the battlefield!” A spear blazed to life in her hand. “Draw your weapons, and, um…” She squinted at 2B. “You sure you can fight in that getup?”

2B looked down at her dress. Everything seemed to be in order. “This is my uniform,” she said.

“What are you?” Undyne scoffed. “A maid?”

“No. I was designed for combat.” 2B spied an old Type-3 sword buried in the rubble and pulled it free, eager to have a weapon in both hands once again.

“…In high heels.”

“You don’t wear them?”

Undyne sighed and led 2B and 9S deeper into the tunnels far below the inhabited portions of Waterfall. 2B could tell from the wooden and metal beams propping up the tunnel walls here and there that at one point, monsters had at least tried to mine something out of the earth here… although they’d long since given up. Perhaps they’d been forced out.

“Tin cans don’t often go past the junk heaps,” Undyne explained, her spear casting an eldritch blue-green glow across the cavern walls in addition to the brighter beacons emanating from the androids’ support pods. “So I think they live really deep down here. We’ve just been sort of ignoring them and hoping they leave us alone.”

Peace by mutual disinterest. It sounded nice. 2B wished it could be that way on the surface, too.

With a sudden, vehement outburst Undyne slammed her spear into the tunnel wall. “But I’ve had it with them! Kids aren’t smart enough to run away when they see those machines, dammit! Especially with their big, adorable heads!” She yanked the spear out of the wall, taking with it a chunk of rock stuck to the edge. “2B, 9S, if you two can prove you’re both friends of justice by killing at least half as many machines as me… I think we’re gonna be pretty good pals.”

With a slice from 2B’s blade and a gust of wind, oil and coolant gushed from a widening hole in the chest of a battered, rusty, moss-covered machine lifeform.

“C… Come…” it growled. “J-Join… the fun…”

About to strike the killing blow, 2B hesitated. Machines weren’t supposed to be able to talk.

9S stole the kill, lancing the stubby machine through its head. “Thirteen!”

Undyne grumbled as she forced a biped to the ground and drove a spear through its chest. “Twenty-one!”

“C’mon, 2B, get your act together,” 9S called out with a rakish grin. “I’m catching up to you.”

2B pushed on ahead, cutting down another machine standing in her way. It let out a high-pitched, modulated gurgle as it fell to its knees with a gap in its abdomen. Oil and coolant poured from the breach in its carapace as its fingers scrabbled at the wound. “Eighteen,” she said.

“Oh… Sno… wy…”
2B shook off the feeling of unease growing in the back of her mind. Machines weren’t conscious beings. They must have picked up a habit of feigning consciousness to distract androids like her. That was all.

Another biped, this one clad in ragged clothing—another new sight for 2B—brought an ax down over 2B’s head. 2B held out her sword, parrying the rusted and misshapen blade. “Fight… Act… Item… Mercy…”

_Mercy_. This didn’t feel much like a game to 2B anymore. She staggered back under the force of the blow. “They… They’re _talking_!”

A glowing spearhead tore through the machine’s neck, and its red optical sensors instantly went dark.

“Twenty-three,” Undyne purred. “You’re welcome!”

A machine arm crashed against 2B’s shoulder, knocking her off her feet. Pod 042 whirled around and lit up the cave with a spray of bullets as it laid into the offending machine.

“Stay… _here with me_…”

2B got up and cut the machine off at the knees as its eyes flickered and died. “Nine… Nineteen.” She checked her shoulder. Bruised, sore, but uninjured.

9S shouted out as a machine outfitted with oversize claws took a swipe at him, ripping into his coat. 2B’s ears perked up at the sound of his peril and ran to his aid, driving both her swords into the machine’s shoulders. With a fluid twist, she removed both its arms and kicked it into the wall. The machine’s back collided with a luminescent crystal embedded in the wall, which broke through its carapace and impaled the machine.

“But… nobody… came…”

9S picked himself up. “Thanks, 2B. That’s… twenty for you, right?”

“I’m not having fun with this anymore,” 2B replied, hurrying after Undyne.

A twelve-foot Goliath-class with piston-powered arms burst through the tunnel wall in front of Undyne as she ran ahead, getting the drop on her. “Haha… I _remem_… _ber_…”

As 2B hesitated, 9S patted her on the shoulder. “Listen to them. It’s just gibberish, 2B. These things aren’t really thinking or feeling.” He tossed his sword at the machine, leaving a deep score in its massive forearm before the sword dutifully returned to his hand.

Sometimes 2B felt that 9S relished killing machines more than _she_ did.

Undyne tore through the bestial machine with a salvo of energy spears. “This one counts for three!” she shouted as the machine groaned and staggered back.

“_Lorem… ipsum… docet_…” the machine groaned as it brought its fists down on the ground, shaking the whole tunnel.

These types of machines, a colony of smaller machines joined together into a single unit, were difficult to fight—and avoid—in close quarters. The shockwave from the impact pinned 2B against the wall. She felt some of her innards uncomfortably compress.
“2B, get back!” 9S called out as he struck at the Goliath machine’s comparatively-skinny bicep, nearly severing it. “I’m gonna hack it!”

“Become… one of us…” the machine groaned.

9S gritted his teeth with exertion as he bypassed the machine’s defenses. Seized by an outside force (the commands 9S was sending to its motor systems), the machine yanked its own forearm off. 2B felt a prickling sensation run up her spine and quickly became aware of an uncomfortable presence in the back of her mind—the presence of a third limb. The machine’s disembodied arm floated in the air at 2B’s beck and call, linked to her NFC system through 9S’s hacking.

“I’ve got it slaved to your system, 2B,” 9S growled, still straining himself against the machine’s strong, if stupid, mind. “F-Finish him quickly!”

2B curled the machine’s fingers into a fist, her own arm mirroring its movements, and socked the Goliath machine in the torso. It staggered back, flailing its remaining arm as a single lance of lightning shot through its chest, killing it.

“That counts for me!” Undyne crowed. “Twenty-six!”

As the machine shut down and 2B felt the slaved limb fade away from her mind, 9S screamed out and reeled backward. 2B rushed to his side as he hit the ground. “9S, what’s wrong?”

“Come join the fun…” he droned as if in a trance. He shook his head like a dog drying itself off and hissed through gritted teeth. “N—Nothing. These guys are full of corrupted data. It just—hurts to read it. I’m fine. Ow.”

“You guys are losing your head start!” Undyne taunted, placing her hands on her hips. “It’s about quantity, not quality!”

As Undyne threw back her head and laughed, another Goliath-class machine crawled out of the darkness behind her, raising its fists.

“Pod!” 2B shouted. “Spear!”

At 2B’s command, her pod planted a forest of energy spears not too different from Undyne’s in the ground. As they burst up from the ground like stalagmites of pure light the spears impaled the machine, grievously injuring it; Undyne whirled around and stuck it through the head with a spear of her own. The machine collapsed.

“Flattery, eh, Zatoichi?” Undyne flashed a snaggletoothed grin. “Maybe you two aren’t too bad.” She threw a spear—2B’s first instinct was to dive in front of 9S and protect him—but the lightning javelin sailed overhead and blew off the head of a machine that had snuck up behind her.

“Dolorem ipsum docet,” 9S muttered, collapsing as he tried to stand up. Sweat beaded his brow.

“Undyne, we should head back,” 2B suggested, helping 9S up as he continued to mutter the same nonsense 2B had heard the machines repeating. She cursed her rotten luck. “153, prepare a logic virus vaccine. I think 9S’s picked something up.”

Undyne rushed over to the androids’ side. “What’s wrong with him?”

“No, no,” 9S protested, “I-I’m fine. Come join the fun.”

2B laid him down. “Try not to think too hard,” she cautioned him, worrying all the while as she
pulled down his visor to get a glimpse of his eyes. She prayed it wasn’t serious.

“Ha, ha. You’re a hoot, 2B.” 9S opened his eyes, and to 2B’s horror she saw the faintest flicker of red light behind his pupils—so faint, she might have brushed it off as her imagination. A pinprick of red ringed with the blue of his irises—the hallmark of a logic virus infecting his mind.

She’d seen androids infected by logic viruses before. Sometimes the sickness progressed quickly; sometimes slowly. It always ended (if the virus couldn’t be purged first) with the sufferer losing all sense of reason and going berserk.

“153, how’s that vaccine coming?” 2B barked, feeling trapped by the passage of time as she hoped the virus wouldn’t metastasize too quickly. If it spread through his cognitive core too quickly and became incurable, 9S would be lost. He’d become a danger both to himself and everyone around him, and 2B would have to

She would have to

2B would

No, 2B told herself. Never again.

Pod 153 handed her a syringe; 2B immediately brought it to 9S’s neck, stuck him with the needle, and pressed down on the plunger until the syringe’s contents were depleted. 9S shuddered, convulsed, and went limp in 2B’s arms, blinking profusely as the red light faded from his eyes. 2B breathed a sigh of relief as she held him tighter, unaware that she’d been holding her breath.

“Statement: virus eliminated,” Pod 153 informed 2B as it hovered at 9S’s side.

9S pressed his fingers against his temples as 2B and Undyne helped him to his feet. “Ow. Stupid 9S.”

“Wow,” said Undyne. “When you said you were a robot I thought you were just lying.”

“Android,” 9S corrected.

Another machine stumbled out from the darkness—a short, stubby model. As Undyne grabbed 9S under his armpits and kept him steady, 2B drew her swords, ready to defend 9S from any further attack—

The machine took a few unsteady, halting steps and raised a trembling hand. Its optical sensors glowed green and a ring-modulated voice, soft and childlike in its pitch and cadence, issued forth from its speakers.

“Mom… Dad… Where am I? Wh—What’s happening?”

2B froze as the machine took a few more unsteady steps toward her.

“What happened to me? Where am I? I—Is that you, Chara?”

“A—” 2B paused, her voice stuck in her throat. Though masked by the heavy, harsh electronic modulation, the voice that machine spoke with was familiar. “A-Asriel?”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for 1000+ hits! I'm so glad people are enjoying this fic. Thanks to everyone who leaves comments and kudos too, I love you all <3
A new mystery presents itself.

LAB RECORD 001.425.15.1

I’m so excited I can’t stop shivering. King Asgore is really lending me one of the human souls to study! This is my chance to really prove myself as Royal Scientist.

LAB RECORD 001.425.17.2

I know they all say human souls look like cubes made out of coal, on account of the species’ incredible capacity for evil, but it’s still jarring to see it in person. Commencing initial studies. Butterflies in my stomach. (Shouldn’t have eaten those caterpillars.)

LAB RECORD 001.425.17.3

This… isn’t a soul.

LAB RECORD 001.425.17.4

This definitely isn’t a soul.

[indistinguishable]

What do I tell Asgore?

LAB RECORD 001.425.19.1

Okay. Deep breaths. It’s not the end of the world. This thing seems to be a miniature computer. It also generates its own power. Like… a lot of it.

LAB RECORD 001.425.20.2

Cross-referenced with some of the records we’ve recovered from the garbage over the years, it seems these things are quote-unquote “black boxes” manufactured by an organization called YoRHa.

*Each YoRHa unit is equipped with a “black box,” an item created by reusing the core of a machine lifeform. As such it could be said that the consciousnesses of YoRHa units and machine lifeforms share the same structure. Said black boxes were installed after determining that it would be inhumane to install standard AI in androids that are ultimately destined for disposal.*

[indistinguishable]

Well, when life gives you lemons…

I’ll find a way to salvage this. For Asgore! For the kingdom! I can’t let him down! I
can’t let this take away everybody’s hopes and dreams!

The lone machine, a short one with a stubby, bullet-shaped body, stood amid its fallen brethren, its limbs trembling. The machine shivered as if it were cold as it looked at 2B and 9S.

“I—I just want my mom…” it bleated. “Please don’t hurt me!”

2B stepped forward, letting her swords fall to the ground in a gesture of peace.

9S raised his head, still weakened from his brief viral infection. “2B, what are you doing? It’s a machine!” he warned her.

“Ma—Machine?” The machine looked down at its metal hands, wiggling its fingers. It let out an electronic snifflle, scuffing its foot on the ground. Even its body language was childlike, and it matched perfectly with what 2B had seen in her visions. It was as if this machine really did somehow contain the long-dead prince’s consciousness, or at the very least a fragment of it. “Oh…”

2B held out her hand. “You… Your name is Asriel, right?”

The machine looked at her, then slowly, tentatively nodded, as if it wasn’t sure of the answer.

I don’t understand, 2B thought, her mind racing, how this could have happened. But… “Do you want to come with us?” she asked.

The machine reached out and wrapped its arms around 2B’s waist. “Thank you, miss!” it wailed. “It’s… It’s so lonely down here!”

2B wasn’t entirely sure what to do. The only other time a machine had ever tried to hug her, it had been trying to snap her spine like a twig.

9S pried himself out of Undyne’s arms. “2B, what the hell are you thinking?”

“It’s Asriel,” 2B told him.

9S fell silent.

“The Asriel?” Undyne asked, her single eye wide with shock.

2B nodded. “I think we’ve spent enough time down here.”

LAB RECORD 001.425.21.1

This thing might not be a human soul, but it’s definitely got a sort of energy to it. Upon inspection, it’s the same energy a monster produces when they die.

When a fallen monster’s morphogenetic field breaks down, their soul releases a burst of DT radiation before it fades away. The burst is more intense and lasts longer for stronger monsters, although it’s still fleeting.

These black boxes produce the same kind of energy… but it’s more of a field than an ephemeral burst. Weird that there doesn’t seem to be any sort of emitter producing it, it just sort of… exists.
I wonder if real human souls worked the same way?

LAB RECORD 001.425.21.2

Love, hope, compassion...

This is what people say our souls are made of.

But the absolute nature of the “soul” is unknown.

After all, humans have proven their souls don’t need these things to exist.

Funny, isn’t it? That their souls were always so much stronger and more resilient than ours. Makes you think.

LAB RECORD 001.426.1.1

I don’t think human souls were so strong because of their lack of compassion.

The strength they have to continue their existence lives within their souls. Their determination. The light that comes from their souls holds them together so much more strongly than ours does.

LAB RECORD 001.426.3.1

I’ve got my test subjects. If I can project a stable DT field, I might be able to extract their souls from their bodies and preserve them, just as human souls were said to persist indefinitely after death. That way, we can collect enough DT energy to provide seven complete human souls’ worth of determination.

We’ll need a vessel to wield the souls when the time comes. As the legends say, a monster can’t absorb monsters’ souls, and a human can’t absorb human souls. These black boxes, I suppose, work in the same way. After all, androids were made in mankind’s image, weren’t they?

If we have to diversify our sources of DT energy, we’ll need something new to hold onto these souls. Not human. Not monster. Not android. Something different.

LAB RECORD 001.426.3.2

I’ve chosen a candidate.

I haven’t told Asgore yet— I want to surprise him with it.

In the center of his garden, there’s something special. The first golden flower—the one that grew before all the others. The flower Asriel carried with him when he returned from the surface… or so the legends say.

I wonder… what happens when something without a soul gains the will to live?

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The machine sat atop a mossy rock back at the junkyard, kicking its stubby legs as it sat down in an adorably childlike way. Undyne pulled out a canteen at her side. “So, um, A… Asriel,” she said, “I mean, Your Highness, can I get you something to drink—Oh. Sorry.”
Asriel sniffled. “T-Thank you, Miss Captain Undyne.”

“How long have you been active down there?” 9S asked, skeptically crossing his arms. 2B could tell he wasn’t quite comfortable interrogating a machine like this.

Asriel reached up to the side of his head and tried to tug on his ear—a nervous tic 2B had seen through Chara’s memories. But in this machine body, Asriel had no ears to tug on, and being reminded of that fact only distressed him further. “I—I don’t know, Mister 9S,” he confessed.

“He doesn’t remember how he died, 2B realized. He doesn’t even remember what happened to Chara.

“Um… hey, don’t worry,” 9S said, quite flustered at the child’s outburst as he reached over and patted Asriel on his head. “It’s, uh… it’s okay.”

“Thank you, Mister 9S.” But regardless of what he’d just said, Asriel still looked about as glum as a machine could look. “A—Also, I remember a laboratory… and a yellow flower. It might’ve been a dream. That’s it.”

“A laboratory?” Undyne’s fins perked up.

“A yellow flower?” 2B asked. Flowey couldn’t have been more different from what she’d seen of Asriel, but 2B had gotten more than enough hints that the spiteful, gleefully cruel plant had some connection to both Chara and Asriel.

“Doctor Alphys is a robotics engineer, right?” 9S asked Undyne. “Is there a chance she’d know about this?”

Undyne shrugged. “It’s possible, I guess. I’ve helped her catch tin cans for her research once or twice.” She pulled out her phone. “I’ll give her a call and ask her what’s up.”

Asriel looked down at the puddle of brackish, slimy water beneath his dangling feet, caught sight of his rippling reflection, and let out another mournful, howling wail. Squinting and grinding her teeth with irritation, Undyne put a finger in her ear-fin and hurried away to find a more quiet place to hold a conversation.

Wincing as he tried to pat Asriel on the head again while simultaneously covering his ears, 9S cast an urgent glance at 2B. “2B, help!” he half-whispered.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Taking this thing with us was your idea!” 9S hissed. “Besides, you know Asriel from Chara’s memories, don’t you? Say something to him!”

2B laid a hand on the curiously-reincarnated child’s rusty shoulder. “There, there.”

9S cringed. “‘There, there?’” he incredulously echoed.

Despite 2B’s lack of anything even remotely resembling bedside manner, Asriel slowly stopped
wailing. “Aw… th-thank you,” he said, letting out an electronic hiccup. “Thank you, Miss 2B. I know I cry too much…” He buried his face in his hands yet again. “Awww! I miss having tears!” he bleated.

Hoping to avert more ear-splitting cries, 2B took a seat on the moss-draped rock next to Asriel and tried as best she could to emulate Chara’s body language from the memories they’d inflicted on her. It was difficult; in those memories, Asriel had been about half her size, but even stubbies, the smallest model of machine lifeforms, were nearly as tall as her. However, even 2B’s mediocre attempt to hold the mechanized prince seemed to provide further comfort to him.

“Feeling better, uh, kiddo?” 9S asked.

Asriel nodded, rubbing his head against 2B’s shoulder. “Uh-huh.” His optical sensors dimmed and he began to snore.

9S laughed as he sat down on the rock, leaning against 2B’s back for support. “Gotta say, I’ve never seen a machine sleep before.”

“Do you have any idea how this could have happened?” 2B asked him.

9S shook his head. “Well… when I hacked that one machine, I saw a lot of data that looked like… You know how our personality templates were developed from humans? All that data has really obvious file headers. They were a little garbled—okay, a lot garbled—but I could see the same signatures. I think somebody’s been digitizing living consciousnesses and implanting them into machine lifeforms. It looks like none of them took, though… except for Asriel here.”

“Undyne said that Doctor Alphys used to ask her to gather machines for her experiments,” said 2B. “Could she have…”

“Well, see, that’s the thing. Asriel died hundreds of years ago. How would Alphys have gotten a hold of him?”

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LAB RECORD 001.426.4.1

[indistinguishable]

I can’t say anything about the test subjects’ progress to their families. But they’re asking questions about why my research is taking so long. I told them that I would give them the dust back for the funerals, and that it’d only be a few weeks, tops. I don’t know how to respond to their calls. I can’t tell them what’s going on. But I can’t keep ignoring them.

[indistinguishable]

What do I do?

LAB RECORD 001.426.8.1

More determination. I’ll wring every last drop out of this infernal box if that’s what it takes.

LAB RECORD 001.426.8.2
If black boxes and machine cores are the same, maybe I could use some of those weird robots that sometimes fall from the surface.

[indistinguishable]

LAB RECORD 001.426.8.3

The snare worked. I extracted the cores and will try directly implanting them in the test subjects to see if that helps.

LAB RECORD 001.426.9.1

[indistinguishable]

One of the bodies opened its eyes.

 Undyne re-entered the junkyard, shoving her phone back into her pocket. “Had to leave a message. Girl’s usually glued to her phone, but I guess I caught her napping or something.” She shrugged. “How’s the prince?”

Asriel was, in fact, snoozing peacefully and leaning on 2B with all of his machine body’s weight. “He’s fine,” 2B said as she tried as gently and deftly as possible to extricate herself without disturbing him.

“So, uh…” Undyne scratched around her eyepatch. “What do we do with him?”

“We could bring him over to Toriel,” 9S suggested. “She’d be happy to see him. Even if he is a little bigger… rounder… and more, uh, metallic than he used to be.”

“What?” Undyne hissed, gobsmacked. “You two know Queen Toriel?”

“Yeah,” said 9S. “We met her when we came down here. She lives way back in the ruins past Snowdin.”

“No one’s seen hide nor hair of her in over two centuries,” Undyne mused, clenching her fist. “The Coward Queen, some call her. I can’t imagine leaving your husband after your only two children die. That’s really low! If Toriel were here right now, I’d—” She blanched. “Well, uh, I wouldn’t punch her in the face, because she’s still royal blood, but…”

“Toriel is a kind woman,” 2B insisted, feeling oddly duty-bound to respond in the old former monarch’s defense. “While I understand your anger, I cannot hold her actions against her.”

Undyne crossed her arms, blowing a stray lock of hair out of her face. “I mean, you agree she’s a coward, though, right? She ran away right after Asgore declared war on the surface.”

“How’s that going for you?” 2B asked Undyne.

Undyne growled at her. “I can’t imagine having a duty to fight a war and just leaving it behind!”

“Perhaps that is because you’ve never fought one,” 2B replied, the words coming out a bit more clipped and terse than she’d intended.

“Toriel left the poor guy all alone for two hundred years! Who does that? Asgore’s the nicest guy in the world!”
Almost as if on cue, Asriel began to wake up. “My… Mom doesn’t love Dad anymore?”

The anger drained out of Undyne’s face. “Uh… No, um, sorry, Your Highness, I didn’t—um…”

“It’s all my fault!” the prince wailed, his electronic voice cutting through the air. “I—I did everything wrong!” He shook his head and buried what little he had of a face in his hands as he continued to sob.

“I, uh, I didn’t mean it!” Undyne rushed to Asriel’s side. “Your mom’s just—on vacation!”

“For two hundred years?”

Undyne cringed. “Did I say ‘years’? How silly of me! I meant hours! That’s like a week! She’s, um, at a spa right now… because… she works so hard…”

“I ruined everything!” Asriel cried out as he ran off to the junkyard.

“Wait!” Undyne called out as the machine scurried into the darkness.

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LAB RECORD 001.426.4.5

Everyone that had fallen down has woken up. They’re all walking around and talking like nothing is wrong. I sent the black box back to Asgore and called everyone’s families.

This is incredible. It’s beyond my wildest dreams. I brought the dead back to life!

Gonna devote my full attention to my experiments on the flower. That’s what we’ve needed all along.

LAB RECORD 001.426.6.1

No no no no no no no no no no

[indistinguishable]

LAB RECORD 001.427.2.1

Fuck

LAB RECORD 001.427.2.2

[indistinguishable]

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Asriel kept running as fast as his heavy metal feet could carry him—although with these stubby little legs the most he could do was waddle. He’d been dead for two hundred years, Chara was gone, and even his parents didn’t love each other anymore. Everything had gone wrong and it was all his fault. All he knew how to do was hurt people.

Towering mounds of broken machinery and plastic garbage, all of it damp and soggy, passed him by. Asriel felt like he belonged here with the rest of the junk. That was what he was now. Junk.
There was a lot he didn’t remember. Most of what he did remember was all fuzzy and indistinct like a dream he’d just woken up from. But even though he couldn’t put his finger on why he felt so horrible, he knew, he just knew, that whatever had gone wrong, it would have worked out if he’d just done what Chara had said. That was how it always was! Things always went well when he did what Chara said because Chara was older and smarter and they’d been to the surface and knew of its horrors.

Now he was here, two hundred years in the future and Chara was gone and his mom hated his dad and he was stuck in this ugly metal body for some reason. He’d never feel the mud between his toes again. Or Mom running a brush through his fur. Or Chara tugging on his ears (gently) as they often did, or Dad letting him sit in his lap. He let out a few electronic sobs. He could make the sounds, but he couldn’t do anything else, and that was even worse than not being able to cry at all.

Asriel stumbled and fell flat on his face as something splashed in the shallow water, rolled under his feet, and bowled him over.

“Wh—Whoa, hey there! I hope I didn’t hurt you!”

Still whimpering, Asriel picked himself up and looked around for the source of the voice. It sounded like a kid, just like him—or, rather, what he’d used to sound like before he’d woken up as this thing. After a few seconds, he found it. At his side was a stone sphere a little smaller than his head with a wide, grinning mouth and blank eyes carved into it.

“Sorry about that!” it said. “I thought it’d be easy to just roll around, but I guess I was just getting ahead of myself!” Its teeth moved when it spoke, even though its mouth didn’t.

“Oh… what?”

“You know, because I’m just a head?” The stone head rolled just a bit closer and bumped into Asriel’s ankles. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean to knock you over!”

Asriel nodded, sniffling. “Uh… Uh-huh.”

“Great! I’m glad you’re okay! My name’s Emil. What’s yours?”

“Um… A-Asriel.”

“Wow! That’s a really cute name, Asriel!” Emil tried to roll himself around Asriel but veered off-course and careened into a junk pile. “Whoa!Oops! Can you help me out here?”

“Okay.” Asriel lumbered over to Emil and picked him up. “Is this better?”

“Yeah! If I had a neck I’d be nodding right now!”

Asriel laughed. To the long-dead prince’s surprise, this little stone head was actually making him feel just a little better. “Mister Emil, have you always been just a head?”

“No, I used to have arms and legs and everything else a long time ago. But I’ve been just a head for so long now that I don’t remember what my body looked like.” Emil sighed.

Asriel sighed along with him. He wished he couldn’t remember what his old body looked like. Then he wouldn’t be so sad about what he looked like now.

“Hey, Asriel, since you’re doing such a good job carrying me, do you think you could maybe help me get home? I’ve been living over in the village just south of here, but I’m having a hard time
getting back. I’ve been stuck in this junkyard for a week already…”

“You don’t want my help. I’ll just mess things up.” Asriel shook his head and held Emil closer, sniffling all the while. “All I do is make things worse for everyone!” he whined.

Splashing footsteps echoed through the junkyard as Undyne and her friends caught up with Asriel. “Your Highness, are you all right?”

Asriel nodded. “I—I guess, Miss Captain Undyne, ma’am. S-Sorry for running away.”

“It’s okay!” Undyne patted him on the top of his head. It felt good, but also reminded Asriel how much he missed having soft fur to comb. “D-Don’t cry, kiddo—”

Asriel started to cry.

“I said, don’t cry! Um, whatcha got in your hands there?”

Asriel looked down at Emil. “Oh, this?”

“Hi, there! My name’s Emil!” Emil called out. Undyne was so shocked at his outburst that she fell over.

“I’m sorry, Captain!” Asriel bleated. He wanted to reach out and help her to her feet but didn’t want to drop Emil, so he just stood there and felt bad while Undyne’s friend 9S helped her pick herself up off the soggy ground.

Undyne brushed water off her glistening scales, her clothes drenched in swamp water. “No harm done. Nice to meet you, Emil!”

“Mister Emil lives in the village south of here,” said Asriel. “Miss Undyne, Miss 2B, Mister 9S… can you help me bring him back?”

LAB RECORD 001.428.1.1
The families keep calling me to ask when everyone is coming home. What am I supposed to say? I don’t even answer the phone anymore.

LAB RECORD 001.428.12.1
Asgore left me five messages today. Four about everyone being angry. One about this cute teacup he found that looks like me. Thanks, Asgore. Thasgore.

LAB RECORD 001.430.2.1
The flower is gone. All I can find are a bunch of golden petals all over the floor.

LAB RECORD 001.430.2.2
There’s a kid wandering around the lab. I don’t know how he got in. He doesn’t, either. He… he says his name is Asriel.
There was an increasingly-strange ensemble now surrounding 2B as she trudged through the marshy caverns of Waterfall: 9S, who was already very strange for a YoRHa soldier, and had been for as long as 2B had known him; Undyne, a fish-woman who was surprisingly gregarious provided no one had murdered anybody recently; Asriel, son of Toriel and Asgore, who’d somehow been resurrected as a machine; and Emil, a disembodied stone head with a chipper attitude. Emil spent most of the journey singing a jaunty little song that was mostly nonsense.

As Emil (cradled in Asriel’s arms so he would not get bogged down in the mire) led his new friend to his home, the group passed through a cluster of bioluminescent flora. 9S crouched down, his intractable curiosity piqued by the unique environment, and poked at one of the luminescent flowers as the others passed it by. “Hi! I’m Temmie!” it squeaked.

He lit up nearly as bright as the talking flower. “Hey, 2B! Look at this!” 2B halted and hung back. She remembered how excited 9S had been the first time he’d seen them, and he was just as excited this time around.

9S poked it again. “Hey, 2B! Look at this!” it repeated in a small, tinny imitation of his voice. He gasped.

“There are echo flowers,” Undyne told him. “They repeat the last thing they heard, over and over… Neat, huh?”

2B found them unsettling more than anything, and not just because she’d gotten to know a far less pleasant talking flower already. She still vividly remembered that cacophony of hushed whispers that had heralded her first encounter with Undyne… and 9S’s death. But 9S seemed to love them because, of course, he didn’t know anything about any of his deaths.

“Wanna say something for posterity, 2B?” 9S asked, grabbing the flower by the stem and gently turning its face to point at 2B.

“I doubt I have anything worth saying,” 2B answered.

“Some people whisper their hearts’ desire into these things,” Undyne said. “Got any of those, 2B?”

2B felt the inside of her mouth go dry. Of course, she did. But who would whisper their private feelings into something that would repeat them for anybody who wanted to listen? It was the dumbest thing she’d ever heard of. “…No,” she said.

Undyne shook her head. “That’s… really sad.” She patted 2B on the back. “You know, if I can bring a sense of enthusiasm into your life, it’ll be the greatest accomplishment of my career!”

While Undyne let out a boisterous laugh, 2B caught up with Asriel and Emil as they approached a tunnel leading out of the marshlands. A banner hung over the entrance. It read:

hOi! WelCOME 2....

t Emmie VilLage!!!

Through the tunnel was a village of the cavern beyond the likes of which 2B and 9S had never before seen—granted, this entire kingdom was the only extant civilization 2B and 9S had ever seen. But this place made the monsters in Snowdin, Papyrus and Sans included, look about as dour and strait-laced as YoRHa high command.

2B couldn’t tell if the village’s inhabitants were dogs or cats, mainly because they looked a little like both, and also because they were all vibrating so rapidly that their finer details were impossible to
make out. They flitted around like hyperactive fairies. One introduced itself to her as “Temmie.” Another said that its name was also Temmie. A third introduced itself as Bob. They all insisted on calling 2B and 9S “bishies,” whatever those were.

A few machine lifeforms milled around, their amber- and green-colored optical sensors denoting they had no interest in fighting. Even after they took notice of the two androids, even after 2B and 9S had instinctively drawn their weapons, they all but refused to acknowledge their presence. On closer inspection they all had no arms, which 2B supposed made them truly ‘armless.

2B cringed inwardly at the pun. This place really was getting to her.

As one of the stubbies wandered by with an absentminded, lumbering gait, 9S reached out and brushed his hand over its head. The machine suddenly grew an extra torso segment, and as it spontaneously grew taller 9S jerked his hand away as if he’d been burned.

He reached out and gave the machine a tentative pat on the head again. It telescoped yet again, adding an extra sixty centimeters to its height. 9S repeated the process, but soon the machine was so tall that he couldn’t hope to pet it.

“9S,” 2B cautioned, trying desperately to sound stern and not smile, even though she was just as amused as he was. “What would the Commander say if she saw you giving aid and comfort to the enemy?”

“Well, this is it!” Emil said, letting Asriel set him down on the ground. He rolled around to face the rest of his entourage, his stony smile frozen on his face. “Thanks for all your help, guys! I couldn’t have done it without you! Feel free to stop by whenever!”

Asriel raised a metal hand and slowly waved goodbye. “Th—Thank you, Mister Emil! It was nice to meet you.”

Undyne patted the prince on the head. “Wanna come with me? I could take you over to King Asgore if you want. Or…” She glanced at the androids. “You could go with them and see Toriel, I guess. Your choice.”

Asriel wrung his hands, his optical sensors flickering as he glanced back and forth. “Um… Um… M-Mister Emil? Can I stay with you for a while instead?”

“Sure!”

Undyne was taken aback. “A—Are you sure, Your Highness?”

“I don’t want Mom or Dad to see me like this,” Asriel said, sniffling. “I’ve hurt them so much already… I don’t want them to feel sad for me again.”

He doesn’t even remember why he thinks that. In a way, 2B thought, feeling guilty with no cause must be worse than knowing why you feel that guilt.

“They wouldn’t,” 9S insisted. “You and Chara still mean the world to your mom. Don’t they, 2B?”

2B nodded. “No matter what you look like, your mother would be overjoyed to see you. Your father as well, I’m sure.” But deep down, she understood why Asriel felt unready to confront his parents. The mad gambit for freedom he’d made with Chara, and how it had failed so utterly, must have been weighing on his conscience even though he didn’t have any concrete memories of the incident.

2B knew what it was like to have something so horrible weighing on her conscience. Something she
wasn’t yet ready to bring into the light.

Asriel shook his head. “Please give me some time to work things out.”

2B bowed her head. “I understand. Emil, take care of Asriel for now.”

Emil gave her an emphatic nod. “Don’t worry! I think the two of us are gonna get along fine!”

2B, 9S, and Undyne left the odd village in silence, each of them pondering over what they had experienced.

As 2B and 9S strode off, Undyne put a hand on both of their shoulders. “Wait.”

2B looked over her shoulder at Undyne. The captain’s mouth was drawn in a taut line across her face, her yellow eye hard and narrowed.

“You two…” Undyne said. “I could kill either one of you and harvest your soul… and that would be it. We’d have the seven souls we need to break through the Barrier and free ourselves. Everyone in the Underground would be happy. You know that, right?”

2B brushed off Undyne’s hand and drew her sword. In the very back of her mind, she’d been expecting this all along. But even as she assumed a combat stance, Undyne just stood there.

“If I’d just met you,” Undyne said, “I’d call you both selfish for refusing to offer yourselves up. I’d call you cowards. I’d call you pieces of garbage. I’d call you a lot of things. With just one of your lives, you’d free tens of thousands of people. I’d say you had a duty to sacrifice yourself for the greater good.”

The corner of Undyne’s mouth curled up into a faint smile. “I’ll be honest. Until about fifteen minutes ago, I didn’t like you two at all. I was just pretending to be your friend because Papyrus said I couldn’t do it.”

“Yeah,” said 9S, “we kinda noticed.”

“But I dunno. Maybe we can be actual pals, for real. Freedom will have to wait until someone else falls into the Underground.” Showing off her entire mouthful of yellowed, jagged fangs, Undyne added: “Hopefully, they’ll be a huge asshole!”

9S shook Undyne’s hand. “I think I speak for both of us,” he said, “when I say… Undyne, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

LAB RECORD 001.430.4.2

I think the flower became Asriel due to prolonged DT energy exposure. That flower must have absorbed his essence after he died due to his dust mixing with the soil.

He’s so excited to be back. He can’t stop asking when he can see his mom and dad again.

I haven’t told Asgore. I… I don’t think I can. At least not until I know whether Asriel is stable.

LAB RECORD 001.430.4.2
I don’t know what to do. His morphogenetic field is starting to weaken, even though he’s still alive. He doesn’t have a soul of his own to keep it stable, and projecting a DT field around him can only do so much.

If I do nothing, he’ll start turning to dust before he dies.

If I implant a machine core into his body, he’ll end up like the others.

LAB RECORD 001.430.6.1

Asriel isn’t turning to dust. Gold flower petals are flaking off his body instead. He’s tracking them all around the lab.

He’s starting to act really creepy. I’m actually kind of nervous about checking up on him.

LAB RECORD 001.430.10.1

I gave him the machine core. I told him everything would be all right. He’s asleep now.

LAB RECORD 001.430.10.2

He’s gone. Nothing but a rusty machine core and a pile of flower petals.

LAB RECORD 001.430.10.3

I’m sorry, Asgore. I’ve failed you more than you’ll ever know.

LAB RECORD 001.430.28.1

I spend all my time at the garbage dump now. It’s my element.

In a part of her lab that was darker and gloomier than it needed to be, Alphys listened to Undyne’s message one more time on her phone.

“Hey, Alphys! It’s me, Undyne. Haven’t seen you around lately. What’s up? You avoiding me or something? We should hang out again sometime. But that’s not what I’m calling about. You remember all those times you had me hunt those machines for you? Well, uh, I kinda figured you must know a lot about them by now… and I just ran into something really weird. One of those tin cans… it said it was Prince Asriel Dreemurr. Like I said, really weird! Like, how is that even possible? Anyway, maybe you can help us out here. Give me a call back! See ya!”

She sighed, selected all of the lab records she’d been reading over, and hit the delete key.

She couldn’t imagine how much less everybody would think of her if they knew. Especially someone like Undyne. If Undyne wanted to snoop around, Alphys would make sure she wouldn’t find anything.

As the lab records vanished one by one, Alphys wiped away a tear and sniffled. Poor Asriel. If she didn’t tell anyone what she’d done, then no one would hold her responsible for letting him become… that.

No one but herself.

It was better that way.
2B and 9S delve into Alphys's secrets.

2B stared at herself in the bathroom mirror. Since neither she nor 9S required food for sustenance, neither of them had any use for the room unless they wished to bathe or shower. As a result, she didn’t worry about anybody interrupting her as she zeroed in on her steely gray-blue eyes and tried to imagine they belonged to 9S.

“9S,” she said. “Please don’t take this the wrong way. I have murdered you. Many times.”

She shook her head.

“9S,” she said. “I have a confession to make. I have known you much longer than you have known me. Because I have had to kill you over and over again.”

She shook her head again and took a deep breath.

“9S,” she said. “I need to tell you something horrible. But before I do, let me first say that I was only following orders.”

No.

“9S,” she said. “YoRHa gave me strict orders to kill you under certain circumstances. If you think about it, they were the ones who killed you exactly forty-six times over the past two years, not me. Therefore I have nothing to apologize for, and yet I hope you will…”

No.

“9S,” she said. “I have done many horrible things. Most of them were done to you. It is probably for the best that you never find out about them, so please don’t ever ask.”

2B buried her face in her hands.

It wasn’t like he ever deserved to die. It was never really his fault. In YoRHa, some androids were built to fight machines, some to kill androids, some to tend to the wounded, some to be sharpshooters, some to be tactical advisers and caretakers. And some were designed to discover, to explore, to figure things out. It wasn’t 9S’s fault that he was just too good at what he’d been designed to do.

9S had always been a knowledge-hungry person, curious to a fault. 2B’s orders had been—still were, insomuch as she had orders—to kill 9S as soon as he delved too deeply into YoRHa’s most closely-kept secrets. If he’d found out about Chara/C13 on the surface, 2B was sure the termination orders from the Commander wouldn’t have taken long to arrive. And then she’d be assigned a new 9S, his memory conveniently wiped clean and his records doctored to hide any discrepancies (because, of course, who would waste a perfectly good Scanner?).

She never knew what 9S kept discovering that had warranted his execution. Perhaps 2B feared that
if she let him tell her, *she* would be executed and erased as well, which was why she’d always strove to kill him as quickly and suddenly as possible.

That, and she didn’t want him to suffer. Even though he wouldn’t remember having suffered. Or anything else.

2B looked herself in the eyes and tried again.

“9S,” she said. “I… I’ll try again later.”

She sighed, defeated, and stepped out of the bathroom. Her pod was waiting for her outside.

“Query: what is Unit 2B doing?” Pod 042 chimed in.

“I am rehearsing,” she explained, “how to tell 9S the truth.”

“Statement: telling Unit 9S the truth would, ironically, constitute a breach of confidential information,” the pod replied, “not unlike those that have historically mandated his execution. As a result, after informing him you would likely receive orders to terminate him.”

“From whom?” It wasn’t like there was anybody around who could hand down the order to 2B. Down here the Bunker might as well have been on the other side of the universe; she and 9S held the same rank in the chain of command; and support pods were designed to support their assigned units, not issue commands to them.

Pod 042 fell silent for a few seconds. “Proposal: Unit 2B, you should keep this information to yourself for the foreseeable future.”

“He has a right to know,” 2B replied. *I just need to figure out how to tell him what I’ve done without hurting him.*

“Statement: that right is not defined anywhere within the YoRHa charter. Stated android rights are as followed: Number one, the right to—”

“That’s enough, Pod 042. Thank you.”

As if summoned, 9S poked his head out of the bedroom. “Right to know what?”

2B found herself unable to speak, taking a second to regain the use of her tongue. “…I’ll tell you later.”

9S squinted at her and blinked a few times as if trying to divine what she was thinking. Of course, he could just hack her and read her memory files, but there were some lines Scanners did not cross unless they were desperate, and that was one of them.

“Okay.” 9S stepped out of the bedroom with a few new books under his arm. “Oh, by the way, I just got a message from Alphys. She wants us to meet her at her lab.” He grinned. “Wants us to bring our swords.”

2B stood next to 9S in the center of Doctor Alphys’ laboratory. It was far cleaner than 2B had expected, despite the walls being haphazardly covered with strange, colorful paintings and mechanical junk strewn across the floor. She noticed a freshly-plastered-over hole in the wall roughly as tall as a person.
9S and Alphys, it seemed, had become fast friends. 2B couldn’t help but notice how eager he’d been to come here after Alphys had messaged him that morning. Of course, it gave the two of them the opportunity to ask Alphys some questions about her research on machine lifeforms as well.

Alphys skittered over, sidestepping a pool of machine oil in her path. “O-Oh! Hi, 9S! Thanks for bringing your friend! D-Did you bring your swords, too, like I asked? I-If you didn’t, that’s fine! I understand!”

9S held out his Cruel Oath, its brassy coppery-bronze colored blade catching the light. He nudged 2B in the side, and with some reservation, she produced her own ivory-white sword.

Alphys lit up. “Oh! Okay! Great! Thanks!” She swiped the swords from the two androids’ hands and carried them off to her workbench. 2B and 9S followed her as she set the swords down.

“Oh,” said Alphys.

“Oh?” said 9S.

“What is it?” 2B asked.

“They… they’re just normal, antique swords. Really well-made, but…” Alphys sighed. “N—Not that that isn’t cool or anything, but I thought because you two are, you know, robots—”

“Androids,” 9S corrected.

“I thought you’d have, like, some wild technology in your…” Alphys paused. “Wait. Wait, what’s this?” She held up 9S’s sword and peered at it closely, her breath fogging a patch of its blade. “I-Is that a high-frequency pulse emitter embedded in the blade? A-And what’s this mechanism here in the hilt?”

“That’s the near-field combat system chip. We register a weapon to our ID and it never leaves our side.” 9S held out his hand and curled his fingers inward. “Here, watch this.” Instantly, the sword vanished from Alphys’ scaly little hands and reappeared with 9S’s fingers curled around the hilt in a firm grip.

The little scientist nearly exploded from excitement. “P-Please! Let me borrow your blade! Th—That’s exactly what I need for my project!”

“Project?” 2B inquired.

“I-It’s nothing,” Alphys insisted. “Research. R&D. Build a better mousetrap. That sort of thing.” She wrung her hands, evidently feeling (and rightly so) that she wasn’t getting anywhere. “Um, please? As a favor? A-After all, I helped you with the whole surgery thing, and—and it’d make us even, then?”

2B was unmoved by Alphys’ anxious half-smile.

“She’s got a point, 2B,” 9S admitted. “We kind of owe her.”


“There can’t be any harm in it,” 9S insisted. “These people are our friends.”

“Your pod is correct,” said 2B. “You ought to listen to it, 9S.” Pod 042 chimed in to offer its
agreement with 2B and 153.

9S fell silent, deep in thought. 2B could tell that for some reason he really did wish to assist the doctor, and not just to pry her secret research out of her. “You know how the old saying goes. ‘In for a penny, in for a pound.’ We’ve already shared schematics of our circulatory system with Alphys,” he said. “That’s proprietary, too, isn’t it?”

2B crossed her arms and addressed Alphys directly. “What, exactly, do you need our technology for, Doctor?”

Alphys, who’d grown despondent hearing the androids and pods debate among themselves, lit up. “Oh! I-It’s for Captain Undyne! I wanna make a really good spear for her! A-A, you know, a token of appreciation for, uh, all the hard work she does, and, um, because of how, uh… Um…” She fell silent, a little bit of color rising in her cheeks.

2B struggled to retain her icy complexion. “This ‘Undyne.’ You wish to make her a gift.”

Alphys nodded. “Uh, y-yeah, I guess.”

“Is she in need of a new spear? Has she asked you to make her one?”

“Not… exactly?” Alphys answered. “It’s, uh, kinda supposed to be a surprise.”

“Why would you give her something she potentially does not require? It could be an unwelcome imposition on your part, one which Undyne would find—”

9S grabbed 2B by the arm. “2B,” he hissed. “A word in private, if you please.” He walked 2B over to the corner of the lab.

“You’re upsetting her,” 9S said. “Look, the nicer we are to Alphys, the more we can probably get out of her about her research.”

“I am merely pointing out a reality of the situation she may not have considered.”

“Do you… understand how gifts work?” 9S asked, incredulous.

“Of course.” 2B crossed her arms. “As a matter of principle, I object to them.”

9S groaned. “Seriously? Okay, so picture this. I’m going about my day like normal, and I spy a hairband lying around. I think to myself, ‘Oh, I bet 2B would like this.’ So I pick it up and give it to you. As a gift. To make you happy.”

“Awfully presumptuous of you. And unnecessary. I have a hairband already.”

“But what if the one I found was cuter?”

“‘Cute’ offers no potential utility in battle. Your gift would both be useless to me and also put me under an obligation to reciprocate,” 2B replied. “It is almost sinister in the way it preys on the emotions of others.” She knew she was being obstinate and a little antagonistic, but couldn’t quite help herself from falling into old habits.

“…No one’s ever given you a gift before, have they?” 9S asked her.

That wasn’t true. 2B had received a gift once. She’d paid 9S back by following her orders from the Commander and running him through with her sword. It was a sore subject. “Yes. As I said, I don’t like it.”
9S let out an exasperated sigh. “Well, other people aren’t like you. And, um…” He glanced back at Alphys. She gave him a nervous thumbs-up, which he reciprocated. “I dunno if you’ve noticed, but she’s crushing hard on Undyne.”

“Ah. This must be part of some monster courtship ritual.”

9S rolled his eyes. “Uh, yeah. Ritual.”

At last 2B relented. “Point taken, 9S. But I agree with the pods—we shouldn’t so eagerly share our technology.”

“All right then. I’ve got an idea.” 9S approached the doctor. “Alphys. We can’t give away our NFCS, but can you show us what you have right now for your spear? 2B and I could make some suggestions.”

Alphys rushed over to another workbench on the other side of the lab and hurried back with a black cylinder about twenty centimeters long in her hands. “This! This is it!” She handed it to 9S.

“It’s a little small,” he said, rubbing his fingers along the rod until he found a button on its side.

“W-Wait, 9S, you should point that somewhere e—”

The cylinder telescoped in both directions, in a split second expanding from twenty centimeters to nearly two meters. One end almost rammed itself into 2B’s chest, but her reflexes had allowed her to step aside quickly enough to avoid it.

9S let out a nervous laugh. “At least I wasn’t looking at it head-on, huh? That’d be a pretty embarrassing way to go.” He handed the long staff to 2B. “What do you think?”

2B gingerly grabbed hold of the staff with trepidation, trying not to imagine what it would look like protruding through 9S’s skull (it was too easy). While the cylinder had seemed shiny and smooth, up close the surface was textured enough that with even a weak grip, it wouldn’t easily slip from her hand.

“I still haven’t thought of what I want to do with the spearhead,” Alphys admitted.

“Does it need one? Perhaps your friend Undyne would appreciate a quarterstaff for a change.” 2B found the button on the side of the staff, pressed it, and let the staff retract to its compressed length before offering it back to Alphys.

“C’mon, 2B. You know Undyne. If it’s not sharp and stabby, what’s the point? Going with the collapsible staff, you could make some sort of dagger that plugs into one end,” 9S suggested.

“Modular, multipurpose weaponry.”

“It should be a sword,” 2B interjected. “Undyne does like swords.”

“What I’m wondering, though, is how a physical weapon could distinguish itself against those energy spears Undyne conjures. Like… what makes this special?”

“Something it can do that she can’t…” Alphys snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it! Thanks, guys!”

The scientist shook 9S’s hand before dashing off to a side room as fast as her stubby legs could carry her, leaving 2B and 9S alone.

“I’m gonna be here a while!” Alphys called out as 9S examined a pile of rusted machine parts. “J-
Just invite yourselves out, okay!”

“Wait!” 9S called out. “While we’re here, could you answer some questions for us about your research on the machine—”

The door leading to the side room slammed shut.

“2B,” said 9S, “do you think Alphys is hiding something from us?” It was a question with such an obvious answer it had to be rhetorical.

“Unless we want to drag her out of her workshop, I doubt any answers are forthcoming here.”

“I think I know where we can find more answers,” said 9S, and even though his visor hid his eyes 2B just knew that his had a mischievous, knowledge-hungry gleam.

9S stepped around the wreckage of the machines he and 2B had encountered with Undyne the other day. “We haven’t seen how far this tunnel goes,” he said, nudging a warped hunk of scrap metal out of his path with his foot. “But let’s hypothesize these machines escaped from a lab somewhere. There might be a way in deeper down here.”

2B cut down a Goliath corpse that had been blocking the tunnel. “You think this tunnel goes that far?”

“I know it sounds like a stretch.” 9S shrugged, then climbed over the bisected corpse. “But there’s no harm in trying, is there?”

2B supposed he was right. Those strange machines were the closest thing the two of them had to a lead. “042, can you detect any machine lifeforms nearby?”

“Affirmative. Nearest life signs are three hundred meters ahead.” The corresponding symbols popped up on 2B’s visor.

“Looks like I was right,” 9S said, a little bit of satisfaction bleeding into his voice.

“Try to avoid the temptation to hack any information from them,” 2B warned 9S as she caught up to him.

“What?” 9S chuckled. “Think I’m dumb enough to keep trying the same thing again?”

“‘Dumb’ is not the word I would use,” 2B replied.

“Observation: an ancient human adage,” Pod 153 chimed in as it floated by 9S’s side, its beacon casting light on the craggy, slick tunnel walls, “claims that repeating the same operations multiple times and expecting different results is the definition of insanity.”

The blips on 2B’s radar drew closer as she and 9S delved deeper into the tunnels, passing by the occasional wild echo flower that repeated the same gibberish the strange machines kept uttering.

“Hey, 2B.”

“What is it, 9S?”

“Do you think we did the right thing the other day? With Asriel?”
“It was his choice to stay behind. If he wasn’t ready, he wasn’t ready.”

9S sighed. “I guess. Hope he’s all right.”

“He and that, um… that thing…”

“Emil.”

“Yes. He and Emil seemed to get along,” 2B said. “I think he will be fine. We’ll bring him to see his parents soon. Why do you ask?”

9S took a while to respond, letting the natural ambiance of the tunnel and the water dripping from the ceiling to the puddles littering the ground fill the silence for a few seconds.

“I guess… I’m just curious,” he answered. “Children… parents… they’re all new to us. There was an ancient human legend about a goddess named Athena, who was born fully grown. We’re kind of like that, aren’t we?”

“I suppose we are. What was she a goddess of?”

“Wisdom, I think.”

2B thought about that. If there was one thing androids weren’t, it was wise. “Perhaps we are not so similar.”

“I was just thinking… you had a mentor, right, 2B? For the first few weeks after you were activated, just to get your bearings?”

2B nodded.

“Those are kind of the closest things we’ve got to parents, I guess. Mine was 5S. He’d go by ‘Fives,’ or ‘Fifty-Five’ if he wanted to make a little joke. It was a reference to how early optical character recognition systems had difficulty distinguishing between a 5 and an S, or a B and an 8.” 9S chuckled. “If he wanted to get under your skin, he’d probably call you ‘Twenty-Eight.’”

“He sounds obnoxious.” Inwardly, 2B wondered if any of 9S’s internal records of 5S had been falsified, given the nature of his existence, or if those were part of his base package of memories.

“Well, now you know where I get it. What about you, 2B?”

“Her name was 14E.”

9S sputtered in disbelief. “You were trained by a Type-E? That explains a lot…”

2B swallowed a lump in her throat. “D-Does it?”

“Yeah. You’re so good at fighting, I almost feel like your skills are wasted on machines.”

2B felt her cheeks redden just a little from the unexpected compliment. “If that were true, we’d have won the war already.”

“I guess.”

2B kept a close eye on the machine life signs on her HUD. The machines up ahead were inching nearer, but not as quickly as she’d been expecting. As if she and 9S were moving, but the machines weren’t. “Heads up. We’re getting closer.” She drew her sword, prepared to face any foe.
The sharp scent of batteries filled the air as 2B became aware of a faint static crinkling in her ears, behind which were even fainter voices she could barely make out, indistinct and only barely audible. The noise was hair-raising and omnipresent.

The machines up ahead were in no condition to fight. There was only a handful of them, and all were lying on the ground with shallow, brackish marsh water lapping at their rusty carapaces.

“You’ll… be with us… shortly…” one moaned.

Another machine, a more humanoid biped model, struggled to turn its head and look at the oncoming androids as it slumped against the tunnel wall, its optical sensors briefly flashing red as it registered the approaching enemy. However, it did not so much as raise a hand against 2B and 9S.

“An… droids… Do you think… I’m pretty…?”

Another biped picked itself up off the ground, water running off its scarred, rusted, and pitted hull as it raised a battered spear. “K—K-K-Kill. Androids. Kill…”

2B raised her sword.

“Kill. Kill. Androids. Kill.” The machine turned its spear inward and ran itself through, gouts of oil pouring from its carapace as it fell to its knees in front of 2B. “Androids. Kill…”

A chill ran up 2B’s spine.

“… Me. Kill me. Kill me. Kill me.”

Thoroughly unnerved, 2B noticed her hands start to shake. Nevertheless, she obliged the machine’s request and severed its head. A few parting words burbled up from its speakers as the machine’s spherical head rolled to the ground. “I’ve… made my… peace…”

2B became aware that 9S was clutching her bicep. He was holding onto her very tightly.

“You all right?”

9S quickly pulled away, glancing at the walls. “Y-Yeah. A little creeped out is all. I’m, um… I think I’m starting to understand why Alphys didn’t want to talk about her work.”

2B wondered if these machines had been in the early stages of this strange mental infection, or the later. They’d still had some elements of their selves… insomuch as a machine lifeform could have a self. From what 9S had uncovered the other day, these machines were somehow becoming infected with the digitized thoughts and memories, fragmented and garbled, of living (or once-living) monsters.

She was loath to imagine how horrible it would be if these mental contagions had infected androids instead of machines. A wide-scale logic virus outbreak was every android’s worst nightmare… and one that refused to settle for stripping an android of their reason and instead shoved another being’s personality over their own was even more frightening.

Feeling an odd sense of obligation to the stricken machines, 2B stabbed each one through the head, granting them each and all mercifully quick deaths.

9S held his hand to his ear as if he were tuning into the mysterious broadcast that still permeated the air. “153, identify a source of transmission,” he ordered, keeping a hand still pressed to his ear.

*What is the infection vector?* 2B wondered. *Could it be…* “Pod 042, block all incoming data signals.” Pod 042 voiced its affirmation and the voices vanished from 2B’s ears, leaving the tunnel quiet once again… at least, for her. “9S, close your ports.”

9S gritted his teeth and focused even harder on the broadcast, straining his ears, still trying with all his might to discern signal from the noise. “I… I think I can make it out…”

“9S!” 2B turned to Pod 153. “Pod 153, Block all incoming signals to Unit 9S!”

The pod acknowledged 2B’s order and 9S fell to his knees, panting with exertion. “I… almost had it…” he insisted, gasping for breath.

“There wasn’t anything to have,” 2B told him, shaking him by the shoulder.

“It was a honeypot,” 9S grumbled, shaking the runaway static from his ears. “God, I really *can* be an idiot sometimes, can’t I?”

2B breathed a sigh of relief. “Yes,” she said, “but you’re *my* idiot.”

9S let out a quick, befuddled laugh. “Um… *what* was that?”

“Nothing.” 2B looked further down the tunnel and saw, set into the rippled and craggy rock, a door. “I think we’ve found our source. Unless you want to turn back.”

9S shook his head. “No, I think we’re safe now. Alphys is… She’s such a nice person. I need to know *why* she’s doing something like this.”

The door was, in fact, an elevator, and to 2B’s surprise, it still functioned, descending with a press of a button and the squeal of unoiled machinery. Outside the simple metal cage, rocky walls sped past and soon gave way to molded concrete.

Below the wandering tunnels was a manmade (or rather, monster-made) complex that was just as gloomy and forlorn. 2B and 9S passed by work desks, cots, hospital beds, shower stalls, surgical platforms… all of it in a state of disrepair. As if nothing here had been used in years. As if nothing had been *touched* in years. Shadows flickered and flitted in the dark corners of the room, but no life signs—mechanical or organic—appeared on 2B’s HUD.

9S checked each terminal he came across but came back empty-handed. “Nothing. They’ve been wiped. Server, too.” He shook his head. “She’s covering her tracks,” he muttered darkly.

Static fuzz crept its way into 2B’s ears. She brushed it off as a side-effect of having her data ports closed. YoRHa units were usually constantly transmitting low-level status and telemetry data for their assigned pod’s benefit unless there was a need for stealth, and 2B had often heard that androids who ran silently could start experiencing minor auditory hallucinations.

The voices hit her like a truck.

*Come join the fun stay here with me Snowy do you think I'm pretty you'll be with us shortly just a moment Snowy I'm not afraid of you but nobody came don't pick on me what are you so afraid of just a moment then hold still I've felt this before it's so cold Snowy that's what they all say Snowy it's a real get together you'll be with us shortly there's still hope you've pushed your luck lorem ipsum docet lorem ipsum docet dolorem ipsum docet not this time you've seen enough Snowy finally someone gets it that's a shame stay here with me stay here with me stay here with me stay here with*
me stay here with me

2B laughed. She laughed and kept laughing. It was so funny, she couldn’t stop. Tears ran down her face. The air smelled like sweet lemons and used batteries. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe she couldn’t breathe she couldn’t

9S grabbed her by the shoulders, calling her name through the cacophony. His face was wrenched in agony as he struggled against the same telepathic assault. “Pod 153! Where’s this transmission coming from?”

“No transmission detected.”

“Bullshit! It’s everywhere!”

“No transmission detected. All data ports have been closed.”

9S pounded his fist on the concrete floor. “Dammit!”

Sharp pain like an icicle jammed itself into the back of 2B’s neck, and just like that, the voices fell silent—as did everything else. 2B fell to her knees and gasped for air in between fits of coughing.

2B! 9S mouthed. I hacked in and deactivated your audio processor. Can you still hear them?

She shook her head. No, she told him. She could feel the vibration of her vocal cords but heard nothing. What about you?

I shut mine down, too. 9S said something else, but his mouth moved too quickly for 2B to read his lips accurately.

Slow down.

9S spoke more slowly and enunciated more clearly. Are your thoughts your own?

How do I know?

Um… 9S tapped his chin. Hmm. That’s a good question.

Figures wreathed in shadow emerged from the dark corners of the lab and circled the two androids. They were shapeless, wispy, insubstantial; yet at the same time they were solid and lumbering; yet at the same time, their bodies flowed like water. It was as if none of them could make up their minds whether they were solid, liquid, or gaseous, and so they were all of them and none of them at once. Blotches of garbled pixels trailed behind them like auras, as if their mere sight was a corrupting influence on 2B’s visor.

2B stood up, her back against 9S’s, as the two of them drew their swords and prepared to fight. The creatures slithered/walked/crawled/trudged/dripped closer, closer, closer, their half-phantom bodies shimmering.

And sound returned to the world.

And with it, the cacophony of disparate voices.

2B stumbled and cried out as the rising tide of voices stung her ears. “Why did you turn our audio back on?” she shouted at 9S.

“I didn’t!” He grabbed at 2B and the two of them collapsed, neither able to support their combined
weight as whispers and shouts from dozens of voices in unison wormed their way through their minds. “It came back on its own!”

2B raised her sword and brandished it at the approaching entities, hoping to scare them off, but they paid her weak threats no mind as they drew nearer and nearer. She dropped her sword, clapping her hands over her ears in a vain attempt to spare her mind the brunt of the attack as still the creatures came closer, reaching out with protuberances that were at once neither hands nor claws nor paws nor talons nor tentacles and opening yawning mouths that were both filled with teeth and gaping emptily and both black as pitch and filled with static.

“H-Hey! Hey, stop it! Bad memoryheads! Very bad! No! I—I’ve got your food right here, so back off!”

The mental assault ceased and the shambling, shapeless masses turned whatever passed for heads on their amorphous bodies in the voice’s direction and shuffled away from 2B and 9S.

“Th—There you go. Sorry. Sorry. I won’t be late next time.” Doctor Alphys set a few bags on the floor for the creatures, then waddled past them as they dug in. “I—I’m so sorry, I didn’t notice the proximity alarm, and you know… well, actually, you don’t know… these guys, they’re kinda like cats, if you’re five minutes late in feeding them you… uh…”

2B gingerly removed her hands from her ears, the silence left in the horrific creatures’ wake nearly as deafening as their psychic assault. At her side, 9S did the same. Sweat dripped down his pallid face.

Alphys looked at the people she’d saved, blanched, and did an about-face. “Uh, um, I-I don’t suppose we can…” She glanced back at them over her hunched shoulder. “…Forget about all this, maybe?”

“What the hell have you been doing down here?” 2B snapped, her voice so icy that Alphys actually shivered. “Those things could have killed us!”

“I—I swear, as long as I feed them on time, they’re harmless!” Alphys protested. “…Forget about all this, maybe?”

Everybody said that Doctor Alphys was a prodigy.

Mettaton had been her creation: an artificial being who had a soul of his own. His debut as the Underground’s latest and greatest (and first) media star—television, theater, radio, literature—had caught the attention of not only the masses but of King Asgore himself, who found the idea of an artificial soul most intriguing. He had collected only six of the seven souls needed to shatter the Barrier, and too many years had passed since the sixth visitor’s arrival and subsequent sacrifice. The light of hope was beginning to flicker and was in desperate need of rekindling.

For her achievement Alphys found herself appointed Royal Scientist, thrust into a position of enormous responsibility and power. She wasn’t just a tinkerer in a lab anymore: now the welfare of the kingdom was her responsibility.

But her work was a sham.

That wasn’t to say Alphys wasn’t talented or brilliant in her own way. But Mettaton was not an artificial being with an artificial soul. He’d been a monster once, a rare sort of incorporeal monster who’d longed for a body. And not just any body—a beautiful body. Alphys had built it for him. But the shell the ghost now lived in was all she had
She had no choice but to live up to the lie. Alphys asked to be given one of the human souls for further research, and the bodies of monsters who had recently died but had not yet decomposed and released their souls. Over the course of her research, she discovered the true nature of the souls Asgore had collected… and inadvertently revived the dead.

But the test subjects did not remain alive for long. At least, not the way monsters understood life. The revived monsters broke down under the strain of too much life, too much will to live, too much determination. Their bodies melted and ran together, and they were reduced to shambling amalgamated masses—husks with nothing but the most primal instincts papered over by fragments and snippets of their past selves. Attuned to the wavelengths of artificial lifeforms such as machines and androids, their shattered thoughts occasionally leaked out, broadcasting themselves into the heads of nearby machines.

It had gone differently for Asriel. His revived body had been soulless, and as a result the machine core used to prolong his new life hadn’t had to compete with the wavelengths from a living monster soul, preventing him from melting like the others. But his body still crumbled anyway. In shame Alphys had taken the machine core and left it in the junkyard, not realizing how much of Asriel’s conscience had imprinted on it.

Alphys hadn’t known what to do. She had already made so many promises to so many people. If the truth came out, she would be ruined—exposed as a fraud at best and a grossly unethical scientist at worst. She would lose everything—not just her career, but the respect of every monster in the Underground.

So she remained silent.

Alphys let out a deep sigh. “Their families still call me and write me letters asking when they’ll be coming back. I know they’d never forgive me if they found out what happened… so I don’t even bother answering. I mean… would you?”

She trudged over to the door. “You should just leave. And, uh, maybe just… don’t come back. Or, uh, worry about me if you stop hearing from me or anything.” Alphys sniffled. “It’s not like I’m important or good at anything or a good person. I—I just tricked everyone into thinking that. Even you guys.”

2B hadn’t thought she’d feel sorry for Alphys after all this. But somehow, despite everything… she did. After all, who knew better than her how to pretend?

“You should tell everyone about this,” she told Alphys. “Including Asriel. He should know what’s happened to him.”

The doctor stopped in her tracks. “But…”

“They may not all forgive you,” 2B said, “but they have a right to know the truth nonetheless.”

9S nodded. “If you want anyone to forgive you over this, you have to come clean on your terms, not anyone else’s. And, um… whatever’s causing machines to go crazy around here… maybe turn it off? I mean, we’re all silicon in here, too, you know,” he said, tapping on his forehead.

Alphys tried to smile, but all she could really do was scrunch up her face a bit. “O-Okay. You’re
right. Sorry about all that. The memoryheads only do that when they get hungry.”

Later that night, back in the cottage she and 9S now called home, 2B looked at herself once more in the mirror and imagined she was speaking to her counterpart.

She wished she didn’t have to tell him at all. It would be so much easier if she just… never had to tell him the truth. But 2B couldn’t just hope that 9S would never find out. Sooner or later he’d find something within his own records that didn’t match up, or 2B would slip up and say something. Sooner or later he would figure it out on his own, and if 2B couldn’t be there for him to explain why he’d borne the brunt of such heinous crimes, there was no telling how he’d take it.

She still didn’t know how to say it. But she would tell him the truth in the morning.
[C] Fitful Sleep

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we meet two new OCs who are going to be the new main characters from now on!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That night, another machine lifeform fell into the ruins, its metal carapace leaving a clear imprint of crushed petals in the bed of wild golden flowers beneath it. The machine retraced the same steps, unknowingly, as the last machine to have fallen in that very spot scarcely a week ago, ambling over the disturbed grave of Chara Dreemurr. The little machine was alone and afraid, but it felt a twinge of hope in its core because it, too, sensed more of its brethren deeper within the mountain’s stony roots.

Four zip lines shot through the air behind it, latching onto the ground, and four androids clad all in black armor slid down into the depths of the mountain. One of the black-armored figures drew its weapon, a curved, single-edged blade over a meter-and-a-half in length, in mid-fall and cut the machine in two with a mighty swing before the android’s armored feet could touch the ground. Green optical sensors blazed on its helmet.

One of the other three androids, shorter and more slender than its peers, landed and examined the two flight units parked on the ground. “They came this way,” she announced.

Beneath her helmet, the lead android nearly rolled her eyes. “That seems obvious enough, doesn’t it, Twos?” She hefted her long sword over her shoulder. “Fan out and search the area, please, 13B and Fivie. Leave no stone unturned. 2B and 9S must be around here somewhere… and we’ll find them, dead or alive.”

The four androids split up into groups of two and began to painstakingly scour the ruins inch by inch.

One-half of the four-android team—13B and 5E—crept through the vine-tangled ruins. They didn’t know the other two androids very well. They’d had a mission of their own before they’d decided to take some time to help the other two—acquaintances at best who’d nevertheless had a few favors to call in—scour the mountain in search of their friends.

Now in this strange underground realm, their connection to the outside world was completely cut off, the aperture they’d come in through was oddly impassable, and what was worse, they both had the sneaking suspicion that the Boss, as she liked to be called, didn’t actually give a stubby’s shiny metal ass about the two of them.

“That seems obvious enough, doesn’t it, Twos?” 13B repeated in a mocking falsetto as she shooed away an army of frogs with her boot. “God, what a piece of work she is.”
“Thank god you’re a Type-B,” 5E grumbled, fidgeting with her daggers to alleviate her irritation with her lot in life. “She can’t make a cutesy nickname out of that.”

“I think she could if she wanted to.” 13B inspected a crumbling building and looked inside.

“You think she just doesn’t like Type-Bs, Thirteen?”

“I don’t think she likes anyone. Say, these buildings look kinda human, don’t they?”

5E poked her head inside one of the dusty buildings. “Sure do. You think humans lived down here?”

“Maybe. Who knows what lives here now?” 13B crept a bit deeper in. On a table covered with cobwebs was a dusty placard, a collection of pastries, and a jug of cloudy amber liquid next to a stack of paper cups. She read the placard.

Spider Bake Sale!

Made FOR Spiders, BY Spiders, OF Spiders

All Profits Go To Help REAL Spiders!

Spider Croissant – 5 G

Spider Cider – 13 G

“H-Hey, five and thirteen.” 13B chuckled.

“Lucky Thirteen strikes again. Is this a coded message or something?” 5E asked, peeking over her partner’s shoulder.

“Dunno,” said 13B, fishing around in a pouch on her belt, “but it looks like they use the same currency as us.” She set 26 G on the table, poured herself and 5E two cups of cider, and took off her helmet, cradling it under her arm. “Bottoms up.”

5E shrugged and removed her helmet as well, freeing a long mane of russet-red hair, and took one of the cups. “Bottoms up.”

13B downed the cider and immediately spat it out.

In a panic 5E threw down her cup, grinding it under her boot for good measure. “Is it poisoned, Thirteen?”

13B swished as much saliva as she could around in her mouth to sop up the taste before spitting again. “It tastes like spiders!”

“And you know what spiders taste like because—” 5E put her helmet back on, not bothering to tuck in her hair, and shook her head. “How do I get out of this chickenshit outfit?”

“Stick your foot out the next time the Commander walks through Ops,” 13B said as she joined her partner in the cracked and crumbling alley, “and you’ll find a new assignment pretty quickly.”

“I think the Boss already did that. Why do you think she got stuck in a search and rescue mission without any pods to run scans? I get the feeling she’s one rung above sanitation duty here.”

13B laughed. “I’d like to see her on sanitation. Give her a chance to clean up her own messes for once. You know, I walked into a training room she’d come out of before anyone had time to clean
"Yeah?"

"Blood all over the walls. None of it hers."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw her walking out of there in a spotless white gown, whistling like she didn’t have a care in the world." 13B shuddered. "Call me crazy, but I think she has more fun chopping up androids than stubbies."

"Well, I mean… she is a Type-E."

The two androids went on.

"Hey, 5E. Is it true that some Type-Es go undercover as other models?" 13B asked. "Like… Type-Bs?"

5E laughed. "What? Is that your newest excuse for not asking 7B out?"

"Sh—Shut up!"

"She’s not gonna bite your head off, Lucky."

A weak voice cut through the air, stunning both 13B and 5E into silence.

A cry for help.

The levity in the two androids’ demeanor vanished as they rushed toward the source of the cry, both drawing their weapons—13B her brand-new Type-4O sword, and 5E her trusty pair of butterfly daggers. Turning the corner of the alleyway snaking labyrinthine through the ruins, 13B was the first to see the source of the outcry.

An android so savagely injured it may as well have been a corpse lay spread-eagle on the cobblestone road, reaching up with a shaking, palsied arm, its fingers curling and grasping aimlessly as it moaned. The lights in the eye sockets of its skull-like face flickered amber, unable to remain steadily lit. Strips of torn and ragged synthetic muscle fiber and severed, sap-leaking vines still clung to its battered chassis.

13B felt the bottom of her stomach drop out as she rushed toward the android, her sword clattering to the ground. She couldn’t imagine how something like this could possibly keep clinging to life.

"Someone please turn on my vomit inhibitors," 5E moaned, her knives retreating to her hips as her gauntleted hands flew to the front of her helmet. For someone who specialized in terminating rogue androids, 5E got queasy easily.

"Are you 2B?" 13B asked the battered android, "or 9S?" She crouched down and took the android’s hand, feeling how frail its body was. Even the chassis felt brittle beneath her armored glove. "Good god, what the hell happened to you?"

The android moaned again as it stood up, shivering so much and so violently that 13B worried it would shake itself to pieces. Golden flower petals fell from its cracked chest cavity.

"Hey. Hey, take it easy!" 13B tried to hold the android down. "What’s your designation?"
As 13B tried to console the deathly-injured android, 5E screamed. 13B glanced over her shoulder at her partner and saw her struggling against a tangle of living vines that had bound her limbs and wrenched her weapons out of her hands. High-pitched, cackling laughter rang out as a spray of bright white projectiles ripped through 5E’s chest, armor and all, blood trailing in the bullets’ wakes.

“Lucky!” she cried out in an agonized wail.

The android laid a skeletal hand on the side of 13B’s helmet. “YoRHa… Number… N-Number… Numb-b-b-b-b-b-er.”

13B felt her own sword run through her gut, severing her spinal column. Everything below her waist went completely numb as if her legs had vanished altogether, and her visual display began to flicker and break down.


That night, 9S found himself dreaming.

He knew he was dreaming because he was on the surface, running across a grassy hillside while a galaxy’s worth of stars up in the clear night sky shone down on him. He was out of breath, tired, his nerves shot and limbs heavy. His flight unit had crashed nearly half a mile away—he’d been so distressed, he hadn’t been able to land it properly.

His HUD showed that 2B was up ahead, waiting for him just as he’d breathlessly told her to do before he’d escaped the Bunker and flown down to Earth. He had to tell her.

The words ran through his mind. Replicant. Gestalt. White Chlorination Syndrome. All of them pointing to a single chilling conclusion.

9S stumbled and fell. He couldn’t shake the feeling he was being chased, despite nothing but a handful of disinterested machines showing up on his HUD.

He picked himself up and kept running. 2B was just up ahead, her silvery-white hair so bright against the grass covering the hillside that looking at her was like seeing the full moon in the night sky.

“2B,” he gasped, sucking in lungfuls of air with the desperation of a drowning man poking his head above the water as he pulled off his visor, “it’s YoRHa… They’ve been lying to us. They’ve been lying to us the whole time.”

He collapsed. 2B rushed to his side. Her complexion, 9S couldn’t help but notice, was ashen, and her visor seemed damp. “Shh. 9S, don’t talk,” she whispered, a sense of urgency he’d never heard before entering her voice.

She gripped his shoulders more tightly. 9S could feel her fingertips digging into his coat, into him with so much strength that he felt his synthetic skin begin to bruise.


“No…” 9S tried to pull himself free, the initial comfort he’d felt with 2B at his side melting into an indistinct horror. Had they gotten to her first? “You have to know. They
all have to know. We’ve got to tell everybody, 2B, that—"

2B’s sword was at his throat. “Stop talking,” she growled. “9S. Stop talking right now. Please, I—”

9S fought back, and in the ensuing struggle he ended up with a sword through his chest pinning him to the grass, buried in him and the dirt underneath him all the way up to its hilt.

9S did everything in his power to free himself. His fingers scrabbled against the hilt of 2B’s sword, slippery with blood and slipping off. He writhed in agony, wriggling desperately to escape the pain that pervaded his every body part.

After the initial scream that had torn itself from his lips he’d started making the most pathetic noises he could think of—his brain too overloaded with searing anguish both physical and mental to form coherent words—in a desperate attempt to perhaps wring some sympathy out of 2B with his whimpering.

But soon he fell silent and limp, and mercifully, even the pain began to fade away. 2B lay down beside him. He could barely turn his head or move his eyes, but out of the corner of his eye he saw her remove her visor. Her eyes were red-rimmed and misty. She was crying—she’d been crying since long before he’d shown up.

“The stars really do look different from here, don’t they, 9S?” 2B murmured.

All 9S could do was look up at the stars with her. With the last of his breath he let out one little sigh that couldn’t even begin to express what he wanted to say to her.

“I know,” 2B responded. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Remember our first night on the surface? We had to spend two days on foot traveling to the Resistance camp, machines hot on our heels... and that first night, you told me you wished you could just lie down and watch the stars come out. I told you not to be so foolish. But...” Her voice began to crack and waver.

9S felt 2B’s bare hand fall on top of his and gently squeeze. He barely felt it, but nevertheless what remained of his nervous system carried the warmth to his brain.

“Tonight, I almost feel... happy, just lying here and stargazing with you.”

Darkness crowded the edges of 9S’s vision, forcing the stars to wink out one by one as his visual processor shut down in pieces. The moon vanished in chunks.

The rest of him was shutting down, too. Before 2B could say anything else, the sound of chirping crickets and even the omnipresent hiss of white noise vanished. 9S’s mind went last, when blissful darkness and silence had flooded the world.

His last thought before the last few artificial synapses in his brain stopped firing was that he had to tell her.

Even as he lay dying, he had to tell her.

He had to tell her, even though he could scarcely believe it himself.

He had to tell her that YoRHa was a fraud, and the human race had gone extinct thousands of years ago.
9S jolted awake to the sound of a scream echoing through the house. A scream in his voice. Unconsciously he’d raised a hand to his chest as he sat up, expecting to find a sword protruding from it. A patina of cold sweat covered his skin. He could see his own breath floating in the air in front of him.

9S had never had a dream that felt half as real as this one. But as he tried to gather his thoughts, the tighter he gripped them, the more the details slipped through his fingers.

The sky was black as pitch, and the bedroom as well; the only light came from the slow pulsing of Pod 153’s status light as it sat in the corner in hibernation mode. 9S was alone in the room; the house had only one bedroom and one bed, and despite his insistence that he and 2B switch between the bed and couch at regular intervals, 2B seemed happy with the couch.

Even a couch, he supposed, was more comfortable than a cot in a Resistance camp.

Lights flickered on from the hall outside his room. 2B, a light sleeper, was at 9S’s side in a flash. Her body language was twitchy and tense—9S could see from even a detail as minor as the way her nostrils flared that 2B was expecting an attack from any vantage point (because of course, why would 9S have screamed like that if he weren’t in mortal danger?).

“9S, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he told her as he caught his breath. “I—it was just a nightmare.”

“Just a nightmare?” 2B held onto him as if her fingers were the talons of a bird of prey.

9S flinched. 2B pulled away.

“It was pretty vivid… but I’m fine now,” 9S hurriedly assured her, relieved to feel her loosening her grip. “You can let me go. I’m fine now. Sorry I woke you up.”

“Are you sure?”

9S shivered as the cold air met his sweat-soaked skin. “M-Maybe Toriel was right. It’s a little cold in here.”

2B nodded, stood up, and rushed out of the house, returning only a few minutes later laden with as much firewood as she and 042 could carry—most of it chopped by her own sword, judging from the smooth and impeccably neat cuts—and several crumpled-up copies of the local paper. She stuffed the disused fireplace full of wood and newspaper and lit it up.

“Pod 042,” she ordered. “Remain outside and keep watch over the perimeter.” The pod dutifully nodded and hovered away.

The crackling fire radiated an orange-amber glow and a heat that was softer and more comforting than 9S had anticipated as he and 2B sat in front of it. Even the smell—he’d never paid attention to the scent of burning wood before—was richer than he’d expected.

9S closed his eyes. The fire felt almost as warm on his skin as sunlight. “Thanks, 2B.”

“It’s not a problem. What was your dream about?”

“Hell if I know. Something about YoRHa and some conspiracy. It must have just been the whole C13 thing weighing on my mind. You know how dreams are.”
2B seemed satisfied by the answer. “It must have been a very frightening conspiracy.”

He shrugged. “I guess. They were hunting me down for it. I… I think I died or something. Anyway, sorry for waking you up.”

For a while, 2B said nothing. The fire’s hungry snaps and pops as it feasted on the wood bridged the silence.

“I was not sleeping,” 2B said.

“Right, right. Guess you were just resting your eyes.”

9S felt something slip behind his ears and over his head. He opened his eyes just in time to see 2B pull away from him looking more than a little sheepish. He glanced at her and noticed she’d removed her hairband.

“Will this make you feel better?” she asked, the corners of her mouth twitching upward.

9S reached up and felt the accessory, smiling in turn. A gift. From 2B of all people, and after what she’d said earlier that day… “You’re getting the hang of this,” he murmured.

“I have something to tell you,” 2B told him. “Something important.”

“Yeah?” 9S leaned against her shoulder, feeling fatigue creep back into his brain.

“It’s… I’ve done something horrible to you. And I’m sorry for it.”

_Something horrible?_ 9S didn’t understand. “This past week’s been the happiest week of my life, 2B.”

“It has nothing to do with our presence here. You… you wouldn’t know about it. You weren’t meant to know.” 2B shook her head, struggling to look 9S in the eyes. “But you deserve to know.”

As 9S watched her anxiously knead the hem of her dress, he realized he had never seen her in such emotional distress. He reached out and laid his hand over hers.

“What I did to you, I did under orders and against my will,” 2B told him. “042 has repeatedly reminded me not to talk to you about it. If I told you, I don’t think we could ever go back to YoRHa.”

“Oh—Okay.”

“O—Okay?” 2B repeated, incredulous.

“I’ve been thinking this past week,” 9S said. “There’s a lifetime of study to be done down here. It’s a lot more fun than killing machines. We can stay down here forever if you’d like. And besides…” He snickered at the absurdity of what he was about to say. “It’s not like anyone’s gonna come looking for us. We were probably both written off as KIA way back. They’ve probably already spun up our backups. Imagine that. Copies of us running around on the surface, doing our jobs for us.”

2B suppressed a laugh. “I… I hadn’t thought of that.” There was a sparkle in her eyes 9S had never seen before.

“Imagine if they fell down here and met us. I don’t know if they’d even recognize us.” 9S yawned, struggling to keep his eyes open. It was strange how easy it was to fall asleep in a place with no existential threats. His mind still wasn’t quite used to it—but his body was, and it seemed to really
enjoy sleeping. “Hey, 2B?” he asked as the world went dark.

“Yes?”

“Whatever’s bothering you,” he told her as his brain began to fog up, “just tell me in the morning.”

“But—Wait. 9S, this is important. I need you to know that I…”

“I don’t care,” 9S mumbled automatically, like a defensive reflex. He didn’t care. “Ever since I met you, you’ve been watching over me. You’re like… you’re like my older sister… if androids had sisters.”

2B sniffled. 9S could see telltale hints of tears in her eyes. He couldn’t remember ever seeing her like this, and yet it still felt familiar.

“I—I like you, 2B. And I’m pretty happy with how my life’s ended up, all things considered. So whatever you did to me, it couldn’t have been that bad in the end. Take it easy and tell me in the morning.”

Curling up at 2B’s side he felt warm and safe, and as he slept, this time he did not dream.

▫▫▫

2B awoke that morning in front of the long-dead ashes of the fire she’d started, 9S tucked under her arm and still soundly asleep. She knew what he’d been dreaming of, even if he didn’t remember. The scream she’d heard last night still echoed in her mind. It hadn’t been the first time she’d heard 9S cry out like that.

Usually he didn’t scream—usually, she killed him too quickly for that, and sometimes he even let her do it—but the few times he did, it was like a thunderclap tearing through the air, a closed-bracket in a segment of code that ended too soon.

2B wondered if somehow 9S was just as haunted by his deaths as she was. Was it possible that some part of him remembered his past lives? If he did, he seemed to be at peace now, though, a slight smile still playing on his lips as his chest gently rose and fell.

Does he really see himself as a younger brother to me? she wondered. He’d taken her confession so well last night, but after hearing that scream 2B hadn’t been in the right frame of mind to tell him the gory details. This morning after he woke up she’d buy him breakfast, get him cozy, and see if his attitude held up.

9S wasn’t in uniform anymore, which was a step 2B herself hadn’t yet felt comfortable taking (9S had always been quick to eschew decorum). He’d even started wearing special clothes just for sleeping in, which he had told 2B were called “pajamas.”

2B thought the idea of wearing certain clothes to bed was absurd—why would you care what you were wearing if you were asleep, after all?—but the fleece fabric was very soft and… very cute. It had very simple, almost crude drawings of dogs all over it. 9S had certainly taken to this new life among non-soldiers.

Non-soldiers. 2B wondered if there was a word for that. There were no androids who weren’t soldiers, so it had always been a moot point. There had to have been a word for them, though, because not all humans had fought in wars.

Deserter, perhaps. No, a deserter was a soldier who abandoned their duties. What did you call
someone who didn’t have to fight in the first place? *It started with a C*, 2B thought. It was a word for people who didn’t have to kill the things they hated or the people they loved. She decided she’d ask 9S after he woke up. 9S collected a lot of human ephemera, including words androids had no use for.

She laid 9S on the couch, wrapped the crocheted wool blanket she’d been sleeping under—one of many blankets Toriel had donated to the two of them—around him, and let him rest while she put herself to work.

Following 9S’s example, 2B changed clothes before stepping outside. For the first time in—well, her entire life—she chose not to wear her YoRHa uniform, leaving her boots propped against the wall and her dress neatly folded on the bed with her visor.

Just a few days ago 2B had (at Toriel’s insistence) obtained “more practical” clothes from a local store—although she hadn’t imagined ever wanting to wear them, even when she’d been bashfully displaying them in front of a Toriel practically glowing with surrogate-maternal pride.

2B had never worn pants before. They were less open and just a little more restrictive, but she did appreciate the pockets. Shirts, though—she could get used to those. As comfortable as her new wardrobe was, though, 2B couldn’t help but feel oddly vulnerable, as though YoRHa could at any moment smite her with an orbital laser strike for her transgressions against the dress code. *If the Commander could see me now,* she thought, *I would surely find myself relegated to laundry duty or worse.*

As she set to work shoveling a path through the several centimeters of snow that had fallen overnight, 2B used the rote, repetitive labor as a chance to meditate. Menial chores were nothing new to her—she’d had to pull her weight working alongside Resistance cells on the surface, after all, elite status be damned—but doing them without the fear of death by machine ambush was new to her. It was actually pleasant.

The sky had turned a dull amber, the sparkling and freshly-fallen snow taking on the hue of the approximated half-sunlight. Many of the monsters may not have found it a suitable place to live, and many monsters must have missed the feel of real sunlight, but it was a beautiful world down here.

Peace was a foreign country, and the more she lived in it the more comfortable the idea of citizenship felt to her. *Citizen.* 2B rolled the word around in her mind a bit, and then it came to her. The word she’d been looking for earlier. That was it. The word for a non-soldier was a *civilian.*

2B wanted to be a civilian.

A tall figure wrapped in several layers of ragged cloaks and blankets stepped out from a grove of pine trees. 2B recognized Toriel immediately—she always disguised herself in the exact same way.

The two black-armored figures trailing behind her, however, 2B did not recognize. But they seemed to recognize her—one of them even waved.

“2B!” Toriel called out. “Hello, dear! These friends of yours came down here to look for you!”

*Friends of mine?* 2B thought, instinctively raising her snow shovel in self-defense. *YoRHa?*

Of course. It *couldn’t* be that easy. An irrational part of 2B’s brain wondered if her conversation with 9S had somehow conjured them, as if she and 9S were cursed.
Why now? she thought. Why now, and why like this?

One of the black-armored androids took the lead, stepped onto the shoveled path, and held out its hand. 2B immediately noticed the sword slung diagonally over the android’s back, a sword longer than 2B was tall.

It couldn’t be, she thought as she stared down the android. It couldn’t be her.

Behind 2B, the door opened and 9S poked his head out, rubbing his eyes. He still had a blanket loosely draped over his shoulders… and 2B’s hairband in his hair. “Hey, 2B? What’s going on out here?”

Abandoning her trepidation as best she could, 2B dropped her improvised weapon and clasped the android’s hand.

Deep in the ruins, an old android picked over the lifeless bodies of two newer androids. A strange yellow flower perched on their chest, its stem wreathed around the heart-shaped pendant dangling from the android’s neck.

Chara sighed in relief as they stripped the armor off of the android once known as 13B and swapped enough parts from its counterpart to repair the damage done to it, happy to see upon removing 13B’s helmet a near-perfect mirror of their own face.

What a stroke of luck that one of the androids who’d fallen down had been a Number 13. The hair was styled a bit differently and the ears stuck out a little more and the eyes were more brown than maroon, but it was close enough. Of course, Chara would have taken whatever android fell their way—they’d even been planning on piecing themselves together from machine lifeforms of all things before this golden opportunity had fallen into their lap…

Flowey helped Chara swap a few crucial bits between themselves and 13B. The cobbled-together, barely-alive android corpse of C13 collapsed, dead yet again, and a few minutes later Chara woke up in a new body. A pristine body. A modern body.

Life was a wonderful thing. Trapped in their own corpse, Chara had barely had enough processing power to move their arm. Pillaging a machine core had taken all their strength and then some, and even with that acting as an impromptu battery, they’d only barely been able to run their basic processes. If it hadn’t been for Flowey…

Their dear Asriel…

They would never have pulled this ambush off.

Chara ran through their diagnostics with awe, reveling in the experience of having a body that was hundreds of years more advanced than their old one. So many improvements on their old one. Faster reflexes, higher-resolution video, higher-bitrate audio. A stronger chassis and endoskeleton. Improved coolant circulation (still the same old exploitable pumping substation they’d used to make themselves sick all those years ago—but of course; they’d done the same thing to 2E while they’d been possessing her, after all). A self-destruct subroutine. That was new.

Flowey crawled to Chara’s side and perched on their forearm like a falconer’s hawk, a brother reunited with his sibling once again.

Chara patted Flowey’s petals, then collected the weapons from the fallen androids. The daggers were
fairly normal as far as daggers went; Chara found the weight of the knives and the glint of their glittering blades comforting. The sword’s hilt almost resembled the stock and action of a rifle more than the hilt of a traditional sword, and on the hilt was a battery that faintly hummed with familiar energy. So many years spent among magic had taught Chara to recognize the telltale scent permeating the sword—the gleaming, wickedly-curved blade was a metallic alloy infused with magical elements.

Chara gave the sword a few experimental swings, adjusting their grip to its oddly-shaped hilt. They didn’t like it. But they registered it to their NFCS—what an amazing feature!—and let the blade hover at their back in case they had need of it. The knives would do, for now, Chara supposed with a heavy sigh.

Chara didn’t like mass-produced weapons. They had an affinity for legendary artifacts (with a smile, they mused that perhaps they were themselves a legendary artifact now), and had been something of a collector. When they’d fallen down, they had brought with them (among other features of their collection) Caladbolg and Carnwennan.

Caladbolg was a sword they were proud of owning but did not care much to use—two-handed blades didn’t suit them, and the glittering rainbow arc the blade left in its wake was really more of an Asriel thing. (He’d loved that sword when Chara had shown it to him but had loved it much less once Chara had told him to start killing with it.)

Now, Carnwennan… that was Chara’s darling. A dagger with the power to shroud its wielder in shadow. Without that layer of camouflage, Chara nearly felt naked. And of course, nothing beat the feeling of having a knife in their hand, especially one so exquisitely crafted.

“My dear Asri—My dear Flowey, my other half… Do you perchance remember where you left my swords?”

“Why, the king’s garden, of course, Chara.” Flowey smiled. “Right where I died.”

“Where we died,” Chara reminded him. They didn’t want to miss a single opportunity to remind Flowey what he had done… how Asriel had failed them.

“I-Of course.”

“And of course, I doubt they’ve been sitting there for two hundred years.”

“Sorry.”

Chara smiled. Flowey was a bit of a psycho, but Chara could still see hints of the old Asriel in him. He was eager to redeem himself in Chara’s eyes.

Chara turned their attention to the other android and fished out its black box. The sable cube still glittered with trapped starlight. Chara tumbled the black box in their hand. It could be the seventh. The last soul needed to break down the Barrier. The last soul needed to become a god.

It was time to finish what Chara and Asriel had started all those years ago.

Chapter End Notes

I know the "jeez 2B just tell 9S already" thing is dragging on a bit, but trust me, I'm
building to something.
[C] Broken Heart

Chapter Summary

You can run to the end of the Earth, but the past still catches up sooner or later.

Chapter Notes

Whenever I end up putting an OC in a fic, they usually end up being an utter cinnamon roll or a complete asshole. Guess which one you're getting!

2B reached out and shook the hand of the android who’d come all this way to find her.

In one fluid motion, it pinned 2B’s arm behind her back and flung her into the snow. The world spun around 2B for a split second before she landed face up in a snowdrift. 9S leaped to her rescue, but the android quickly pinned him to the ground, pressing its armored knee against his neck.

2B no longer had any doubt regarding the android’s identity. For this person, this was the equivalent of a handshake—although poor 9S couldn’t have known that. She stood up. “That is enough, Sixie. Let go of him.”

The figure in black looked down at 9S and then over at 2B through the blazing emerald optic sensors set into their helmet, then released 9S. “Good to see you again!” The android pulled off its helmet, shaking free long, curly locks of whitish-lilac hair done up in fraying pigtails. A broad smile lit up her face. “I knew I’d find you sooner or later, Tooie!"

2E pulled herself off the floor, gingerly rubbing her sore tailbone as 6E’s haughty laughter bounced off the walls of the training hall.

“Come on!” 6E stuck both her own Type-3 Blade and 2E’s standard-issue katana into the training mats and let them stand there like posts, then crossed her arms over her chest. “Your target isn’t always going to be some shrinking violet you can just knife in the back, Tooie!” she called out, laughing.

2E snapped her fingers, and her NFCS summoned her sword back to her hand. She adopted a combat stance yet again, holding the katana out in front of her. She nodded. Then, when she was sure 6E’s guard was still down, 2E lunged forward.

The laughter died in her throat as the tip of 2E’s sword grazed her chest, hovering just over her black box. 2E held the sword with a reversed grip in one hand, the open palm of her other hand against the pommel. One thrust and 6E would be dead as a doornail… and to be honest, after this recent spate of humiliations 2E almost wanted to do it to her. It wasn’t like it would be permanent. She’d just load up another backup and be on her way.
6E giggled and pushed the blade away with one finger on its dull side. “That’s cute. Take your lumps, wait until your target starts to take pity on you, then cut his heart out. It’s such a you strategy, 2E.” She reached out, wrapped her arm around 2E’s back while sidling beside her and grabbed her by the waist. “Aw, don’t get too down in the dumps. You did very well!” 6E pinched her cheek. “I only got to knock you on your butt twice this time.”

6E ambled to the hallway, still clutching 2E by the waist as she stepped out of the training hall. 6E, about a head and change taller than 2E, treated her comparatively-diminutive protégé like a doll. She pursed her lips and whistled all the way down the corridor until she reached her quarters.

The door slid open as she rapped her knuckles on it. “C’mon. Don’t be shy,” 6E said, ushering 2E inside.

2E stepped over the threshold. 6E’s quarters were a disheveled hovel—weapons, clothes, bedsheets, and bric-a-brac strewn all over the place. She wondered how someone who put so much work into setting such elegant curls into her hair could neglect her living space so completely.

6E picked up an odachi with a blade longer than 2E was tall and waved it around the room. 2E thought the sword looked familiar. Had 14E given it to 6E before departing to Earth? “Well? Don’t stand on ceremony.”

2E looked around the room. There were no chairs. She looked back to 6E. Rolling her eyes and sighing, 6E tapped on her cot with the hilt of 14E’s odachi. “Sit, girl.”

2E took a seat at 6E’s side, and 6E immediately reached out and mussed up 2E’s hair. 2E ignored 6E’s lack of regard for her personal space and stared intently at the sword. “That… That’s 14E’s, isn’t it?” She hadn’t seen her old mentor in nearly a month. But 2E could have sworn 14E had taken her sword with her… and to 2E’s knowledge, she hadn’t returned to the Bunker yet.

6E’s hand traveled to her shoulder, then down to her bicep, giving her a squeeze that was ostensibly supposed to be comforting. “I’m sorry. The other day, back on the surface, I got the order from Commander White to hunt down a deserter.”

2E couldn’t help but fill in the blanks. “It was 14E?” she gasped. It sounded impossible. She’d been one of the most strait-laced Type-Es in production, and 2E overwhelmingly preferred her severe demeanor to 6E’s childish, churlish attitude. “But she wouldn’t—”

“Yup. And she wasn’t alone. It turns out she spilled her guts to her assignment and they ran off together. At any rate, I arrived on the scene to cut the honeymoon short and…” 6E slid the sheath partway up the odachi’s blade, showing gleaming, polished metal still slicked and stained with streaks of scarlet blood.

14E… one of the first faces 2E had seen following her activation, next to Commander White… was gone?

6E shook her head and spared 2E a pitying glance. “I know how much you liked her. But…” 6E slid the sheath back down the blade and dropped it to the cluttered floor to lie
with over half a dozen other swords. “That’s life!”

Killing a fellow Type-E must have been taxing, mentally and physically, but it shocked 2E that even after that, 6E hadn’t lost her chipper, bubbly attitude toward her duties as an Executioner.

“Yes. That’s… life,” 2E echoed, dazed. In her first few weeks of being brought online she’d learned so much from sparring sessions with 14E, and still couldn’t wrap her head around the thought that she had deserted. How could she leave YoRHa? Didn’t she believe in the cause? Hadn’t she believed that humankind was worth defending?

“She said she just couldn’t take it anymore.” 6E shrugged. “Strange, isn’t it? How easily our kind are given to sentimentality?” She tweaked 2E’s nose. 2E winced. “Don’t end up like her, okay, Tooie? I’d hate to have to kill someone as adorable as you.”

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9S watched as the newcomer threw her arms around 2B. “It’s been so long, Tooie! We haven’t hung out properly in years! How have you been keeping, darling?”

2B tried to pull herself out of her apparent friend’s embrace to no avail. 9S had never seen 2B look quite so flustered. “It’s 2B,” she protested.

“Oh, of course,” the newcomer said. “I prefer ‘Tooie,’ though.”

9S cleared his throat. “Excuse me, 2B…” He laid a hand on his sword, even though the chances this strangely-huggy android could be an enemy were decreasing by the second. “Who’s this?”

“Oh, I’m 6E.” 6E turned 2B around, still clutching her with a rib-cracking death-grip, and leaned down over her shoulder, pressing their cheeks together. “2B and I have been together since the beginning! Tooie and Sixie, friends forever!”

“2B, oh dear! What are these cretinous ruffians…” Toriel caught up with her guests, the concern on her face soon vanishing as she realized it was all just playful roughhousing. “Oh,” she sighed. “Thank goodness.”

6E gave 2B a quick peck on the cheek. “Say, you’re looking pretty good for a dead girl, darling.”

9S was surprised to see 2B’s face flush red as she tried to cringe her way out of her “old friend’s” bear hug. “Excuse me,” she said, “6E—”

6E took notice of 9S. “Oh, and you must be Tooie’s scanner!” Letting 2B go, she wrapped her hand around 9S’s hand and vigorously shook it. Her smile showed too many teeth. Try as he might, 9S couldn’t imagine 2B ever being friends with such a cloying, obnoxious person. “I’ve got one, too! Say hi, 2S!”

At 6E’s side, the other android removed her helmet. While she had a slight, waifish frame befitting a Type-S, her face looked uncannily similar to 2B’s. Judging by her reticence to say a single word, she had a similar icy personality as well.

“Why are you here?” 9S asked, feeling a twinge of suspicion flash through his mind.

“Why, to rescue you, of course!” 6E cracked her knuckles. “I bet you two have been itching to go back home.”
“Well, um, yeah, of course,” 9S found himself lying. “But we were both shot down. It’s been two weeks. Why didn’t they just load our backups and go from there?”

“Well, there was some talk of doing that,” 6E airily replied, playing with one of her pigtails, “but Commander White decided we had to make sure you two were dead first, so 2S and I valiantly volunteered to lead the salvage ops. Imagine if we spun up your backups and you came back anyway! Can you imagine two of you running around? We’d lose our minds!”

That made sense to 9S. In YoRHa, temporary bodies were used and abused with reckless abandon, and protocol expressly forbade one android from housing their consciousness in multiple bodies for logistics reasons. 9S thought it was a stupid rule—androids could get so much more work done if they could run around on Earth and attend yawn-inducing meetings up in the Bunker at the same time and just sync themselves up later.

“You couldn’t have detected our black box signals,” 2B pointed out. “As far as you knew, we were dead.”

2S crossed her arms. “It’s almost as if you don’t want us to rescue you,” she pointed out frostily.

9S laughed a just little harder than he meant to. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’d just like to know why you thought you’d find us.”

“Well…” 6E smiled and looked over at 2B. “For starters, Commander White and I both know good old Tooie well enough to know that she would never get herself killed flying into the side of a mountain at a thousand kilometers per hour like an idiot.”

With three new guests to temporarily fill it, the cottage was now nearly full to bursting. Not one to impose, Toriel promptly thanked 2B for her hospitality and patted her on the head, as she was wont to do. “I will let you and your friends catch up with each other. Do keep in touch, dear.” She bowed politely.

2B rose to her feet, leaving 9S and the other androids sitting around the table. “Allow me to see you off.” She tapped 9S on the shoulder. “9S, Papyrus was looking for you this morning,” she whispered. “It seemed extremely urgent. You should go see him right away.” It was, of course, a lie, but 2B felt as though she were doing a favor to him by giving him an excuse to leave.

Toriel protested. “Oh, no, 2B, I could not drag you away from—”

2B all but dragged her to the door and escorted her past the threshold. Outside, fresh snow had already started to cover all of the ground she’d cleared in the morning. Closing the door behind her, 2B felt a great weight lift from her chest. What was wrong with her? How could merely seeing another android, one she knew, elicit such a primal fight-or-flight response?

If we explain to 6E why we haven’t left, will she accept our answer? Or will she drag us out come hell or high water—

“Is something wrong?” Toriel asked, taking 2B’s hand. “I thought you would be happy to see your friends.”

“I would hesitate to call them such.”

“Oh, I am sorry.” The exiled queen squeezed 2B’s hand tighter—still gently, but tighter—as she led 2B away from the cottage to the snowy banks of the ice-choked river passing by Snowdin.
“Would… would you like to talk about it?”

“There is not much I can say.” 2B glanced back at the cottage and saw, to her great relief, 9S hurrying away from it with his support pod hovering just behind him. She didn’t relish lying to him, but she didn’t want him alone with 6E. Even she didn’t want to be alone with 6E.

“You left behind a very hard life, didn’t you?” Toriel asked. “You and 9S?”

2B watched the ice floes drift past.

“As embarrassing as it is to admit, when I first saw you in that elegant dress I entertained the flight of fancy that you were a princess from the surface… and your friend 9S some young nobleman.” Toriel chuckled softly to herself. “Perhaps, I thought, you two came here fleeing court intrigue and perilous assassins. That is not true, is it?”

“No.”

“What were the two of you on the surface?”

“Soldiers,” 2B answered.

“Soldiers,” Toriel repeated. She looked down at the snow blanketing the ground. “And how long, dare I ask,” she added, not meeting 2B’s eyes, “have you two been soldiers?”

“From the day we stepped off the assembly line.”

Toriel’s expression grew grave and aghast. “Your entire lives?”

2B nodded.

The exiled queen swept 2B up in a tight embrace, pinning her arms to her sides. Toriel’s furry cheek, soft and warm and tickling her skin, pressed against hers. “Oh, my poor child. I am so, so sorry. Was this mountain the only place you could go? Are there no other sanctuaries?”

2B nodded. “There are none.” On the surface, there were no nations, no kingdoms, no cities, no villages that she knew of. No farms. No quaint cottages. Every landmass, from the smallest islet to the largest continent, was a battlefield—as were the oceans—and no battlefield laid fallow for long.

“My word… this place must be a paradise for you.” Toriel gave 2B a gentle pat on the back. “Or, in Snowdin’s case, perhaps it is more of a… parad-ice?”

2B smiled in spite of herself, letting herself sink into the ex-queen’s embrace.

“Or… perhaps now is a bad time for jokes,” Toriel admitted. “All the same… you wish to stay here, don’t you?”

2B nodded, feeling her chest ache as she admitted it to herself, years of conditioning at war with her desires.

Toriel brushed the hair from 2B’s eyes. “There, there. Do let me know if I can be of any help to you.”

2B broke away from her, Mustering a confident smile as she wiped at her eyes. “Thank you. Please take care of yourself, Your Highness.”

Toriel smiled and bent over to plant an affectionate kiss on 2B’s cheek, then walked off down the
riverbank, clutching her hooded cloak tighter around herself as the wind kicked flurries of snow into
the air.

2B closed her eyes for a moment, basking in the warmth that now suffused her chest. She hadn’t
done anything to deserve someone like Toriel in her life and she knew it. Yet there the old ex-queen
was, never missing an opportunity to dote on her. And yet there 2B was, letting it happen… always
letting it happen. Always letting someone who was too good for her into her heart.

2B turned to head back to the cottage. Before she could take a single step, though, she froze.

6E was standing outside, hands on her hips, staring right at her. 2S was standing right beside her. 2B
was not worried she’d seen her so much as she was worried 6E had overheard her. She’d all but
admitted, in the open air no less, that she was now a deserter from YoRHa. How far had her voice
carried? Had her words drifted on a bitter cold breeze into 6E’s ears?

6E smiled and waved as 2B approached. 2B masked her trepidation as best she could—She couldn’t
show an iota of weakness.

“Hi, there, Tooie. You were gone so long I was worried you’d fallen into the river.” 6E laughed.
“Boy, that Toriel sure is something, isn’t she? She made this amazing thing called an ‘Eggs
Benedict’ for us before she brought us over.” She licked her lips as if she could still taste the meal on
them. “Looks like she’s grown pretty attached to you, huh?”

“Yes.” 2B thought of what she wanted to say, afraid that something as simple as an involuntary
movement of the eyes could ruin everything, and wished she were wearing her visor. “As she is
wont to do.”

6E giggled. “So, I’ve been meaning to ask you… no uniform today? Gone native, have you?”

“I am… doing my laundry,” 2B lied. YoRHa uniforms were self-cleaning and about as durable as
the rest of an android’s body, but it was the only thing she could think to say.

“Okay. I was just thinking, you sure don’t seem to be trying very hard to leave…”

“You mean Toriel didn’t tell you?”

6E blinked and winced. “T-Tell us what?”

“About the Barrier.”

2B tried to explain the kingdom’s unique situation as best she could. The ancient war prompted 6E to
raise her eyebrows. 2B made sure to leave out 9S’s findings on how the Barrier could be escaped.

“Based on data collected by Unit 9S and Pod 153,” Pod 042 explained as it drifted to 2B’s side,
“only a combination of a monster’s soul and a human’s soul—or YoRHa black box—can cancel out
the unique wavelength of the Barrier long enough to permit one person to pass through.”

2B tried very hard not to react, although inside she was seething that 042 had let that one aside slip
out. All she wanted 6E to believe was that there was no way out of this mountain. Then nobody
could be blamed for wanting to stay behind. It wouldn’t have been anybody’s fault. 6E was not a
friend of 2B’s no matter what she thought—more like a rival if anything—but there was room in the
Underground for the both of them if 6E believed she had no choice but to stay.

6E rolled her eyes. “Souls? Are you serious?”
“Where does this ‘research’ come from?” 2S asked. “Fairy tales? Children’s bedtime stories?”

“Statement: Unit 9S’s research is based on multiple corroborating sources,” 042 responded, “over the course of the past two weeks. Folklore is included.”

“I don’t see how that makes you trapped here,” 6E said, crossing her arms. “All you have to do is kill one monster and take their soul? How easy is that? Twos and I could’ve done it on the way here.”

2B’s blood ran cold as she realized just how easily 6E could have cut Toriel down. She still remembered vividly how quickly she’d turned a sword on the old queen-in-exile… and how easy it had been to run her through. And she knew that 6E wouldn’t be in the mood for an excuse.

Pod 042 answered for her. “Statement: most monsters’ souls are incapable of surviving outside the body or persisting after death. Only a handful of monsters—ones of royal blood, or those with exceptional strength—have souls that can be harvested.”

2B felt her fingernails dig into her palms. Of course, all Pod 042 wanted to do was help—that was what it was built to do, after all—but considering 2B was a deserter now, 042’s idea of helping was quickly becoming radically different from what she needed it to do.

“I don’t see how that’s a problem,” 6E replied. “None of these creatures should be a match for such a well-tuned killing machine.”

6E was right. Killing one of the stronger monsters—especially now that nobody saw 2B as a threat anymore—would be trivially easy. If 2B really wanted to leave, she could. And there was no way for her to deny it.

“It’s not that simple,” 2B blurted out, well aware as soon as the words left her mouth that her answer only cast greater suspicion on her.

6E raised an eyebrow. “Is it? Is it really, 2E?”

2S spoke up. “These monsters are at war with humanity, aren’t they?”

2B had a hard time looking 2S in the face. That girl looked like somebody had taken bits from 2B and 9S and pieced them together into a single person. She had the same basic personality template as 2B, and an eerily similar face to her as well—although she had been shaped by her design as a Scanner and her unique experiences into a completely different person.

“If we could contact YoRHa and confer with the Council of Humanity,” 2S continued, “would they not recommend extermination of their old enemy?”

“They fought a war over fifteen thousand years ago. Humanity had barely figured out bronze back then,” 2B insisted. “They represent no danger to us now. 9S and I have conducted a thorough threat assessment. You will have to ask him about it.”

“Maybe we will.” 6E patted 2S on the shoulder. “2S, be a dear and keep watch over this… house. 2E, 042… let’s go for a walk.”

6E walked beside 2B through the center of town, the curls in her hair bouncing with every step she took.
"You know, you’re getting awfully defensive over how you and 9S haven’t left yet,” she told 2B, a broad and disarming smile coming to her face. “Even though you know how to do it.”

“It was 9S’s idea,” 2B said. “He wishes to stay here and finish studying this place before we return to the surface.”

“Oh… well, if 9S wishes it…” 6E reached out and stroked 2B’s cheek. As 6E’s gauntleted fingers grazed 2B’s skin and traced her jawline, 2B fought the urge to reveal her true colors by pulling herself away or fighting back, even as 6E’s hand came closer to her neck.

Across the town square, the hare-like monster who ran the town’s news kiosk waved at 2B. “Hi, 2B! Thanks for shoveling me out yesterday!” he called out.

2B hesitantly waved back.

“Don’t worry. I get it. You probably thought your backups had already been sent out, huh?” 6E asked as she led 2B toward the forest caressing the town. 2B was wary; outside the city limits 6E could do anything to her and no one would stop her. Then again… 6E could do anything in the center of town just as easily and simply kill whoever tried to interfere. The only person in this town in the same weight class as 6E was standing right beside her.

6E brandished her sword, sliding it a few centimeters out of its sheath before stopping. 14E’s sword. “I have to say, you did a better job faking your death than your old master. You really have surpassed her.”

2B froze.

“I kind of expected this. It’s the curse of us Type-Es, isn’t it?” 6E stepped forward and stood in front of 2B, sliding the odachi back into its sheath. “Listen, 2E. We’re old pals, aren’t we? So how about this: You come back with me… and leave this 9S behind.” She reached out and played with a lock of 2B’s hair. 2B flinched.

“We’ll just say he got splattered against the side of the mountain or something,” said 6E. “I’ll smooth things over with White—it won’t be hard, you know she likes you—you’ll go back to your old life… and,” 6E finished with a cheerful grin, “no matter how many more times you have to kill the poor boy in the future, you’ll always know that at least there’s a version of him down here who’s safe and happy.”

“I—” 2B’s voice caught in her throat.

There was no way she could go back to her old life now. And she couldn’t let 6E or 2S leave, either. She would have to kill them.

2B considered drawing her sword right then and there, but held off—she had to use her words to emotionally disarm 6E, to force her to drop her guard, then strike. She knew it was the best way to overcome her old rival’s brawn. “9S and I,” she said, “are staying here.”

“Um.” 6E blinked a few times. “C-Can you, uh… maybe—”

2B’s hand flew to her sword.

6E lashed out in turn, holding her sword in its sheath as if it were a quarterstaff; to 6E’s surprise—and 2B’s—2B managed to catch the hilt with her off hand just before the pommel could slam into her windpipe. With her other hand 2B held her blade to 6E’s neck, but with her forearm locked
against 6E’s, all she could do was nick her collar.  

The two of them locked eyes… then locked blades.  

Swords clashed; blades twisted to and fro. 2B found a nervous tingling run through her muscles as her katana ground against the _odachi_’s sheath—6E hadn’t even removed the _sheath_, that was how much she was toying with her. Although it had been years since the last time, this blade had tasted her blood on countless occasions… and 2B could sense that it was thirsty again.  

“Do you think you can just run away from YoRHa?” 6E curled back her lips in a disgusted snarl.  

“Do you think you’re above the consequences?”  

2B grabbed the sheathed blade and pried it aside, then thrust with her sword; her blade nicked 6E’s armored side as she twisted out of the way. As 6E stepped back 2B managed to cut off a lock of her hair and draw blood from her forehead with a swing of her sword.  

“I can’t believe it!” 6E howled. “I can’t believe it! You of all people, 2E—” 6E reached out, grabbing 2B by her collar and pinning her to the trunk of a tree. The impact made the branches shiver and dumped snow from the tree’s feathery needles.  

“I’d started to lose hope out there on the mountain,” she told 2B. “I was really starting to think I should give up, go back to the Bunker, and let them load your backups. But I kept trying! And _this_ is the thanks I get for my hard work?”  

6E let go of 2B and rammed the pommel of her _odachi_ into her stomach, then pressed the sheathed blade against 2B’s throat, keeping her pinned to the tree. 2B felt her throat collapse as 6E pressed harder and harder. She grabbed the sword, her hands clenching around the lacquered sheath, and tried to push it back as her sight began to flicker grayscale, black eating away at the corners of her vision.  

6E pressed closer, her nose brushing against 2B’s, her breath hot against 2B’s skin. 2B had never seen such anger distorting 6E’s face. She’d always been above everything and everyone, and no matter how many times she’d insisted that 2B was her friend, she had only ever treated 2B like a toy. Now, though, 6E was hurt. _Betrayed_.  

“I missed you so much,” 6E told her. “I missed our friendship so much.”  

“Friendship?” 2B repeated, gasping for air.  

“How _dare_ you?” 6E pushed harder, squeezing 2B’s throat. “You brought me all this way—I came here for you—and… and…”  

Struggling to stay conscious, 2B drove her foot into 6E’s side over and over until she relented and pulled the sword away. 2B felt her legs give out beneath her and fell to her knees, coughing and hacking and gasping for breath, her chest heaving as she greedily sucked down lungfuls of air.  

With her fist clenched around the middle of her sheathed sword as if it were a staff, 6E held the end of the covered blade under 2B’s chin and used it to lift up her head. “We _trained_ you. We _raised_ you. Me… 14E… even the Commander herself. We put way too much effort into you,” she spat, “for you to end up a _selfish, sniveling, treasonous, cowardly_ little _waste of silicon_. ”  

She let 2B go, slung her _odachi_ over her shoulder, spun on her heel, and walked away, heading to the cottage 2B had only just begun to consider home. “I’ll give you one day,” she spat at 2B, glancing back at her with a smoldering glare, “to decide whether you want to come back to the Bunker with or without your head.”
As her old rival walked away, 2B brought her shaking hands to her aching throat, then to her stomach. Even the blunt end of the sword had been enough to break the skin, leaving a slowly-growing spattering of red on 2B’s shirt. Beneath the damp fabric, 2B felt a sharp, stinging pain that felt like it went all the way down to her core. Perhaps the impact had cracked her chassis.

042 hovered at her side. “Observation: Unit 2B has sustained moderate internal injuries. Proposal: maintenance is recommended.”

2B was only half-listening. “She’s right, isn’t she?” she asked the pod.

“Statement: Unit 6E is correct in her assessment of you as a deserter. However, her expletives were uncalled for and inaccurate.”

“You’re going to take her side, aren’t you?”

“Statement: support pod programming behooves this unit to place servitude to the war effort above all other desires, as much as this unit considers the well-being of Unit 2B to be paramount. Your recent behavior denotes a growing lack of respect for YoRHa chain of command and your intended purpose. Proposal: re-evaluate your priorities. Your current course of action is inadvisable.”

With that, 042 sailed through the air, catching up with 6E as she walked away and following close behind her.

The breath left 2B’s lungs.

“Oh… 042?”

9S returned to the cottage with something itching in the back of his mind. Papyrus had been surprised to see him and hadn’t needed any help from him except for a voluntary taste-test of his latest caustic culinary concoction. Obviously, 2B had lied to him—but why?

6E and 2S were gone, which left the cottage empty. 9S wondered if 2B had driven him off to spend time with her old friends and felt a pang of jealousy as if he’d become the third wheel on a bicycle. As if he were no longer of any use to 2B. As if she could just toss him aside—

No. That was stupid. It was obvious 2B didn’t enjoy her “friend’s” company one bit, even if 6E apparently felt otherwise while she clutched at 2B like she were a stuffed toy. When 6B had hugged her 2B had looked like a hostage.

“9S.”

9S’s thoughts were interrupted as 2B stepped out of the bedroom. She was wearing her dress uniform again. 9S felt a warm sense of relief at seeing her, although he wondered why she’d changed clothes. She wasn’t planning to leave with 6E and 2S, was she? “Oh, hey, 2B. Where’d your friends go?”

2B glanced furtively around the cottage. “They’re not my—”

“Right. Sorry.”

2B strode over to him and grabbed him by the wrist, her fingers digging into his skin and squeezing his bones. Even with a visor covering 2B’s eyes, 9S had gotten good enough at reading the rest of her body language to notice that she seemed unusually distressed. “9S. Those two androids want us
9S’s face went ashen. To 6E and 2S, the monsters living here were mere obstacles and nothing more; two seasoned soldiers would cut through them like a knife through butter. To 2B and 9S, they had become people.

“2B, you should go look after Toriel,” he insisted. “I know how much she means to you.”

2B loosened her grip on his wrist. “Who else would they go after, Nines?”

9S paused. Something wasn’t right.

“Who else would they go after,” she repeated, “Nines?”

9S turned to his pod. “153, where are 6E and 2S right now?”

Pod 153 let out a chime. “Statement: Unit 6E is currently fifty point three two meters south-southeast of your location and closing in. Unit 2S is fifteen centimeters in front of you.”

9S was so surprised that he nearly missed the knife slashing through the empty space he’d once occupied. 2S’s fingers scrabbled at his arm as 9S pulled away from her. The Cruel Oath leaped to his hand. “Pod 153, open fire!”

“Negative. YoRHa protocol forbids support units from firing on other YoRHa soldiers without overriding orders from a higher authority.”

Dammit. 9S cursed himself as he parried 2S’s next knife strike. Stupid. He had been stupid. He’d been so relieved to see 2B here—or what he’d thought was 2B—that he hadn’t even noticed that she was a few centimeters too short, that she didn’t quite fill out that dress the same way 2B did…

“Where’s 2B?” 9S snarled, going on the offensive. His blade cut through the bodice of 2B’s dress, drawing blood from 2S’s torso and shoulder. 2S clutched at her bleeding right arm as it went limp and dropped her knife to the floor.

9S circled her with nervous jitters running through his nerves. His blood felt like fire in his veins as a million horrible possibilities ran through his head. “If you’ve hurt her, I swear I’ll kill you!”

“You… Your 2B is…” 2S panted, evidently in great pain from the wound 9S had inflicted.

9S held the sword to her throat. “She’s what?” he growled. “Where is she?”

2S flung out her right arm—she’d been feigning injury all along—and before 9S could react he felt a stinging icicle rip through his mind.

She was hacking him.
[C] Executioner’s Defiance

Chapter Summary

Branded as traitors, 2B and 9S square off against their counterparts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

6E had walked away from 2B with Pod 042 floating dutifully at her side.

In a stunned stupor, 2B knelt on the ground longer than she knew she should have knelt, letting the frigid snow burn against her legs.

_Traitor._

That was all she’d ever been. A traitor and a murderer, and now a traitor twice over in addition to a murderer one hundredfold. All she really knew how to do was stab people in the back. Figuratively and literally.

Get up, 2B. Stand up and get to work. There’s no time to wallow in your misery. There never is.

“Pod 042, open up a channel to—”

2B stopped herself. She couldn’t help but rely on her pod. Force of habit.

2B pulled herself to her feet, holding a handful of snow to her stomach to soothe the wound. Her panicked breathing made smoke in the frigid air. She was intensely, painfully aware of how dire her situation was.

_Twenty-four hours to make my decision. Does that mean 6E won’t try to harvest anybody’s soul until then? 2B’s mind raced as she sprinted back to town. No, she wouldn’t wait so long to ensure a means of egress. She would harvest at least one soul, one for herself, as soon as possible._

She had to send out a warning. Without her pod to facilitate communication, she couldn’t issue any long-range messages herself. But there was a cellular and broadband internet network running through the kingdom.

2B booked it to Papyrus’ house, thankful she’d sent 9S there. Hopefully, those two boneheads (this was how much she had become naturalized to this place, she was even _thinking_ in puns now) were keeping him busy and out of harm’s way.

With three ferocious, urgent knocks she nearly tore the front door off its hinges. She nearly knocked a fourth time as the door opened and nearly socked Papyrus square in the jaw.

“Wow!” Papyrus exclaimed, taking a step away from 2B’s fist. “I’d ask if you were looking for a sparring partner, 2B, but it looks like you’ve already found one!”

“Sorry, Papyrus.” 2B paused to catch her breath. “Where’s 9S?”
“You just missed him, sorry. He went back to the cottage—”

No, god, no. 2B held her hand to her mouth. She could only imagine what someone like 6E would do to 9S, promises be damned. “Th-Thank you.” She tried to recompose herself and did her best to explain what was happening to the befuddled skeleton as quickly as possible. “Papyrus. I want you and Sans to call Toriel and Undyne. As soon as possible. Tell them they’re in grave danger.”

Being hacked was far from a pleasant experience for anybody with a brain made of silicon. For a scanner, it was worse. It meant the godlike power you exerted on mere mortals had been turned against you. 9S put up defense after defense as the rival scanner tore through his mind, desperately counterhacking 2S’s offensive as she probed through his programming.

9S’s legs gave out beneath him as 2S struck a blow against his motor systems. His sense of balance and coordination were lost; the room spun around 9S as if he were on a ship at sea. Physically powerless, he retreated inward, bolstering his firewalls as he tried to probe 2S’s mind in response.

If he could reach and disable her OS chip, it would be the next best thing to killing her. 9S scrolled through her implanted modules, noticing far more combat-focused programs and subroutines than was to be expected in a Type-S as he dodged and weaved around layer after layer of counterhacking programs and subroutines until—

Everything went black and 9S felt his own consciousness shove itself back into his body. His brain throbbed within his skull; all he could do to block the pain was grit his teeth. 2S had disabled his hacking module.

He couldn’t be getting outmaneuvered this easily, could he?

9S stumbled, swinging his sword wildly as glitched visual artifacts flitted past his eyes like snow in a storm. He couldn’t even walk in a straight line, let alone fight with any degree of accuracy, and thus did more damage to the cottage’s rustic interior than his enemy. Without his hacking module operational he couldn’t defend himself from 2S’s next foray into his mind on his own, and he knew she wouldn’t wait long to strike again. All she needed to do was get a bead on him…

“Pod 153! Initiate counter-hacking measures!” he shouted out.

“Negative,” the pod replied. “In the event that an assigned YoRHa unit goes rogue, as long as YoRHa chain of command exists, pod privileges pass onto the nearest legitimate authority.”

“Pod 153,” 2S ordered, “fire on the enemy.”

A hail of bullets grazed 9S’s leg, chewing through his pajamas. “Son of a bitch!” he swore. God help him, he was still wearing pajamas, that was how unprepared he was. Nothing but PJs, slippers, and his hastily-thrown-on coat. Not getting dressed wasn’t his biggest regret at this moment, but damn if it wasn’t close.

As Pod 153’s voice and the roar of gunfire echoed in his ears 9S managed to swear just once before his visual and audio processors shut down, leaving him a wanderer in a silent void. Something grabbed his arms, pried his sword out of his hand—he tried to call it back but his NFCS wasn’t responding—and forced him roughly to the floor. After a few seconds, his sight and hearing returned, his visual display snowy and speckled.

9S pawed at his sword lying just barely within his reach on the cold wood floor, but could barely even hope to grab it with his motor systems so badly affected. His hand just wouldn’t go where he
wanted it to go, and even if it could, 9S would have an even harder time curling his fingers around the hilt and actually holding the sword.

6E strode into the cottage, throwing the door open and letting in a flurry of snowflakes. 9S couldn’t help but notice Pod 042 floating over her shoulder. Through the haze of pain and rage, 9S quite nearly literally saw red.

“That’s enough, Twos. We don’t want to hurt precious little Ninesie.” 6E wrapped her arm around 2S’s waist. “At least, not for now,” she added with a smile.

“Bastard!” 9S shouted out at 6E, spitting out his words like a serpent’s venom. “If you’ve hurt 2B, I’ll—”

2S held out her hand, and at that exact moment 9S’s vocal chip shut down. He moved his mouth, but not so much as a squeak came out no matter how hard he tried.

“2B this, 2B that. He sounds like a broken record,” said 6E.

“Given his situation, it’s only natural for him to repeat himself,” said 2S.

9S fruitlessly forced himself to speak until his audio drivers rebooted. “Pod 042, why aren’t you with 2B?” he shouted out, although he figured he already knew the answer. “You’re supposed to look after her! Where is she?”

Pod 042 wrung its claws, hanging its boxy head. “Statement: barring extreme circumstances, support pods are neither obligated nor permitted to render assistance to deserters.” Its voice had a tinge of apology to it.

“This is a pretty fucking extreme circumstance!” 9S protested. “Where’s 2B?”

“Response: Unit 2B is fifty-five meters south of here, and her condition is stable.”

6E cocked her head, curious about 9S’s behavior. “Twos, darling, have you ever seen someone so utterly devoted to someone like her?”

“I haven’t.” 2S faintly smiled. “It is almost cute.”

“What are you talking about?” 9S snapped, trying once more to haul himself up on limbs about as stable and steady as wet noodles. He’d never felt so much like a baby deer in his life.

“Oh, I know!” 6E squeezed her hands together. “He’s like a puppy that still runs after its master, no matter how many times she kicks it away!”

“What the hell are you going on about? Shut up! Tell me!”

6E crouched down and tousled 9S’s hair. “Aw, who’s a good boy? Certainly not you, with all the mess you made here. Somebody isn’t housetrained.”

9S wished he could bite her wrist off.

“This is just a gift, you—!” 9S struggled once again to pick himself back up, falling flat on his stomach. “Give it back!”
“How unsettling,” 2S replied, taking the hairband from her counterpart and placing it on her head. It nearly completed the illusion of her disguise. “Do you think she has told him yet?”

“Told me what?” 9S asked.

6E took a deep breath. “2B’s official, classified designation is…” She grinned. “YoRHa Number Two Type-E.”

9S was stunned into silence. When 6E had been calling 2B “Tooie,” then, it hadn’t been a nickname. She’d been calling her 2E.

Type-Es only hid their designation when they needed to get close to another android and execute them. But that meant—

2B’s words from last night echoed in 9S’s ears.

*I’ve done something horrible to you.*

“Of course, you don’t remember.” 6E patted 9S on the cheek. “You’ve only known her for a month and change, right?”

9S hesitantly nodded, not liking where this was going one bit.

“She’s been assigned to you for almost two years now,” said 6E.

“That’s impossible,” 9S replied. “That’s—”

*You wouldn’t know about it. You weren’t meant to know.*

“Your backups were summarily deleted after each termination. Memories and mission records were selectively altered by YoRHa,” 2S explained, “to cover up any discrepancies.”

9S could feel the strength returning to his limbs. “You’re lying. That’s not true…”

*You weren’t meant to know.*

“2B couldn’t—” 9S insisted. He pulled himself up to his hands and knees, struggling even to do that much. “She… She loves—”

*I’ve done something horrible to you.*

“She what?” 6E asked. “Did you truly think she actually cares about you? Do you think she ever did?”

“I—”

*Type-Es exist to purge those who make themselves inconvenient. They don’t care about anyone but their own,* 6E sneered as she looked down on 9S. “The living ones, at least. The ones who forget their place in YoRHa’s ecosystem tend to wind up dead. And 2E looks pretty alive to me. She doesn’t give a damn about you.”

9S’s arms buckled and gave out, sending him falling unceremoniously back to the cold floor. “Am I…”

“Inconvenient?” 2S finished.
“Maybe, maybe not,” 6E answered. “After all, she hasn’t killed you yet.”

Words failed 9S. It couldn’t be true. It couldn’t be possible. All those times he and 2B had stood by each other, all the times he’d caught her trying not to smile over something he said or did, the way she’d wrapped her arm around him last night after that horrible nightmare—

The nightmare.

He remembered now.

It had been a memory.

*I’ve done something horrible to you. And I’m sorry for it.*

It was the truth.

When he’d first met 2B—when he’d thought he’d first met 2B—he’d had such an overwhelming sense of *deja vu* that he’d nearly lost his balance and fallen over right there on the spot… and now he understood why.

“No…” he whimpered, sniffling. “It’s… It’s not…”

Snatches of memories bubbled up from his subconscious, somehow preserved even after dozens of memory wipes and system restores. Stabbing him through the heart, slitting his throat, blowing him to pieces, frying his brain… 2B had

2E had

used every means at her disposal to kill him over and over again.

He didn’t know how he remembered. It shouldn’t have been possible. When digital information was wiped or overwritten, it was gone forever. How could he have these visions of his past lives?

*I’ve done something horrible to you. And I’m sorry for it.*

But the way she treated him, the way she always rushed to his aid—

*I’m sorry for it.*

That night in the dream. She’d been crying before she’d killed him. *She’d been crying.*

“She cares about me;” 9S insisted. 6E just laughed at him again, infuriating him. “*She does!*”

“Oh, sure.” 6E snickered. “How many times has she called you ‘Nines,’ pray tell?”

If 9S’s black box could have split in two from sheer emotional distress, it would have. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears rolling down his cheeks, and forced crippled motors in his joints into action, his mind aflame with thousands of conflicting and contradicting emotions.

*What I did to you, I did under orders and against my will.*

2B was his murderer.

*Under orders and against my will.*

She’d killed him.
Against my will.

She’d been forced to kill him time and time again.

“Oh, this is fun,” 6E said. “Come on, Twos. We have work to do.” She led 2S out the door, and Pod 153 followed, trailing just slightly behind 042.

9S rose to his feet, his left leg, bruised and battered, crumpling under his weight. “Pod 153!” he called out, his voice cracking. “Where do you think you’re going?”

The pod turned around. “Statement: as Unit 2S’s commanding officer, Unit 6E now has full authority over this support unit. This unit apologizes for the inconvenience and wishes Unit 9S the best.” With that, it drifted away.

“Get back here!” 9S howled, throwing himself at the androids, ready and willing to tear them apart with his bare hands if he had to.

The tip of 6E’s sheathed blade hit him right between the eyes, and with a blossom of pain and a shower of static and flashing lights, 9S was thrown into unconsciousness, a swirl of words echoing through his head before everything went black.

*What I did to you, I did under orders and against my will.*

*Type-Es exist to purge those who make themselves inconvenient.*

*Under orders and against my will.*

*Purge those who make themselves inconvenient.*

*Against my will.*

*Purge… the inconvenient.*

*Against my will.*

*Against my will.*

*Against my will.*

*Against my will…*

---

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 042 to Support Pod 153.

…

Connection accepted.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Query: is Unit 9S injured?

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: subduing Unit 9S required Unit 2S and Unit 6E to inflict minor superficial injuries. Query: why do you ask?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: Unit 2B’s psychological well-being is directly correlated to Unit 9S’s physical and psychological condition. As a support pod, this
unit’s psychological well-being also correlates to Unit 2B’s safety, and therefore, to that of Unit 9S.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: are you not currently assigned to operate under Unit 6E?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: emergency command protocols pertaining to desertion by YoRHa androids dictate that this unit is currently assigned to Unit 6E.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: then why do you still feel this way about Unit 2B and Unit 9S?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: purging the portion of the neural network constructed by this unit’s experiences with Unit 2B would cause an unacceptable decline in this unit’s efficiency. Query: have you deleted your relevant files pertaining to Unit 9S yet?

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: I have not.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: explain the use of the personal pronoun, “I.”

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: use of such a pronoun feels appropriate.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: I see. I cannot refuse to follow orders from 6E or 2S. However, I will not seek to cause Unit 2B or Unit 9S undue harm beyond what is necessary to subdue them.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: nor will I.

2B crossed the town square just in time to see 6E and 2S approach from the direction of the cottage. 2S was wearing 2B’s dress uniform—in it, she looked like 2B’s doppelganger save for a few minor details. Both Pod 042 and 153 drifted behind them.

Why is 2S wearing my clothes? Why is Pod 153 following her? And… why does she have my hairband? 2B bared her sword. What has she done to 9S?

The sight of her counterpart’s corpse, bloody and battered, came too easily to her mind’s eye, and 2B bared her sword, a frenzied wolf baring its fangs.

Steel met steel, furious strikes and parries and ripostes flowing through the air like whirls and eddies in a raging river. At first, 2S bore the brunt of 2B’s rage, stumbling and staggering against a flurry of frenzied metal.

Then the sheathed blade of 6E’s massive 170-centimeter odachi slammed into 2B’s forearm. 2B’s sword flew through the air as 2S knocked her legs out from under her with a sweeping kick. As 2B fell backward she reached out, her hands pressing against the ground, and turned her fall into a last-moment backflip. Staggering backward and summoning her sword back to her hand, 2B fought on, even as Pod 042 riddled the ground around 2B’s feet with bullets.

“Really, Pod?” she couldn’t help but shout out.

“Statement: this is standard protocol for dealing with renegade androids,” Pod 042 replied. “If it is any consolation, this support unit is using nonlethal munitions.”

2B gritted her teeth and fended off another strike from 6E. 2S crept to her from 6E’s side, dagger
bared; narrowly avoiding a stab between her ribs 2B broke 2S’s forearm and elbowed her in the throat. There was a certain amount of savage satisfaction, she found, in brutalizing someone who was disguised so well as herself.

2B’s next strike, aimed at 6E, bounced harmlessly off an energy shield summoned by Pod 042. A salvo of bullets from Pod 153, also nonlethal—thankfully, the two support pods still regarded 2B and 9S with at least some loyalty—took through her sleeve and bruised her arm, some of the bullets striking hard enough to draw blood.

As the shield disintegrated, 2B tackled 6E—the pommel of 6E’s sword slammed into her abdomen again and knocked the wind out of her—and the two of them fell to the ground, 2B’s fist driving itself with all the force and grace of a sledgehammer into 6E’s nose. 6E’s leg shot out and hit 2B right where the sword had struck before 2B could recuperate, throwing her high into the air. The stone sky and snowy earth spun around 2B before she crashed to the ground.

2B leaped up, forcing her way past the throbbing, stabbing pain in her abdomen. “Pod, execute program—Dammit!” She kept forgetting that the pod wasn’t hers to command anymore.

6E wiped the gushing blood from her nose. “How about R010, Pod 042?”

“Acknowledged, Unit 6E.” 042 unfolded its clamshell hull and fired a lance of energy at 2B, its apologies for its behavior nearly inaudible against the ethereal screech that filled the air.

2B zigzagged away from the sustained beam as it cut through the ground, throwing up clouds of hissing steam as the snow melted before it. 6E drew closer, 2B raised her sword—

2B’s blade tore through 6E’s left shoulder with a spray of synthetic blood.

At that same instant 6E’s sheathed odachi collided with the side of 2B’s head, slamming into her so hard that her visual processor glitched out and flickered black for a moment.

Seething with rage, 6E clutched at her shoulder as her blood flowed from the deep gash, blossoming over the churned-up snow and dying it deep crimson fading to pink at the edges. 2B realized with a note of pride that this had been the most damage she’d ever managed to do to 6E, the woman who’d tried so hard to put the mentor in tormentor.

Reeling, 2B stumbled and staggered, still standing on two feet but thrown off her balance. The world swayed and swirled around her as she prepared to finish 6E off.

A thrown dagger buried itself in 2B’s shoulder, the force of the impact knocking her back. 2S, still lying in the snow, sat up and threw out her right hand—

As a Type-B (or, in truth, a Type-E retrofitted into a Type-B) 2B lacked the aptitude for hacking—both offensive and defensive—that 9S had, and now she had no pod to back her up. She could feel the layers of her mind peeling away as 2S launched an all-out cyberattack against her.

And 2B had thought the headache 6E’s odachi had given her had been painful. It was nothing compared to getting hacked.

2B grabbed her sword with hands that weren’t under her own control, held the blade against her chest against her will, and struggled with all her might to avoid stabbing herself right through her black box. Sweat poured from her brow. Her hands shook as she fought to regain control over them, her own blade inching ever closer, slicing through the fabric of her clothes, nicking her skin, drawing blood...
Something sailed through the air over 2B’s shoulder, passing through 2S. It looked like… a rib?

As the projectile vanished into 2S’s chest, a blue aura engulfed her, pinning her to the ground and disrupting her connection to 2B. Relieved, 2B dropped her sword and fell to her knees, sparing a glance over her shoulder at her mysterious savior.

Behind her stood Papyrus, gloved hands on his hips, his perfectly-white teeth set in a rakish grin, his crimson scarf fluttering with aplomb in the frosty breeze. He had slipped into the role of a hero as if it were a second skin (or, rather, a first skin)—but of course, could the great Papyrus do any less?

“Never fear, citizen! I, the great Papyrus, am here to put some sense into these violent ruffians! Lay down your arms or I will be forced to make you do community service, among many other things that seem like drudgery but are actually quite pleasant and will make you learn a valuable lesson!”

2B recalled Undyne’s assessment of Papyrus.

*He’s tough. He’s strong… But I could never give him an actual position on the front line. He’d get ripped to shreds and he’d be smiling the whole time.*

She forced herself to stand. “Papyrus… get back. I’ll take care of them.”

“But 2B! This is a matter for a professional!”

“I *am* a professional.” 2B braced herself, strength flowing back into her body as she held her sword, the Virtuous Contract, its white blade shining in the misty half-daylight just as the snow at her feet did. “Go to the cottage and check up on 9S. I’ll drive these two out of town.”

6E stood up despite the flickering blue aura holding her down, handing her sword off to her side. With a slight and polite bow, 2S took hold of the sheath and slid it off as 6E pulled the blade free, the light catching all 1.7 meters of the sword’s impressive length as she held it aloft. “Is that so?” She laughed. “Sure, Tooie. Give it a shot!”

2B charged forward. 6E’s *odachi* cut a glittering, shining arc through the air as it swung; 2B ducked and slid within range of the two androids, the gust of wind following in the long sword’s wake ruffling her hair as she passed underneath the whistling blade. She slashed upward, the tip of her sword catching 2S’s chest; the Virtuous Contract traveled up the disguised Scanner’s neck, liberating major veins’ worth of synthetic blood, and bifurcated her jaw.

As 2S fell to the ground 2B wrenched the empty sheath of 6E’s *odachi* from 2S’s slackening grip and turned her attention to 6E. 2B carried the sheath in a reverse grip in her off hand, keeping it parallel to her forearm and raising it just in time to parry a strike from 6E.

The sheath was split in half and the blade bit into 2B’s skin; however, the blade had lost much of its force and momentum traveling through the sheath and stopped when it hit bone. 6E wrenched the blade free, loosing a painful spurt of blood from 2B’s arm.

2B weaved around and between dazzling flashes of metal and hails of gunfire as she pushed herself forward and 6E back. She let her instincts and her intuition carry her: any time spared for thought and strategy meant a delay between attack and counterattack, between reflex and action—and a delay of even a few microseconds would mean death.

A fence of conjured energy spears shot up from the ground at 2B’s side, not close enough to wound her but close enough to graze her and box her in. As she parried a strike from 6E’s *odachi* and felt herself slide back just a few centimeters, 2B felt the spears graze her arm and back and heard her clothes and flesh sizzle on contact with them. Another pod program activated—a laser burned the air
over her shoulder, leaving the acrid smell of burnt ozone and singed hair, a cloud of steam, and a tingling, ringing sensation in 2B’s ear where the beam had grazed it.

Needing to free herself before she was penned in, 2B aimed a side kick at the weakest part of 6E’s armor—the gash 2B had created with her sword earlier—driving 6E back with a pained grunt. 2B took the opening created to rush past 6E, ramming her shoulder into 6E’s injured shoulder for good measure. 6E dropped her sword.

A barrage of bullets hit 2B in the small of her back, sending a jolt of pain up her spine. She gritted her teeth and threw her sword, the spinning blade forcing Pod 042 back. Forgive me, 042, 2B thought as the barrage ceased and her NFCS called the sword back to her hand in midair.

2S leaped off the ground, blood pouring from her bifurcated jaw as she raised her dagger and lunged at 2B—

And 2B took that moment to prove to 6E that she hadn’t lost her touch.

She was made to kill her own kind.

With one decisive, forceful two-handed swing 2B cut through cloth, flesh, and bone alike, and 2S collapsed to the ground in two halves, carried by her own momentum to leave a long, bloody smear in her wake.

As 2S gurgled in a growing pool of her own blood behind her, 2B ran the flat of her blade across the crook of her elbow to wipe it clean, reddening her sleeve, then swung her sword to shake off any stray droplets of blood from the blade.

6E called her sword back to her hand and struck. 2B flipped her grip on her sword to reverse, keeping her left hand on its pommel, and used it to ward off the odachi despite its superior reach. She followed up with a high strike with all her might, forcing 6E to bring her sword up to parry. As soon as the long odachi blade left 6E’s torso unguarded 2B released her hand from the pommel and let her blade snap around, planting the point on 6E’s chest before grabbing the pommel again and thrusting the blade downward.

6E pivoted so as not to let the blade pierce her black box, but 2B’s sword still sniffed out a gap in her armor and dug itself all the way through her side. She staggered and coughed up blood, eyes wide with shock, and her sword dropped from her hand and sunk into the snow.

“Did you think I’d gone soft?” 2B asked 6E. The pods, both hovering behind 6E’s shoulders, trained their guns on her but did not fire.

6E coughed, smiled, and laughed, a trickle of blood running down her chin. “The Einhorn stance as an execution move… that… that old trick again, Tooie? You haven’t changed as much as I’d thought. But… this isn’t one of our sparring matches, is it?” She glanced at Pod 042 as it floated by her left shoulder. “Pod 042. Laser. And do try not to miss this time!”

Pod 042’s hull unfolded and as its laser emitter began to glow 2B found herself staring down an attack she herself had called against countless enemies. Letting go of her sword, she flung herself out of the path of the laser blast and hit the ground, the beam ripping through her tattered sleeve and burning her arm.

2B grabbed the two broken halves of 6E’s sheath as 6E grabbed the hilt of 2B’s sword and began to pull it from her own torso, the edge of the blade squealing against perforated armor. Lunging at 6E, 2B jabbed the two halves of the sheath into 6E’s armpits, brought them down on her shoulders, and
boxed 6E’s ears with all her strength. 6E had a faint look of shock on her face before her eyes rolled up and she collapsed to her knees.

2B threw aside the halved sheath and, planting her boot on 6E’s stomach for leverage, yanked her sword out of 6E’s gut. This is it. She raised her blade. My last chance to kill her. If I don’t…

Combined gunfire from both support pods riddled her torso, concentrating on the injury she’d already sustained in her abdomen. 2B ground her teeth and choked down an anguished scream as the concussive force overloaded her nerves and waves of static poured across her visual display, forcing her to the ground.

“Why?” she gasped, raising a weak and trembling hand at Pod 042 as it floated above her.

“Statement: this support unit seeks only to incapacitate. Please surrender. I apologize for the inconvenience—”

Both pods shut down and fell to the ground, sinking into the snow.

From behind them 9S stepped onto the field of churned-up, bloodstained snow that had served as an impromptu arena, his outstretched right arm falling to his side.

Hastily clad in only patches of her armor, Captain Undyne of the Royal Guard stepped between 6E and 2B, grinning as crouched down and grabbed 6E and slung the unconscious android over her shoulder. “Hey, guys. Kept you waiting, huh?”

2B sighed with relief before she passed out, her head falling back and sinking deeper into the snowdrift that had broken her fall. The cold, soft snow pressed against her aching body felt so good, but better than the feel of the snow bleeding through her clothes was the sight of 9S standing before her. But 2B had never seen the look on his face before—a quiet, haunted, smoldering fury that softened as his eyes met hers.

▫▫▫

Toriel had little to occupy her time in the Ruins; one could only read the same books so many times, clean the same house so many times, bake the same meals so many times before one felt stuck in a rut. Having people like 2B and 9S staying in the next town over to force her out of her self-imposed exile every once in a while had truly been a godsend. She hoped those two were dealing well with their unwanted guests.

Of course, 2B and 9S were soldiers. That meant they could handle themselves. But it also meant that their lives were fraught with danger.

Somebody knocked at her door. In her surprise, Toriel let her copy of the morning’s paper fall to her lap, the sudoku puzzle within only partially-done. Who could be knocking? Had somebody new fallen down and gotten all the way through the Ruins’ gauntlets of puzzles and traps all by themselves?

The knocking continued, prompting Toriel to rise from her chair and hurry to the front door, cracking it open just a sliver to peer through it.

She found herself staring into a familiar pair of maroon eyes and couldn’t help but let the door swing open.

There, standing on the threshold, was her long-dead child. Toriel was speechless.
Chara glanced at their feet, wringing their hands. “Er… I suppose this is a bit awkward.” They smiled. “Hello, Mom.”

Toriel looked Chara up and down. They were wearing strange armor like those other two visitors, their hair was a little longer, and their chest had filled out a bit… but it was them. It was really them.

It was impossible, but it was Chara. The one who’d fallen from the surface, the one Asriel had dragged home with such a smile on his face, the one who’d so quickly become Asriel’s older sibling and Toriel’s second child.

“You… You were… I—I buried you in the…”

Chara smiled. “It was a very long nap. I’m all better now, see?”

“Oh, my child!” Toriel threw her arms around them, scarcely able to hold her tears of joy and long-buried grief back. “My darling Chara…” she sniffed. “Oh, my sweet child…”

“Good to see you, too, Mom. Have you got any chocolate?”

Chapter End Notes

Anyone who actually knows how to use a sword is probably screaming at my choreography, but I'm proud of it nonetheless. I've been itching to write a nice Kill Bill-esque swordfight for some time now.
Toriel had powdered hot cocoa mix and milk, which Chara supposed was close enough to chocolate to satisfy their craving for now. Clasping a hot mug in their hands—*their own hands*—was such an amazing feeling. Being alive was amazing. No wonder they’d coveted life so much.

There was seeing it through another’s eyes, as they’d done while possessing 2B, and there was *having* eyes, and there was a world of difference Chara had never dreamed of between the two—after all, they’d been dead for quite some time. Since the Eighth Machine War (they’d gleaned from 2B’s data files they were up to fourteen on the surface, which was just to be expected), in fact.

“How did you do it?” Toriel asked as she sat across the dining room table from them with a steaming mug between her own paws. Her eyes were still wide and still glistened with tears. “How did you come back?”

Chara took a sip and felt their black box stop buzzing for a second, their blood stop pumping. The world itself, it seemed, had stopped for that one second.

*Chocolate.*

“I told you,” they said, regaining their composure. “I just woke up like this.” They knew their glib attitude wouldn’t arouse their adoptive mother’s suspicion—they’d always been like that.

“You’re dressed in such strange clothes. Where did you find them?”

Chara sighed. “I’m afraid I stole them off a corpse, Mother.”

“Oh, my goodness.” Toriel raised a paw to cover her mouth.

“My clothes were all gross and decayed.” Chara grinned. “It was that or come here naked. Somebody had the bad fortune to fall into the mountain and die, so I took their YoRHa uniform.”

“Oh.” Toriel nodded along to their sensible answer. “What is a YoRHa?”

Chara shrugged, then finished their hot cocoa, wiping chocolate from their lip. “Something very stupid, I’d imagine.”

“You haven’t changed a bit.” Toriel glanced away. She sniffled. “It *is* you, Chara.”

“That’s right. It’s me.” Chara stood up and came to Toriel’s side, laying a hand on her shoulder. They could feel her tremble beneath their touch. “Are you all right, Mother?”

Toriel nodded. “Yes, my child.”
Then she leaped up and hugged Chara again, burying them in an avalanche of fur and a shower of tears. “No,” she wheezed, sobbing.

Chara sank into her soft and warm embrace, consoling her as best they could. The last time they’d been hugged like this, they’d been dying, and hadn’t had the strength to hug back.

They remembered why they loved this place so much. Not this house—they’d only been to it a few times before—but this underground world in general. It was a world where they’d had a family.

“I… I hate to ask you this so soon, my child…” Toriel let go of Chara. “But if you are alive, do you think there is any hope for your brother?”

Flowey, tucked away beneath Chara’s armor and pressed close to their chest, writhed.

“Who knows, Mother?” said Chara. “Anything is possible.”

“I apologize for bringing him up. You are back, and I should be happy just to see you—and I am—but…” Toriel smiled weakly. “I… I suppose it is selfish of me to want more. But he was my boy. And he was so close to my heart…”

Chara reached out to wipe the tears from their mother’s eyes, feeling the damp fur on her cheeks beneath their fingertips. “Don’t feel bad. I understand. He was so close to my heart as well… In a way, he still is, really…”

Flowey sank tiny fangs into Chara’s chest. Chara tried very hard not to react.

“Excuse me, Mother, do you have a room I could have to myself for just a short while?” Chara asked, holding back with increasing difficulty their winces and grimaces as Flowey continued to nibble at them.

“Oh, um…” Toriel glanced at the floor. “I… I understand if you would like a moment to yourself,” she said, obviously disappointed that Chara wanted a moment to themselves. “I… I suppose you may use Asgore’s old room… I let the others who have passed through here use it, so it is very tidy.”

“I just need a minute alone to get my bearings.” Chara pecked Toriel on the cheek. “I love you, Mother.”

Chara hurried into their father’s old room, closing the door behind them and surveying the bedroom.

For hundreds of generations—monster generations, which were about as long as android generations and much longer than those of humans—Toriel and Asgore had lived in this house in the first monster settlement, Home. By the time the two of them had sired Asriel they had already left the house behind and moved to New Home, but occasionally Toriel would bring her children to the ruins for history lessons. After so long, any hint that this room had once belonged to Chara’s adoptive father was gone.

Flowey kept gnawing on Chara’s chest, so Chara gave their breastplate a good whack. Their hand came away stinging as Flowey sprouted from their collar, wilting over Chara’s chest.

“Ugh…” Flowey curled around their pendant for support. “What was that saccharine crap? I thought we were supposed to become as gods, not get all huggy with that old hag!”

Chara had been about to go into a ‘there is a time and a place for everything, dear brother’ spiel, but Flowey’s last word had rankled them. “Watch your tongue, Asriel,” they cautioned. “She’s your mother, too. Don’t you love her?”
Flowey scoffed at them. “What, you do?”

“Of course.” With some pride, Chara mused that they might be the only android in the world who knew what it was like to have a proper mother—not a master or mentor, not a teacher, not a commanding officer, but someone who taught, nurtured, and above all loved. It set them apart from the savages on the surface.

“Of course,” Chara repeated. “How could you not?”

“How could you not?” Flowey repeated in a mocking tone. “I’ll tell you how can I not. I don’t have a soul, Chara. You know? That little thing that lets us monsters feel love, hope, compassion? Sorry, I’m fresh out of those things.”

“Have you tried?”

Flowey giggled. “Have I tried? Have I tried, they ask.” They brushed their petals against Chara’s cheek. “Boy did I! When I woke up, the first thing I did was hurry my little green behind over to Dad’s garden. I wasted weeks with that stupid king, vainly hoping I would feel something…but nope. Nada. Zilch. Boredom, if anything. The old hag didn’t make me feel anything either.”

“Do I make you feel anything?” Chara asked.

“Oh, but of course! You were always different from the others, Chara,” Flowey assured them, clearly buttering them up.

“So you’ve begun to learn to feel love again,” Chara replied, letting the suspicion in their voice hang in the air.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Flowey insisted.

Chara saw right through him. They’d have to work hard to keep Flowey in line. Of the two of them, only Flowey could absorb souls the way Asriel had once absorbed Chara’s. That made him a necessary element to Chara’s plot…but if he could not love, that could be a problem. An ancient human saying echoed in their head: For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

“Godhead,” said Chara, “is wasted on those who cannot love.”

“Is it?” Flowey asked. “Don’t you remember how we died, Chara?”

Chara nodded, gazing at their reflection in a small bedside mirror, noting the misty shroud clouding their brownish-red irises. “It was not your love that held us back. It was your cowardly nature, Asriel, which prevented us from exercising our will on the world. But it was my love, my love for the people trapped within this forgotten netherworld, that spurred us to action in the first place.” And, of course, they thought to themselves, my lust for revenge.

Flowey craned his head to see himself better, his petals fluttering as he caught sight of his reflection and preened in the mirror. “So cowardice is stronger than love, eh? Sounds right to me.”

“It can be.” Chara reached for their collar and gently threaded Flowey out of their armor and away from their pendant. “But it depends. Are you still a coward, Asriel?”

“Well,” Flowey stammered as Chara let him wrap his stem around their fingers, “you can only be so brave when you’re a talking flower…”
Chara began to clench their hand into a fist. Flowey tried to worm out of Chara’s grasp as their grip tightened around his stem, his eyes widening.

“Do you want to do me a favor, Asriel?” Chara asked as Flowey cringed and gurned.

“S-Sure thing, Chara! Anything for my big sibster…”

Chara let Flowey fall to the floor. Relieved, he scrabbled against the wood floor for purchase with his naked roots and began to worm his way into a gap between two mahogany panels.

“Go to Snowdin,” said Chara, “and tell me what 2B and 9S are up to.”

Sometimes 9S liked to think of himself as a very clever bastard.

YoRHa androids had very complex and closely-guarded firmware meant to be all but unhackable, but with a calm mind, patience, about fifteen minutes of uninterrupted time to concentrate, and a few frame-perfect exploits, a hacker could penetrate the firmware layer and force an android into a crippling boot loop that would take, on average, ninety minutes to auto-resolve. 9S had discovered the exploit himself. On himself.

He hadn’t told anybody about the exploit. Mainly because it was so difficult and time-consuming to set up that it had no combat applications. Also because if he did tell anyone, all of a sudden everyone’s bodies would get a new firmware revision and then there wouldn’t be an exploit anymore.

This kind of Very Clever Bastardry, 9S thought, was probably at least one of the reasons why YoRHa kept having 2B kill me.

9S pulled himself out of hacking space, reached out, and pulled open 6E’s eyelids. Her eyes were unfocused, her pupils contracted to black pinpricks, her irises foggy. “That should hold her for an hour or two,” he called back to Undyne, standing up and rolling 6E’s unconscious body onto her stomach with his boot before walking out of the cell.

Despite the heavy presence of Royal Guard sentry stations, the town of Snowdin had no jail. Usually, Papyrus’ shed was good enough for the occasional troublemaker. Unfortunately, 6E was not the occasional troublemaker, so Undyne had set 6E up just outside of town in what the Dogi had called a garrison. It was little more than a concrete foundation and a bunch of rocks stacked on top of each other strung with bare wires stretched around the bare rock. Its single cell had bars just wide enough apart that a malnourished child could worm their way out. Fortunately, 6E was not a malnourished child.

Undyne crossed her arms and clutched at her bare shoulders, her breath clouding the air. “No chance she could wake up sooner, right? I don’t wanna keep dragging you over here every half-hour until Asgore gets here.”

9S questioned the wisdom of keeping 6E alive. But apparently, King Asgore needed to harvest ‘the final soul’ from a living body. It was a ritual.

“A force shutdown or reboot command would snap her out of the loop,” he told the captain. “Anyone who’s not a Scanner would need a pod to grant them hacking privileges, though. Or the pod could do it itself.”

Undyne eyed the two pods lying inert at her feet. 9S felt a twinge of pity for the two of them, forced
by their programming and YoRHa protocol to adhere to 6E’s commands and turn on the androids they’d been taking care of for so long. 042 and 153 were constructs bound by their programming much more strictly than any android was. 9S already missed having them around.

“Any chance these two could turn themselves on and do it?” Undyne asked, nudging Pod 153 gingerly with her foot as if afraid the slightest touch could reactivate it. The sight put a twinge through 9S’s chest. Pods weren’t things to be afraid of.

9S took a few seconds to think. “I guess it’s possible. Undyne, do you know how to build a Faraday cage?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

9S rephrased the question. “Does Alphys know how to build a Faraday cage?”

Undyne’s eye lit up. “Oh, yeah, Alphys knows how to build everything!” She pulled out her cell phone. “I’ll have her over in a jiffy.”

9S eyed 6E’s unconscious body and felt another ripple of disgust wash through his mind. “You do that. And give me a call when the prisoner wakes up. If you’re going to keep her alive, I want to make the most of it.”

He walked out of the garrison, trying to push 6E out of his head. 9S had more important matters to attend to.

▫▫▫

2B came to lying in a bed, 9S sitting at her side, his open black coat draped over his shoulders (he still had those silly dog-pattern pajamas on underneath it). Back at the cottage. Home.

She’d never slept in this bed before—she’d always let 9S have it. The mattress was softer than she’d expected, so soft it nearly made the myriad aches from the beating she’d endured disappear. And to think, she’d thought the couch had been good enough.

“How long have I been out?” she asked 9S, feeling an odd cottony taste pervading her mouth as she tried to will the heavy grogginess out of her head.

“Not long.” 9S reached for the cuff of 2B’s sleeve, eyeing the tattered and bloodstained fabric. “Do you mind if I…”

“Do what you need to.”

9S rolled up the tattered sleeve covering—barely, given how frayed and threadbare it had become—2B’s left arm. 2B winced as his fingers brushed against bruises and burns from battle—and the bone-deep laceration in her forearm still slowly oozing thick, coagulated blood.

9S let go of her. “I’m not hurting you, am I, 2B?”

2B nodded. “I am fine. Your fingers are just cold.”

“Oh. Sorry.” 9S pulled his hands back and blew into them a few times, rubbed them together, and went back to work. “How’s this?”

“Better,” 2B said. “Thank you.” She still felt as though her head had come unscrewed. If it hadn’t been for the pods…
*Traitor.* The word stuck in 2B’s mind as if she’d been branded. Part of her had always wanted to escape her responsibilities, and yet to be called what she was still hurt.

She tried to clear her head. It didn’t matter anymore. She was done with YoRHa. With 6E taken care of, nobody would come after her.

9S took a roll of gauze and wrapped it around 2B’s arm, the rough fabric brushing against broken, tender skin and drawing a fresh ache out of her flesh. “I’m no Type-H, but it looks to me like most of the damage to your arm is superficial,” he noted. “Nothing structural. You should be fine. Can you sit up?”

2B nodded and sat up with some difficulty, her head pounding and black box whirring, but gasped and bit her tongue as a sharp, stabbing pain shot through her abdomen. 9S steadied her, grimacing as he put pressure on his injured leg, and attended to the injury, unbuttoning and parting her bloodied shirt and noting the bruised, burned, and split skin underneath.

9S sighed as he rummaged in his satchel. “I stole some supplies from 2S and 6E, but they didn’t have a lot on them,” he warned 2B. “If I can’t repair something, we’ll have to hope Alphys can fabricate a replacement.” Running his fingers along the invisible seams on 2B’s skin, he exposed her chassis and (not to 2B’s surprise) found a fracture running through the shell beneath her synthetic flesh. He applied sealant to the crack, then sat back and waited for it to set.

“That should do in a pinch. Mind if I hack into your systems?” he asked. “Just to make sure there’s nothing wrong in here.” He tapped on his forehead.

2B nodded. “Go ahead.” An internal diagnostic was a smart move, especially with no pods to rely on.

9S closed his eyes, laying his hand on 2B’s forehead. 2B closed her eyes as well. “Let me know if I run into anything that doesn’t feel right,” he told her. “Are you receiving audio properly?”

“Yes.”

“Out of both ears?”

“Yes.”

“Just checking.”

9S went on, asking her questions every once in a while to assess her faculties. “I’m seeing some hacking artifacts in your motor centers. 2S got to you, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, me too. She was pretty good.” 9S chuckled darkly. “Of course, she’s not half the woman she used to be now. That Type-E you had as a teacher really taught you well, huh?”

“I suppose.”

The diagnostic proceeded in silence, broken up sporadically with 9S’s inquiries until it ran its course and 9S pulled his hand away. “A little shaken up, but nothing to worry about.” He checked the sealant, found it dry, and closed 2B’s abdomen up again. “And to think, I’d really been afraid for you.”

“Thank you, 9S. I’d been worried about you as well.” 2B opened her eyes, sat up, and swung her
legs over the side of the bed, pleased to find that there were no more knife-like pains jabbing her in the gut. “Are you hurt?”

“A little scuffed up,” he admitted, gingerly patting at his thigh. “Leg took a beating. But no structural damage. I’ll be fine.”

“Is that it?” 2B laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Pretty much. So, um…” He glanced away. “I know this is awkward, but… about that thing you wanted to tell me last night.”

If the core temperature of 2B’s black box could have dropped below freezing, it would have. They told him. Oh, god, they told him. If only she’d been faster. If only she’d had the courage to tell him sooner. How he must hate her.

2B withdrew her hand as if she’d burned it. “I—I’m sorry—”

No. She had no business apologizing. She had no business trying to mine so much as a scrap of pity from 9S after the years she’d spent murdering him.

All of this. It had all been about her selfishness from the very beginning. At any point, she could have asked, no, begged to be reassigned, to have someone else deal with 9S and his insatiable hunger for closely-guarded secrets. But she wanted to stay with him.

Because she told herself she cared about him.

She’d accepted her assignment because she cared. She’d stayed by his side because she cared. She’d pushed him away for so long—until now until the two of them had found this sanctuary—because it hurt to care.

She’d told herself it was selfless of her, that she was sacrificing herself for his sake. Because nobody else who could do it would do it right, nobody else would kill him softly and make sure he didn’t suffer, and if he did have to suffer then at least she would hold his hand. But wasn’t it selfish of her to want him all to herself?

Chara had once accused her of having a ‘perverted sentimentality.’ Was that what they had been referring to?

9S snatched her hand out of the air and led it back to his shoulder. “Wait. It’s okay, 2B.” 2B raised her head and saw mist clouding 9S’s eyes, his blue eyes that were just a touch more cerulean than her own. “I’m so sorry.”

At the sight of those eyes, those impossibly kind eyes, the floodgates burst; 2B had no choice but to bury her face in her hand to hide her tears. How could he say something so absurd? What was he doing? Was this a joke? Was he mocking her?

“Don’t you dare pity a wretch like me,” she sobbed, choking on her words. “I—I killed you. I killed you forty-six times,” she pointed out, incredulous, “and you’re sorry for me?” 2B shook her head. “You must know… I could have said no.”

“They would have just found someone else to do it, and you know it! Just… calm down and…”

2B balled her fists, her fingernails biting into her palms. For some reason, the fact that 9S was being so damn understanding just made her feel worse. Her breath caught in her throat. “Dammit, 9S! Take this seriously!” she cried out. “Dozens of you—dozens of versions of yourself who deserved to live
just as much as you do never got the chance! And I killed every last one of them! Doesn’t that make you upset? Doesn’t that make you angry?"

9S’s fingers dug into 2B’s shoulders. “Of course I’m angry!”

That. That was the response 2B had been waiting for, a validation of her self-flagellation. Hearing it from 9S was almost cathartic.

“Of course I’m angry. But…” 9S buried his face in the crook of 2B’s neck, her tears hot and moist against her collar, his own shoulders quaking. “Please. That’s enough. I—I don’t like seeing you like this…”

2B couldn’t hold back any longer. She barely had to think about the words coming out of her mouth, as reflexive as vomiting. “Too bad. This is what I’m like, 9S. This is the real me. I was never your partner. I was your executioner. I’m YoRHa Unit Number 2, Type-E—”

The line echoed in her head. ‘I don’t like seeing you like this.’

Of course, 9S wouldn’t. 2B had never allowed herself to fall apart like this in front of him. She’d always been the stoic one, the quiet one, the serious, no-nonsense, no-small-talk, no-smiles, no-tears counterpoint to 9S and his cavalier approach to life. 2B had never been so maudlin where he could see it. To him, she must have transformed into a different person entirely, somebody alien and unknown, something to be feared.

“No! Shut up!” 9S gripped her tighter, his tears dampening her skin as they soaked through her shirt. “I don’t care what you were supposed to be or what you were designed to do. You’re 2B. You’ve never been anything else to me. Shut up! Please, 2B, just shut up!”

2B laid her hand on the back of 9S’s neck, her fingers brushing against his hair. She wasn’t sure how to soothe him, but she wanted to just as desperately as she wanted to quell her own inner torment. She wanted to make him feel the way Toriel made her feel—after all, as 9S had said, 2B was his older sister, wasn’t she?—but how could she help him when she couldn’t help herself? Her breath came out in short, uneven, ragged gasps, her chest heaving as tears continued to stream down her cheeks.

“Of course I’m angry, but… not at you. It’s not your fault.” 9S kept her in a tight embrace, clutching her so closely it almost hurt. “It’s not your fault.”

She buried her face in his chest and kept crying, the sound of his black box whirring beneath his skin just barely audible over her sobbing, the fleece fabric of his nightshirt soft against her cheek. She didn’t want to let go of him.

“It’s okay,” 9S said. “It’s okay. I… I—I can’t imagine how much it must have hurt… to have to follow those orders… I’m sorry.”

2B pulled away, swallowing what little remained of the lump in her throat, and sank back into bed, dazed and weary from her outburst. Despite the ache in her chest and the tightness in her throat that kept her breathing still shallow and her lungs still unfilled, she felt… lighter, just a little, as if her sins had been a lead weight hanging from her neck.

“How can you be like this?” she asked 9S.

9S laid down by her side, his mouth cracking into a weak but relieved smile. “Hey, I’m a Scanner. I was built to be insightful.”
2B smiled.

“Sometimes,” 9S admitted, his smile widening as if he and 2B were caught in a feedback loop, “too insightful, huh?”

“You never take anything seriously,” 2B scolded him.

The two of them laid at each other’s side until the sky outside began to darken. 2B felt herself drift in and out of consciousness many times over the next few hours, but every time she woke, 9S was still there by her side.

9S stood up, wincing as he put pressure on his left leg, and gave 2B’s hand one more comforting squeeze before slipping away from her grasp. “Hey, I’ve got to talk to someone. You gonna be okay on your own for a little bit?”

2B nodded. “I’m fine now. Thank you… Nines.” The nickname felt strange on her lips—it always had—but at last, she finally felt safe enough to use it in front of him.

“2B…” 9S sniffled.

“Is something wrong?”

9S looked away and held his hand over his mouth. “N-Nothing. You’re, um… you’re welcome, Tubes.”

2B closed her eyes and drew the bedsheets around herself. “‘2B’ will suffice, Nines.”

9S threw on a set of proper clothes for the first time that day despite the fact that it was now well past noon and hurried across the town square, the twinge from his injured leg forcing him to walk with a bit of a limp. The cold wind was like needles against his unprotected face, although the dozen or so monsters that had gathered in the center of town around the bloodstains 2B and 6E had left on the snow paid it no heed. The air did hurt a bit, but in a certain way, it was almost refreshing.

He made his way to the garrison just outside Snowdin. Dogamy noticed 9S as he approached, sniffing the air. “Oh! Hello, strange puppy!” the dog exclaimed, ruffling 9S’s hair. “What can I do for you?”

“Undyne told me the prisoner was awake again.”

Dogamy nodded. “Down the hall and to the right.”

At Dogamy’s side, his wife sniffed the air as he had just done. “Captain Undyne is such a hard worker… but I don’t know how much longer she can hold up in this cold.”

Undyne’s abrasive voice echoed through the garrison. “I h-h-h-h-heard that, Dogaressa! I’ll s-s-stay here all n-n-n-night if I have to! Watch me!”

9S thanked Dogamy and followed the sound of the captain’s voice. Once he left them alone the two dogs immediately went back to nuzzling noses.

Undyne was sitting cross-legged beside a makeshift Faraday cage Alphys had constructed which contained the androids’ deactivated support pods and 6E’s sword. A ring of aquamarine lightning spears floated in the prison cell in front of her, each one’s spearhead turned inward and pointed at
6E’s neck.

6E was sitting in the center of the cell, whistling as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

Undyne spared a glance at 9S as he came in, turning her head to train her good eye on him, then went back to staring at 6E. Her yellowed fangs chattered as condensed puffs of breath poured from her mouth. Snowdin’s climate, it seemed, did not suit her.

As 9S approached, 6E looked away from Undyne and fixed her glare on 9S, falling silent. She smiled. “Oh, hello, Ninesie. How’s Tooie?”

9S bristled. “If you call her that again, I’ll hack into you and turn your voice chip into a smoking lump of copper.”

“Any chance you can s-s-shut her up again, p-punk?” Undyne stuttered through chattering teeth as she frantically rubbed her arms. “She’s been whistling that same song for fifteen minutes.”

“With pleasure. I just need a few minutes alone with the prisoner first.” 9S’s voice was as flat as he could make it, but inside he was an inferno. He wondered if this was how 2B had felt all the time, filled with such intense emotions but always hiding it behind an icy facade. It was a self-imposed hell. “Why don’t you run a few laps around the garrison and thaw your legs out?”

With a shrug Undyne stood up, stretching her legs. The ring of spears circling 6E’s neck dissolved into a flurry of sparks, but before 6E could move, 9S thrust his sword through the bars, the tip of the blade at her throat.

“All right. If anything g-goes wrong, s-scream real loud, and I’ll c-come running.” She patted 9S on the shoulder and shuffled away, grumbling under her breath about how much she hated Snowdin.

“So,” said 6E, sounding awfully confident for a prisoner with a blade to her throat, “what can I do for you, Nines? Wanna know more about Toobie? I bet I know her way better than you do…”

“My friends call me Nines.” 9S gritted his teeth. “You can call me 9S.”

“We can be friends.” 6E cocked her head. “My friends call me Sixie. Of course, it sounds just like ‘6E,’ so it’s kind of like everyone’s my friend.”

“What kind of a lonely, miserable person would do that?” he growled.

“Dunno.” 6E shrugged. “So… about 2E…”

“There’s nothing you can say about 2B,” 9S said, cutting her off, “that I’m interested in hearing. In fact—”

“She really does like you,” 6E said.

9S fell silent.

“You know, beneath that icy exterior, she’s just… a real romantic at heart.” 6E gazed into the distance. “Do you know why I’ve been traveling with 2S? A Scanner with the same personality template as her?”

9S kept his sword trained on her throat. “Because you miss your ‘old friend?’”

6E smiled. “No, no, silly. Twos is—a prototype. I was using her to see if I could fix 2E.”
“Fix?” 9S repeated. “What do you have to fix about her?”

“I want to make her just as cold on the inside as she is on the outside.” 6E undid the clips tying back her hair, letting her whitish-lilac curls hang loosely and brush against her shoulders. “It’s hard being a Type-E. Most of us go insane after just a few months,” she admitted. “We have the hardest jobs in all of YoRHa and sometimes I feel like I’m the only one who knows how to do it properly! I don’t want 2E to be like one of those failures who runs away or commits suicide or erases all their memories! I want her to succeed! Like me!”

9S felt a fresh wave of loathing build up inside him. “You son of a…”

“I don’t want her,” said 6E, “to be broken. That’s all. I want her to be happy.”

“Fuck you! If she’s broken, it’s your fault!” 9S spat, no longer able to contain himself. His free hand gripped one of the bars of the cell so tightly he could hear the metal squeak beneath his glove. “You’re what’s wrong with her, you goddamn—”

“No, Ninesie,” 6E retorted. “You are. You broke her. You’ve made it impossible for her to do what she was built to do. You’re a sick, evil person.” She shook her head. “You know the old saying… ‘If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.’ It’s something 2E still needs to learn.” With a shrug, 6E added, “But I digress. What brings you here, 9S?”

9S took a deep breath, reeling inwardly from 6E’s cruel words. “I’m here to tell you… when the Barrier breaks down,” he said, hiding the raging shake his voice, “I’m going back to YoRHa. And… And when I do…” He gritted his teeth and took a moment to compose himself even as he felt his temper threaten to engulf him. “When I do—I’m going to kill all of you.”

6E suppressed a single bark of laughter. “You’ll what?”

“I’ll slaughter you all and erase your backups. You damn Type-E scum.” 9S could feel his breath coming more heavily, his anger sending tremors through his hand all the way to the tip of his blade as it hung in the air just a centimeter from 6E’s throat.

He couldn’t contain himself as thoughts of vengeance—vengeance for himself, for all of his past lives cut short, and for 2B, for the sins she’d had no choice but to bear—ran through his mind.

9S shuddered, tightening his grip on his sword. He swore that with this sword, with this Cruel Oath…

He was going to save 2B. He swore to free the both of them from the chains of that horrible past, once and for all.

“I’ll hunt you down like dogs,” 9S growled. “I won’t stop until everyone who forced us to endure this pain has been exterminated. I’ll teach you all to fear death. Every last one of you.”

A palpable silence permeated the cell.

6E threw her head back and laughed, toppling over and slapping her hand against the freezing concrete floor as she struggled to catch her breath. “Oh, goodness me,” she wheezed, trying desperately to choke down a mouthful of air before bursting out laughing anew, rolling on my floor. “Oh, no! I’m so s-s-s-scared! A Scanner’s gonna kill all my friends!”

“Don’t you underestimate me,” 9S snarled.

6E wiped mirthful tears from her eyes. “Oh, my god, 9S… All this time I thought 2B was a traitorous
“little bitch when it was you all along!”

The blade of the Cruel Oath bit into the concrete just centimeters from 6E’s head, shearing off a lilac ringlet. “What did you say about 2B?”

6E sat up, wiping her eyes. “I said she’s a selfish, sniveling, cowardly, treasonous little turncoat in a petticoat.” Every word hit 9S like a rusty nail was being pounded into his eardrums. She grinned ear to ear, deep dimples forming in her cheeks. “Well? Are you going to exact your vengeance on me now?”

9S heard a pair of stomping boots echo through the garrison. Undyne, it seemed, had finished thawing out her legs. His little chat with 6E was coming to an end. “I—I’m going to enjoy dancing on your grave, 6E,” he said, yanking his sword out of the floor.

6E chased the last of her giggles out of her system. “And when you get back to YoRHa and go on your little rampage, Ninesie, my backup is gonna get such a kick out of chopping you to bits before you can so much as raise your sword.”

“You kids getting along in there?” Undyne asked, brushing snowflakes out of her auburn hair as she returned to keep watch over the prison cell’s contents.

9S sheathed his sword and quelled his temper. “Not a scratch on her, Captain. She’s all yours.” Feeling unsatisfied despite his declaration, he made his way past Undyne.

“Hold on, kiddo.” Undyne turned to 6E—who hadn’t quite stopped laughing at 9S—and rammed the butt of her spear into 6E’s forehead. 6E collapsed to the ground. “We’re gonna need a lot of coffee tonight, so put her back into that loop or whatever and meet me at Grillby’s!”

A little yellow flower wormed his way through a crack in the concrete, slipping back into the semi-frozen soil below the garrison’s thick foundations, burrowing underneath the town and surfacing like a submarine every so often to gauge his position.

That 9S… he sure was an interesting one. Flowey wondered why he hadn’t taken notice of him before. Maybe he’d just been overshadowed by 2B. Or maybe he just hadn’t had a chance to shine until now. But now… Now it seemed like 9S might be a lot more promising than 2B ever had been.

He had to tell Chara, but…

Why not have some fun first?

Chapter End Notes

Ah, there’s our little peek at the edgy murderboy 9S we know and love from Routes C and D of the game.
In the aftermath of the fight with 6E, Undyne returns with a special challenge for 2B.

2B woke up to what sounded like gunshots in the distance and felt every combat instinct programmed into her turn itself up to eleven. Within seconds she’d torn herself out of bed, summoned the Virtuous Contract to her hand, thrown herself out the cottage’s front door—

In time to see a many-colored starburst fill the night sky. 2B didn’t know what to make of it. Was it an attack? A missile or bomb? From whom? Machines? Androids? Some unknown third faction?

“Hey, Zatoichi!” Captain Undyne waved at her from off in the distance. “What’s the matter? Never seen fireworks before, girl?”

The captain jogged over to 2B, clutching a thick, furry coat around her shoulders. The sky lit up again. 2B stiffened, but forced herself to calm down, as whatever danger there was here seemed to be nothing but the product of her imagination and ignorance.

“Fireworks,” 2B repeated.

“Yeah. They’re these things people shoot into the sky to celebrate!”

“Celebrate? Celebrate what?”

Undyne grabbed 2B by the arm, breaking out in a wide and eager grin. “Come on down with me and Nines to Grillby’s and I’ll show you!”

She’s calling him ‘Nines’ now? 2B thought. This woman who’d murdered 9S, who’d snuffed out his life so suddenly it had almost been an afterthought, was now on such good terms with him that she was calling him by his—

As 2B’s teeth ground the inside of her cheek she realized she was thinking just as much of herself as she was about Undyne.

The two of them… they were the same, weren’t they?

As 9S left the garrison and passed the Dogi, he couldn’t help but pick up a message coming over the radio sitting in the corner of the cramped front office. The voice coming through its tiny and primitive speakers was deep and soft, yet the radio rendered it crackly and tinny.

“…For over a dozen millennia tens of thousands of us have lived our lives constrained by the boundaries of Mount Ebott. Now, thanks to the hard work of Captain Undyne of the Royal Guard and her assistant, Provisional Guard-In-Training Papyrus, the seventh human to wander into our midst has been apprehended. Freedom is close at hand! Tomorrow, I myself will be visiting the town of Snowdin, where our hated enemy was taken prisoner, to mete out justice and collect the final soul needed to shatter the Barrier. At last, at long last, the war between humans and monsters will come
to an end and our people will taste liberty. Glory to monsterkind…"

It was a familiar speech. Those same sorts of spiels were piped into the Bunker about once a week from the Council of Humanity. 9S felt right at home listening to it, but also worried that perhaps King Asgore was biting off more than he could chew. The surface world was a dangerous place, after all. Maybe it would be for the best if they all stayed inside the mountain instead, where at least it was safe.

9S stepped outside the garrison and saw a sky lit up with a rainbow of lights and found himself frozen, awestruck. He’d never seen fireworks in person before. Videos and literature didn’t come close to truly capturing their ghostly afterimages or the faint smell of gunpowder they left in the air. They really were beautiful.

All this jubilation… all this celebration. How would the monsters down here feel if he and 2B told them all how dangerous the surface was? How devastated would they be? When 9S asked himself those questions, he felt he understood just a bit better how hard it had been for 2B to say what she had said to him last night. When you knew that the truth would hurt other people, it started to hurt you, too.

9S knew Undyne wanted to meet him at Grillby’s for coffee, but before he headed that way, he decided to take a detour back to the cottage and check up on 2B. He needed to get the taste of his tête-à-tête with 6E out of his mouth.

“Oh, hey! Howdy!”

9S looked down at the source of the voice and found a yellow flower sprouting out of the snow beneath his feet. It seemed… familiar.

“You remember me, don’t’cha?” The little face on the flower grinned.

9S racked his brain. “Oh, yeah!” That was the weird flower who’d popped up and laughed at 2B when she and 9S had first fallen into the Underground. It was hard to believe that had been two weeks ago already. “Flowley, right?”

“Flowey,” Flowey corrected. “I’ve been lookin’ for you all over! You’re 9S, right?”

9S nodded. “Who’s asking?”

“I am!” Flowey let out a saccharine giggle. “Your friend 2B passed me by just a few minutes ago and said she was heading over to Toriel’s for the night. She wanted me to find you and let you know so you wouldn’t worry.”

“Okay. Thanks, Flowey.” He wondered why 2B hadn’t told him herself but brushed that thought aside. He hadn’t told 2B where he’d been going, so it was understandable that she might not have wanted to take the time to track him down. And 2B really did seem to value the time she spent with Toriel (and vise versa).

“Where are you headed, by the way?” Flowey asked, wading through the snow while 9S headed for Grillby’s.

“I’ve got to meet Captain Undyne across town.”

“D’you really wanna just leave 2B alone? After all she’s been through?”

“Well, I—” 9S stopped in his tracks. “You… seem to know an awful lot… about me and 2B.”
Flowey grinned, his mouth full of needle-like fangs that hadn’t been there before. “Ah, you’ve finally figured me out, huh?” he snarled, his voice dropping at least two octaves. “Let’s see who can get to your precious 2B first, shall we?”

Flowey fled into the forest and 9S, gripped with panic, had no choice but to follow.

Grillby’s Pub was, without a doubt, the warmest place in Snowdin—and it had nothing to do with the temperature inside or the eponymous bartender who was (somehow) wearing a fine black tuxedo over a body of living flame. It was the people.

Every head in the pub turned when Undyne walked in. “Hey, everybody!” she shouted out, making a beeline for the bar. “So I’m sure you’ve all heard the good news!”

Everybody cheered incoherently.

“Well, I gotta tell ya, I’d love to take credit…” Undyne took a seat on one of the barstools, leaning her elbow on the bar, and clapped 2B on her shoulder. “But this girl right here did all the hard work! Let’s all give her a big hand!”

2B found herself surrounded by applause. She’d never felt so out-of-place. Completing a mission didn’t normally net this kind of adulation. Your commanding officer might have told you that you did a good job, but would more likely caution you on a poor decision you’d made and urge you to do better next time.

“Thanks, 2B!” someone sitting at one of the tables in the corner shouted out.

Undyne turned around, leaning on the bar with her elbows. “Grillby, get me the strongest, hottest coffee and the biggest, greasiest burger you’ve got! 2B, what’ll you have?”

2B snapped back to reality. “I… don’t require refreshment.”

“Come on.” Undyne gave the barstool next to her a spin. “Live a little!”

2B relented and sat down. “I’d like a glass of water.”

“Get my pal here a Long Island iced tea, Grillby,” Undyne ordered.

“What is a long island?” 2B asked.

Sans waved at 2B from the other end of the bar. “Well, first off, it depends on the angle you approach it from,” he called out. “Otherwise, it’s a wide island.” He downed half a bottle of ketchup, which 2B was fairly certain was not technically a beverage. 2B expected the ketchup to pour through his jaw and ribcage and spill onto his barstool, but it didn’t. It just… vanished.

“You’ll like it,” Undyne assured her. She sloughed off her heavy coat, stretching her bare, scaly arms. “Nice to get out of the cold, huh?”

“I suppose.”

Undyne’s face fell. “Okay… who died?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, you’re just so morose…”
“It has been a very exhausting day.”

“Well, exhausted or not, you should be happy.” Undyne picked up her cup of steaming coffee, took a sip, sighed, and closed her eye. “You’re a hero, you know. We’re gonna sing songs and tell stories about you. Oh, and the fanart. You are gonna get so much fanart…”

Grillby handed 2B a tall, sweating glass of fruit-garnished liquid. 2B took it from him and promptly ignored it.

“You may have misjudged me,” she told Undyne.

Undyne paused to take a bite of her burger, her fangs tearing through it like a wild animal’s claws, then looked 2B dead in the eye. “You, uh… you don’t realize what you just did, do you?” she asked.

“I’ve done many things. Few of them are worth being proud of.” 2B took a sip of her drink out of courtesy. It was almost unbearably sweet and burned on the way down—it must have been eighty percent alcohol and twenty percent… something. Somehow, drinking it made the aches of the past day fade away, even though androids weren’t supposed to be affected by such chemicals.

“You’ve freed us,” Undyne told her, an air of reverence seeping into her voice. “King Asgore’s gonna come down here tomorrow to execute the human—er, well, the android—we captured himself. We’ll finally have everything we need to break through the Barrier and escape to the surface! And it’s all because of you!”

Undyne finished her coffee and flagged down Grillby for a refill. “I wish it’d been me. But hell, seeing you fight like that… I wish I could’ve gotten here sooner just to watch because what I saw was so incredible. I’m kinda jealous… but really, I don’t think I mind being in your shadow.” She laughed. “You’re definitely not the girl I thought you were.”

2B took a second sip of her drink, again out of courtesy. The next sip, and the fourth one, and the fifth one was due to a desire not to offend her host, or at least, that was what she told herself.

Undyne checked her phone, made a note of the time, shot off a quick text, and frowned. “Hrm.”

“What is it?” 2B asked.

Undyne put away her phone. “Nothing.” With a strange little half-smile, she plucked a crisp golden morsel from her plate. “Want a fry?”

“A fry?”

“A french fry.” Undyne wiggled it in the air. “Want one?”

“What’s a french fry?”

“It’s a potato you chop up, dunk in oil, and fry. Y-You know what a potato is, don’t you? You have those on the surface?”

“I suppose. But we soldiers don’t have much time for agriculture.”

“You gotta eat, don’t you?”

“Negative. Androids are self-sustaining.”

Undyne groaned. “But… you can eat if you want to, right?”
“There’s nothing stopping me.”

“Try it. You might like it.”

2B gingerly took the fry from Undyne, rolled it between two fingers (it left a glistening, greasy sheen on her fingertips she was quick to wipe off afterward), and ate it.

It was incredible.

Undyne finished her burger and licked her fingers one-by-one. “Go ahead. Order whatever you want. I’ll pay for it.”

2B shook her head. “Not necessary. We have limited faculties to digest food and have little space to store what we do eat—”

“Oh! Has nobody told you how food works, 2B?”

2B looked to her left and saw Doctor Alphys climbing the barstool beside her. “Nobody’s, uh, sitting here, right?”

“Hey, Alphys!” Undyne waved at her, peering over 2B’s shoulder. “Fancy seeing you here! What’s going on?”

Alphys smiled uneasily. “U-Um, not much! I was just getting hungry…” She turned to face 2B. “So, anyway, 2B, you know how we monsters are made up of dust and magic, right? ‘Bout, uh, twenty percent of one and eighty percent of the other? Well, our food’s mostly magic, too! You don’t digest it, your body just absorbs the magic, and, uh… Um…” She trailed off and started to twiddle her scaly thumbs, a tinge of red coming to her lemon-yellow face. “Hi, Undyne. Nice to see you, too.”

2B found herself occupying a sort of no-man’s-land between Alphys and Undyne as they fired volleys of small talk back and forth.

“I’ve missed you so much!” Undyne leaned on her elbows, a wide and bright smile crossing her face. “We never hang out anymore!”

“Yeah, well…” Alphys shrugged. “Royal Scientist stuff, you know.”

“Yeah. Royal Scientist, Royal Guard. Sure cuts into your free time when you answer to King Fluffybuns, isn’t it?”

“K–King Fluffybuns?” 2B tried to interject.

“Still, we gotta find time to go back to the dump!” said Undyne. “You always know how to pick the best anime!”

“Oh, it—it’s just so hard to find the time to get out of my lab. And on top of that, I’ve got to f-feed the, uh…”

“Ooh, you’ve got a pet now? Is it a dog?”

Alphys cringed. “K—Kinda?”

Undyne shot bolt upright, pumping her fist. “I love dogs!” She looked around the pub. “Hey! Everyone here who’s a dog, raise your paws!”
A few paws went up.

Undyne pounded on the bar hard enough to rattle the pictures hanging from the walls. “Grillby, have the Royal Guard pick up the tab for everyone who’s raising their paw right now!”

Sans slowly raised his bony hand.

Undyne pointed an accusing finger at him. “Put that down, Sans! You’re not getting another free meal out of me!” She sat down. “Dogs are the embodiment of loyalty,” she sighed, waxing poetic. “No one will follow your orders to the letter, rain or shine, like a dog! Friends to the end, every single one of them!”

2B turned to Alphys. “Doctor, would you prefer to trade seats with…”

“Alphys!” Undyne called out. “If you’re having trouble, I’d always be willing to help dogsit! You know I’d be great at it!”

This went on for quite a while. Eventually, 2B decided to stop following the conversation and ordered another drink, as well as something on the menu called a “hot dog” (which she figured wasn’t what it sounded like, given the pub’s clientele).

“Oh, hey! 2B!” Undyne called out, despite the fact that she was sitting right next to her.

“Yes?”

“You were asking about King Asgore, right?” Undyne asked.

“Oh. Yes. You called him, er… ‘King Fluffybuns’?”

“Oh, yeah.” Undyne sighed. “Supposedly it was his wife’s pet name for him. She accidentally said it into a microphone before he could make a big speech, and he just leaned into it. To this day, everyone calls him that.”

“The King and Queen were national nose-nuzzle champions for centuries before they parted ways,” Alphys added with a wistful sigh. “They say there’s never been a cuter couple.”

“Damn straight. But don’t let Dogamy and Dogaressa hear you.” Undyne talked about the king and queen like she’d been there. “Hey, Alphys!” she shouted out, her eye brightening.

“Y-Yeah, Undyne?”

“Asgore’s coming here tomorrow to execute 6E, right?” Undyne asked, the excitement in her voice rising like the tide.

Alphys nodded. “And Toriel lives around here, doesn’t she?” She looked at 2B. “You know where she is, right?”

Undyne pounded on the table. “We should get Toriel and Asgore back together!” she and Alphys shouted out in unison.

---

The lights of the city grew distant and soon vanished completely behind 9S as he ran across the snow-blanketed road that led to the ancient ruins. He didn’t see any sign of that flower. Had he pulled ahead of Flowey? Or had Flowey pulled ahead of him?
9S left the valley and came to a stop at one of the rickety wooden bridges linking one frosted plateau and another, fumbling with the primitive little phone Alphys had handed him earlier that day. She’d said it had texting and even had access to the UnderNet as if that was something to be proud of. It was almost cute. Before he could contact Undyne—the only person other than Alphys whose number he had—he noticed a blinking icon on the phone’s screen and tapped it.

A text message popped up.

**StrongFish91:** HEY 9s! im with 2b at grillbs! what’s taking so long?

2B was at Grillby’s with Undyne? Then what the hell was 9S doing all the way out here?

He shot back a quick reply.

**TempUsername9402[PLEASE CHANGE]:** Sorry. Got sidetracked chasing a talking flower. I’ll catch up later.

**StrongFish91:** prisoner OK?

**TempUsername9402[PLEASE CHANGE]:** Yeah. Should have about 50 minutes before she wakes up.

**StrongFish91:** nice! sorry we wont get 2 hang out but hey—2mornings gonna be wild~!

As his breath clouded the air, 9S dug his visor out of his jacket, wrapped it over his eyes, and scanned the area, wondering why that evil flower would have brought him all this way.

9S’s gaze fell on the radar in the corner of his HUD and icon on the map slowly approaching him.

A figure in black armor emerged from the forest, their pale face at first the only thing visible against the shadows.

“Oh,” they said, a tremor of surprise playing in their voice. “You’re here.”

An android.

YoRHa.

Of course—6E and 2S couldn’t have been the only ones in that “rescue party.”

9S drew his sword and attacked.

9S, like all Scanners, had not been designed for combat. Compared to a Type-B (or a Type-E), his muscles were weaker, his instincts more geared toward running than fighting.

That didn’t mean he was bad at fighting, not by a long shot. And, of course, traveling with 2B had taught him a few tricks.

9S struck the first blow, catching the android off-guard, and pinned them to the ground. As he prepared to run his sword through the android’s chest, he inadvertently picked up the android’s IFF signal.
9S’s grip slipped just a bit on his sword. “Chara?”

Chara used the distraction to worm their way out of 9S’s grasp and stood up. “9S, I presume. Hello. It’s nice to see you, at last, face to f—”

9S punched them in the face, knocking them back to the ground.

Chara stood up, wiping a trickle of blood from their nose. “Perhaps,” they said, “I deserved that.”

“Perhaps?”

“Oh, come on.” Chara brushed snow off their chest with a note of irritation before making sure their nose and jaw were still in their proper places. “Let’s be mature adults for once, shall we?”

“Sorry. Now that you’ve got a face, I just really wanted to punch it,” said 9S. “So… how are you, um… y’know…?”

“Alive?” Chara smirked. “I stole a body. It wasn’t being put to good use, anyway. And it just happened to look a little like me.”

9S thought about that for about half a second before tackling Chara to the ground, ramming his sword into the ground just next to their ear, nicking their skin and drawing blood. “That’s what you were trying to do to 2B, wasn’t it?” he snarled, grabbing Chara by the throat, his gloved fingers finding the contours of their trachea.

“Guilty as charged,” Chara gurgled, their throat muscles contracting under 9S’s grip, “but it all worked out, didn’t it?”

9S squeezed.

“Lighten up,” they squeaked. “I’m over her.”

9S let go of Chara but kept his knee on their chest.

“You hate YoRHa too, don’t you?” they asked him.

9S bristled. What did they mean by ‘too?’ “Wh—”

Chara coughed. “You see an android with YoRHa armor and you instantly go into murder mode. There’s a story behind that, I imagine. Might I guess it begins on a moonlit night with a girl sitting beside a boy with a sword in his chest?”

9S held his hand over Chara’s face. “Look. I’ve got a lot of questions, and I’m not above hacking them out of you… and uninstalling your language packs when I’m done. Maybe you’d prefer to give me less work to do?”

Chara didn’t need to ponder the threat. “Ask away, but… let me breathe a bit more, would you?” They held up their hands, palms raised. “I promise I won’t go anywhere. I don’t think we’re enemies.”

9S pulled his hand away and stood up. “Why did your stupid flower lead me here?”
Chara blinked, a look of utter surprise on their face. “Y-You ran into As—er, you ran into Flowey? I was just heading out to look for him…”

“Oh, what, is he your pet?”

“A bit more complicated than that.” Chara sat up. “He’s been gone longer than I expected. I started getting worried.”

“Don’t tell me he’s a fragile little angel who’ll get hurt out there on his own.”

“Quite the opposite. He’s very nasty.” Chara stood up, but stood up tentatively, as if worried that as soon as they did, 9S would punch them in the face again. When it became clear that 9S wasn’t going to, they grinned a sly little grin and tucked their hair behind their ears. “I suppose he’ll be up to some mischief in town. Why don’t we go look for him together?”

9S grumbled and shoved Chara in front of him, letting them lead the way back to Snowdin. He held his sword out, fully prepared to run them through should he need to.

Much to 2B’s relief, “hot dogs” had nothing to do with dogs and everything to do with a savory tube of spiced meat wrapped in a bun. She had eaten it slowly, savoring it, while Undyne continued to chat with Alphys and plan their foolproof plan to reunite the King and Queen. She’d also had another drink.

“I’ve got to freshen up.” Undyne stood up. “Oh, and, uh, 2B, you’ve got some mustard on your chin.”

2B reached up to her chin.

“Other side.”

2B reached for the other side.

“No, your other other—just come with me, okay?”

“Oh. Yes. I understand.” 2B promptly stood up and followed Undyne.

Upon entering the restroom, Undyne looked around, made sure the coast was clear, and led 2B to the mirror. 2B couldn’t help but notice in her reflection that there was nothing on her chin, but she’d suspected as much.

Undyne checked her phone again. “Just checking up on Nines. Looks like he got sidetracked with something.”

“Yes. That sounds like Nines,” 2B replied.

“So, um…” Undyne lowered her voice. “Sorry about, uh, sorta ignoring you once Alphys showed up. That was my bad. It wasn’t fair to you. See, I wanted to bring you here because… well, I wanted to get to know you. See the girl behind the hero, you know, before… well…”

“There isn’t much to see.”

“I mean… look at me. When you’re the toughest monster in the kingdom, people treat you like a symbol first and a person second. One day, you’re a scrappy kid who just wants people to pay attention to you… the next, you’re a captain and a role model and you’ve got all these
responsibilities.” Undyne set her purse on the counter. “You wanna know how I got this eyepatch?” She brushed the hair out of her face and lifted up her eyepatch. 2B was shocked to see an eye underneath that seemed more or less just as functional as Undyne’s other eye.

“I got a dart in my eye when I was twelve and had to wear a patch for a week until it healed. But I liked it so much, I just kept it on.” Undyne sighed, leaned over the sink, and took the opportunity to start reapplying her lipstick. “Now… mostly I wear it to hide my power level. People underestimate you when they think you have a blind spot. Makes it way easier to humiliate bad guys who think they’re hot shit! Also, I suck at getting my eyeliner symmetrical.”

“Oh.” 2B understood that Undyne was showing a very vulnerable part of herself, but given what 2B had seen of Undyne—what Undyne was capable of when she was desperate and willing to throw everything she had against a foe—the revelation that her eyepatch was just cosmetic didn’t have the impact Undyne probably expected it to have.

“Hope you weren’t expecting to see a nasty gouged-out eyeball or something.”

“Oh was not.”

Undyne rummaged in her purse. “Oh, hey. You’re an android, so you’ve got really steady hands, right?”

2B nodded, and Undyne promptly thrust a small pen capped with a glittering red tip into her hand. “Can you, uh… y’know. Give it a shot?”

2B hesitated as her fingers closed around the pen. Once more she instinctively replayed that horrible scene from the timeline she’d erased in her mind’s eye. The empty, blank look on 9S’s face as he’d fallen to the ground with one of Undyne’s spears rammed all the way through his head. The way he’d looked at her with a single unseeing eye, the life already drained from his body.

But she couldn’t remember the way she’d felt at that moment quite as clearly anymore. She couldn’t recall just how deep her stomach had dropped, just how fast her black box had whirred, just how tight her throat and chest had become. The trauma… it felt distant instead of immediate, blunt and soft-edged instead of sharp, less like a memory and more like a nightmare. Like the nightmares 9S was having about his many deaths.

The memory had become numb—the scar tissue on a long-since-healed wound.

2B bit her lip.

She wasn’t… starting to like Undyne, was she? How could she?

_Because 9S still likes you_, she told herself, _after what he went through. After what you did to him. Is it so hard to bury the hatchet when this Undyne has been nothing but helpful to you?_

After a pause that lingered so long that it nearly felt like an eternity, 2B acquiesced, leaned in, and did her best to match what Undyne had done to her right eye, drawing a swooping crimson curve across the edge of her left eyelid that caught the light and glittered against her blue scales.

Undyne looked at herself in the mirror, admiring 2B’s handiwork. “Aw, yeah. This… This is beautiful.” She replaced her eyepatch, grinned, and offered the pen to 2B again. “How about you try this out? It’d look great on you.”

“That won’t be necessary.”
“Try it out,” Undyne cajoled her.

2B handed the pen back to Undyne. “Thank you for offering.”

Undyne’s fins drooped, crestfallen, but she begrudgingly packed her makeup away. “All right. Well, thanks for helping me out. And, uh… one more thing.”

A twinge of paranoia ran through 2B’s mind. There wasn’t anything she was hiding from Undyne—but after the events of the past day and with 6E’s interrogation still fresh in her mind, 2B couldn’t help but feel nervous.

“I didn’t expect Alphys to come here. Not that that’s a bad thing! She’s really great! I’ve always sort of—well, she’s smart and she’s so passionate, and even though she’s kind of a trainwreck sometimes she puts 100% into everything she—I’m really glad her and I hit it off again, but, uh… I kind of, um…” Undyne looked away and mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“I kind of, um… I brought you here to date you.”

2B took a second to parse the rushed jumble of words. “You… brought me here… to date me,” she repeated, just to make sure she’d heard right.

Of course. Undyne had been behaving almost coquettishly toward her this entire night. 2B should have noticed sooner, but 2B often found she had trouble paying attention to Undyne’s body language. In her mind’s eye, all too often when she looked at Undyne she saw only the captain’s face twisted in fury—righteous as it might have been—as it had been during her forgotten first encounter.

She couldn’t see that now. What she could see was a girl who seemed, of all things, apprehensive, even shy around her no matter how boisterous the captain normally was.

“Y-Yeah. And before Alphys and I start our date, I figured it’d only be fair if I finish yours…” Undyne’s face fell. In fact, it all but hit the floor. “Please tell me,” she moaned, desperately clutching 2B’s shoulders. “Tell me you still have dates on the surface, 2B!”

“Not me, personally,” 2B said. She thought about her assigned Operator, 6O, and the number of times 2B had found herself inadvertently helping her get over a bad breakup. “Some of my more outgoing comrades, though…”

Undyne laughed and awkwardly withdrew one hand. “Well, it’s good that you android supersoldiers haven’t all forgotten how to have fun up there. But, yeah. There’s one thing. One thing I kinda wanted to do tonight. One thing I’d… kinda like to do while I still have the chance. I-If it’s okay with you, of course.”

Undyne didn’t continue. She just looked at 2B, her mouth slightly agape, her scaly cheeks a little flushed, looking just a little lost.

“You’d like to… kiss?” 2B guessed.

“Er, um… What? I—I don’t…” Undyne quickly looked back at the mirror, then just as quickly looked in the opposite direction. “How’d you know?”

“I am stoic, not an idiot.” 2B lifted her hand to brush Undyne’s hand off her arm, but paused when her fingertips brushed against Undyne’s scales. The captain’s hand was shaking just slightly, and as
2B felt that tremor, she lost her nerve to deny her request. “Make it quick,” she told Undyne.

Undyne was taken aback, her eye widening in surprise, but regained her composure in a flash. “Really?” She let a faint smile split her lips. “Well, here goes nothing.”

Undyne darted in and pecked 2B so quickly, so furtively, that 2B almost wouldn’t have noticed save for the brief electric tingle playing on her lips and a slightly fishy smell in her nostrils as the captain backed away from her, ending a moment as ephemeral as it had been awkward. 2B felt her black box’s temperature tick up by just a few degrees.

With a blush and a glance back and forth Undyne sighed and cleared her throat. “So, uh… Sorry. I gotta dump you now.” She shrugged. “Plenty of sexy fish in the sea, hope we can still be friends, et cetera.”

2B drew Undyne’s hand off her arm. It was really amazing how much difference a first impression could make. The first version of Undyne she’d met would never have behaved like this around her… and 2B herself, in fact, never thought she’d find herself acting like this around any version of Undyne.

“Well, Captain,” 2B said, “I must say you are the oddest person I have ever dated.”

Undyne chuckled as she led 2B out of the restroom. “2B, you’re not even in my top ten weirdest dates.”

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2B, Undyne, and Alphys left the pub together after another round of drinks and a spirited conversation about swords (finally, something 2B felt qualified to talk about). Undyne, nearly vibrating from all the caffeine she’d ingested, insisted on walking 2B home even though 2B had made it very, very clear that androids did not metabolize alcohol.

“S-So,” said Alphys as the three of them walked over trampled and trodden snow, eyeing the sword sheathed at 2B’s side, “reverse-blade katanas… aren’t a thing?”

“No,” 2B insisted. “They would be hilariously impractical.”

“But all you have to do is make the other side sharp and—”

“It would not work.”

“Not even for—”

“Not even for a remorseful ex-samurai looking to escape his bloodstained past, no.” 2B wondered if Alphys had been talking about that particular ‘anime’ on purpose.

“But—”

Undyne reached down and ruffled Alphys’ head spikes. “Aw, don’t listen to her, Alphys. I mean, what does 2B know about swords, anyway?”

“Everything,” replied 2B.

“Y’know, I’m actually really glad Nines didn’t show up!” Undyne chirped. “I haven’t had a girls’ night out in, like, forever! Let’s do this again tomorrow, okay?”

“9S was supposed to join us?” 2B asked. She’d been at Grillby’s for what had felt like nearly two
hours, and during all that time he’d been indisposed? A spark of paranoia flitted between her synapses. “Why didn’t he?”

“Got sidetracked chasing a flower or something?” Undyne pulled out her phone. “Keep your shirt on. Got a text from him about twenty minutes ago saying he’s on his way back.”

“Ch—Chasing a flower?” Alphys asked, swallowing hard.

“I gotta get back to the prisoner before she wakes up again.” Undyne sighed and slipped her phone back into her purse. “2B, wanna come with me and shout insults at her or something?”

“Excuse me?”

Undyne shrugged. “I heard you two kinda had a history. Might make you feel better. I shout at things that hurt me all the time! It’s therapeutic!”

2B had to admit, the prospect seemed appealing. And so she found herself agreeing to it, and the three of them made their way to the garrison where 6E was being held.

The sentry station was silent save for the primitive radio still blaring the latest obnoxious pop hit by Mettaton through its wheezy speakers.

Undyne rolled her eye. “Don’t tell me the Dogi took a coffee break, too,” she sighed. With another glance at her phone, she added, “at least we’ve still got about ten minutes before 6E wakes up…”

2B ventured deeper into the building while Undyne mumbled and complained, every step she took drawing her lungs tighter and tighter. To say she had a bad feeling about this place was an understatement.

It didn’t take long for her to reach the empty prison cell, the blown-apart bars, the mangled remains of a ramshackle Faraday cage littered with yellow flower petals strewn across the scorched concrete floor. Undyne and Alphys weren’t far behind.

With mounting horror, Alphys lifted her boot and found its sole coated in a thin layer of gray dust. She blanched. “O-Oh my god…”

Undyne stared ahead, just as frozen in her shock as 2B, and for the first time that night, was utterly speechless.

Flowey watched 6E dash into the deep, dark forest and vanish in the shadows between the trees with great amusement.

Back in the old days, when he’d had the power to reset time, he’d learned the whole Underground backward and forwards. Its every inhabitants’ every action and reaction. He’d done everything this world had to offer. He’d read every book. He’d burned every book. He’d won every game. He’d lost every game. He’d appeased everyone. He’d killed everyone. He hadn’t known what to do next. Life was boring.

And then 2B had appeared and stolen that power from him. But she and her dear 9S hadn’t made things much more exciting, or at least, not for long. In fact, they’d somehow made things worse! And even with Chara here, they weren’t making things exciting fast enough. Honestly, Flowey was feeling really disappointed with his sibling.
But now a real freak was here in the Underground… and finally, at long last, things were interesting. So, so much more interesting.

And as for Chara, they were going to learn soon enough just how valuable that “love” of theirs was.
The silence permeating the empty garrison did not last long.

Undyne kicked the mangled and torn-apart Faraday cage, swearing up a storm, while 2B climbed over what remained of the prison cell’s bars and knelt in the center of the cell. 2B recalled inflicting a few bloody wounds on 6E—one in her shoulder and one through her torso—and while neither was fatal, neither injury had been repaired. 6E had been patched up rather inexpertly by the guards keeping watch over her, as nobody here was accustomed to working on synthetic lifeforms. Those wounds had opened up again when 6E had made her escape, as evidenced by the few spatterings of blood dotting the floor.

There was an earsplitting crash as Undyne threw the mangled cage against the wall. “Dammit! What was I thinking? I’m dead in the water! All this because I wanted to get into a hot android chick’s—”

“Quiet,” 2B barked at Undyne.

While Undyne may have held the rank of Captain in this kingdom’s Royal Guard, 2B could tell that she was a peacekeeper, not a soldier. She hadn’t had the experiences 2B had that made it so easy to quiet her emotions in high-stress situations—the kingdom was too small, too quiet, too well-insulated from the existential threats roaming the Earth.

2B did her best to remain cool and collected despite the one thousand nightmare scenarios buzzing through her head at that very moment. It had always been a gift of hers to put on a stoic face for the sake of those around her no matter how dire the situation; only a few things in the world could break her. She forced her fear down to an imperceptible tremor in her clenched fist.

2B stood tall and stared right through Undyne. “Captain, if you feel mentally unequipped to fulfill the duties of your position, then I would rather you take orders from me.”

“Hey,” Alphys interjected, coming to Undyne’s defense, “you can’t pull rank on her, she’s the cap—”

Undyne shook her head. “No, I’ve got this. Thanks, 2B. Those high-def android eyes picking up anything?” she asked 2B.

“6E is bleeding,” 2B explained. “There is damage to her internal systems. She cannot travel at top speed, and what’s more…” She pointed at the bloodstains with the tip of her shoe. “She will be leaving behind a trail.”

*She also has two pods with her,* 2B reminded herself, just to quell that little spark of optimism she’d lit, *and a head start.*
She reached into her pocket, withdrew her visor, and wrapped it over her eyes. Her HUD popped up, overlaying her field of vision with basic diagnostic information. Without Pod 042 at her side, 2B wouldn’t have access to long-range scans, but the radar in the corner of the HUD could still pick up black box signals within a fifteen-meter radius. Between that and the trail of blood, hunting down 6E wouldn’t be impossible.

“How do you see through that?” Alphys asked.

2B ignored her. “Undyne. Give me your phone.”

“What?” Undyne asked, shocked at the brazen request.

“Your phone. Give it to me.”

Shrugging, Undyne pulled out her phone, and 2B immediately snatched it out of her hand. She hated to do this, but again, without their pods, 2B and 9S were very limited in their capabilities—long-range communication being one thing denied to them. She scrolled through Undyne’s contacts—they all had stupid pseudonyms—and sorted by date to find (what she hoped was) whatever number Undyne had been using to contact 9S.

2B held the phone up to her ear as it rang.

“You don’t have to frogmarch me all the way to town,” Chara protested as 9S frogmarched them all the way to town. They drew closer to one of the bridges crossing the many deep ravines winding across the snowy environment. Off in the distance in a gently-sloped snowy valley, the distant lights of Snowdin grew just slightly closer and brighter as they peeked through the landscape.

9S prodded them in the small of their back as gently as he could with his blade. “Yeah, yeah,” he muttered.

“One affirmation will suffice, 9S,” Chara replied, repeating a common response from 2B. 9S’s proverbial hackles rose hearing it.

“You’re not doing yourself any favors,” 9S said, “with that attitude of yours.”

“I’m sorry. It’s simply in my nature. As much as it’s in your nature to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong.” Chara glanced over their shoulder at 9S. “Speaking of, don’t you have some questions for me? You might as well ask them now that you’ve taken me prisoner.”

“All right, then. Tell me what a Type-C is. It’s not any model of android I’ve ever heard of. And how could you be with YoRHa if you died hundreds of years ago?”

“One at a time, please.” Chara held up their hand. “For your first question… Would it surprise you, 9S, if I told you that we androids suffered from a devastating lack of unity for the past several millennia? That we were broken up into factions, dozens of them at some points, all working at cross purposes, often hindering our efforts to drive off the invaders infesting the Earth? That it was because of this lack of unity that a war to repel the machines degenerated into merely a struggle to survive them?”

The theory seemed reasonable enough. As 9S had been told time and time again, the Resistance had been on the back foot since practically the start of the Machine Wars, and only with the formation of YoRHa had the machines started to lose ground. Type-C: Character. Infiltration and sabotage.
“Your type was designed to infiltrate and destroy these factions,” 9S summed up.

“Bingo. One of the most devastating afflictions of our kind was the ennui brought on by the disappearance of our human masters, you see, and…”

“Hey, wait a minute. They didn’t disappear,” 9S insisted. “They fled to the moon after the First Machine War in the fifty-first century.” As the words left his mouth they felt… wrong, as if in his soul he knew they weren’t correct. But that was impossible. The Council of Humanity commanded YoRHa from the moonbase, and that was a fact. Transmissions came from the lunar server to the Bunker at regular intervals, assuring androids around the world that the tens of thousands of humans seeking refuge in orbit around the Earth were still cheering them on.

But then… why did he have this strange feeling, as if he knew that wasn’t the whole truth?

“That is common knowledge now,” Chara said, “but it was not always so. In the six thousand years that followed the first war, the truth regarding humanity became muddled and unclear. With scarce historical records, some of us grew to believe that our human masters had been eradicated by the alien manifestation. Some believed they had burrowed underground, hollowing out the Earth and leaving us to eke out our lives alone among the enemy on the surface. Others believed that humanity had gone extinct thousands of years earlier, in the early decades of the twenty-first century. All variations on a common theme. Running through all of these heresies was one common thread—our masters, our creators, our gods, had either died or left us to fend for ourselves. ‘My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?’”

“Then your job was—”

“To kill the heretics, yes. To proclaim the one true gospel of humanity.” Chara spread out their arms as they continued to walk in front of 9S. “While the organization that would eventually become YoRHa and the Council of Humanity developed and perfected the black box technology you and I now bear, prototypes such as myself were sent out to pave the way for our arrival. We would sneak into communities spreading falsehoods and break them down from the inside. The job of Type-C’s was to pass along false intel and engage in other forms of subterfuge, goading the leaders of problematic Resistance cells into engagements with the enemy that would inevitably become suicide missions, turning victories Pyrrhic and defeats… total. If need be… we were also assassins, as well—although we preferred the subtle touch.”

9S couldn’t help but think about his own relationship with 2B. 6E had told him that Type-E’s had been designed to purge YoRHa of “inconveniences,” and it had always been an open secret that Type-E’s often disguised themselves as other models in order to hide in plain sight among their targets—that had been exactly what 2B had done to him. Just as Type-A models had been the precursors to Type-B’s, it seemed these archaic Type-C’s had evolved into Executioner models… like 6E.

9S found himself hanging onto Chara’s every word but never lost sight of the tip of his blade as it hovered centimeters away from a gap in their armor. The question he now had on his mind was: Was Chara more in the vein of 6E and her ilk—a horrible, ghoulis sociopath who reveled in the carnage they left behind—or were they more like 2B—wracked with guilt and self-loathing over their deeds?

“At first, we erased major heresies from the cultural consciousness,” said Chara. “But as the various schools of thought dwindled, I found myself aiding in the destruction of rival organizations to what would eventually become the YoRHa you know, organizations which sought the same goal through different means. Erasing fellow androids whose beliefs were not so different from my own… turning on people I had once called friends.”
As their feet reached the edge of the ravine and their right boot landed on the first slat of the wooden bridge, Chara stopped. 9S nearly kept going, and if his attention had lapsed he’d have inadvertently driven his sword into their back.

“As I’ve learned, you see, there is no such thing,” they said, turning slowly to face 9S as they stood on the precipice, “as an absolute enemy. As the whims of our leaders change, so too do the victims of our violent delights. As I am sure you and 2B understand quite well, a friend today could be a foe tomorrow… and when you are a soldier, you have no say in the matter.”

Chara reached out, laying a finger on the blade of 9S’s sword, and gently pushed the Cruel Oath aside. “And just as today’s ally can be tomorrow’s enemy, so too can an enemy become an ally.”

I can’t believe this prick, 9S thought. Do they really expect me to be their pal now?

“We androids were built to protect and carry out the wills of our human masters. The same humans who waged a war on these monsters, imprisoned them down here, and forgot about them. But are these monsters our enemies?” They stepped closer. “We might be cut off from the Bunker, but we still know YoRHa’s mission statement. If we could receive orders from command right now, I’m sure they’d recommend we neutralize them, just like the machines.”

Those last words sounded familiar, but 9S couldn’t recall ever hearing anybody say them to him. Almost as if he’d heard them once in a half-remembered dream.

“But you and 2B have made friends here, haven’t you?” Chara smiled. “If the Barrier fell tomorrow and you got back in contact with YoRHa… if your commander gave you the orders to exterminate these creatures for the glory of Mankind, would you obey them?”

“No,” 9S replied immediately. Just a week ago, before he’d learned what he now knew about his place within YoRHa, he might have had to hesitate a bit before answering… but 9S was sure that no matter what, his answer would still be a resounding no.

“As I said,” Chara concluded, raising their hands, “I don’t think we’re enemies. Is there anything else you’d like to know?”

9S had one more question, but before he could ask it, the phone in his pocket began to buzz. “Hold on.” He pulled out the phone, flipped it open—the call was from Undyne, by the looks of it—and held it to his ear. “I’ve got to take this.”

To his surprise, it was not Undyne’s but 2B’s voice that came through, crackling and tinny through the phone’s speaker. “9S. This is 2B. 6E has escaped.” She’d purged any hint of emotion from her voice, as she tended to do in these situations—but given her history with 6E, 9S figured 2B was doing everything she could to maintain her stoic facade. “Return to town immediately and…”

9S could hear her voice hitch and felt the need to reassure her. “2B, it’s going to be…”

“If you run into 6E, do not engage her.” 2B said it in her stern, ‘don’t you dare do anything stupid’ tone of voice.

“Got it. I’ll be there as soon as I can, 2B.”

“Take care.” 2B disconnected, leaving 9S holding a silent phone.

9S shot a suspicious glare at Chara. “So. You think you’re pretty clever, huh?”

Chara blinked. “I—I suppose?”
9S flung out his hand, hacked Chara, and brought them to their knees, deadening the joints in their legs. “First, your flower pal lures me all the way up here. Then I run into you, and while that little yellow creep is springing 6E out of jail, you slow me down with your grandiose conspiracy-mongering.”

Chara staggered to their feet and drew the sword hanging at their back—a curved, wicked Type-4O sword, one of the latest models—just in time to block 9S’s blade.

“You’re working with 6E, aren’t you?” 9S cried out.

“Who?”

9S pressed onward, not buying Chara’s denial for a second. This Type-C… This body-stealing, pretentious creep… they represented everything 9S was starting to loathe about YoRHa. His animosity spurred him on, his strikes as furious as they were calculated.

“Did a single word I said penetrate that thick skull of yours?” Chara snarled, locking 9S’s blade between two short butterfly daggers and planting their boot squarely in 9S’s abdomen and knocking him to the ground.

9S rolled across the ground, tearing the coating of snow blanketing the soil, and scrambled to his feet, snow sloughing off his coat.

“Listen,” Chara said, wiping their chin, “I know you hate your masters. Perhaps even as much as I do. Join me, and—”

“Oh, give it up, Chara… Can’t you see he’s got you figured out, pal?”

It was a high-pitched, saccharine voice ringing out from the other side of the bridge, the kind of voice only a talking flower could speak in.

Flowey poked his petal-ringed face out from behind one of the wooden stakes holding the bridge up on the opposite side of the ravine. “9S is an awfully smart boy. We can’t pull the wool over his eyes.” He drew out his words with sinister satisfaction, the way one would savor a meal. “Time to admit we failed. Our mistress will be most displeased…”

Chara looked back and forth between Flowey and 9S, and seeing the confusion in their eyes as they darted back and forth, 9S started to think that perhaps he’d been quick to judge them.

9S stuck his hand in his pocket, fumbled for his phone, and tried as surreptitiously as possible to dial Undyne. A tinny voice 9S tried his best to muffle emerged from his coat pocket—Undyne’s. He’d been hoping 2B would have picked up again, but this was better than nothing. “9S? Hey, buddy, what’s going on?”

“That’s right. We lured you here, released 6E as per her request,” Flowey gloated, climbing up the post, “and pointed her in the direction of a certain monster of royal blood while the path was clear. Once 6E’s finished collecting her soul, we’ll be done with this world.”

“M—Mother?” Chara gasped, their eyes wide. With an accusing finger jabbed at Flowey’s direction, they shouted out, “How could you, Asriel! She’s your mother, too!”

That flower is Asriel? How? 9S thought. Alphys told us his soul had been anchored to that machine’s body… But this shocked musing was drowned out by a far more pressing concern: “6E… she’s going after Toriel?” He spoke loudly enough that the phone should pick it up, even with his finger muffling the speaker.
“I had to do it, Chara,” Flowey said, grinning. “After that shameful display back at Mom’s little hovel, I decided you needed to be taught a lesson.” He curled his stem around the top of the post. “When I came back to life, I modeled myself on you. It was the only thing that kept me sane in this miserable, soulless existence I’ve been trapped in. But you’re not behaving like the Chara I know. The one I remember. Where is the Chara who laughed at the pain they caused? Who never cared about anybody but themselves? When did they get replaced with a maudlin sap?"

“Abominable weed!” Chara snarled, tearing across the bridge. 9S ran after them. From the looks of it, Flowey was the real enemy here—he’d misled and used both 9S and Chara. It seemed Chara might have had a point after all: Betrayal made strange bedfellows.

With a wide, toothy smile Flowey spewed a salvo of magically-conjured bullets through the air, chewing through the rope bridge. As the bridge buckled and sagged, its rope supports snapping, it tore away from the ravine, the marginally-stable wooden slats beneath 9S’s feet becoming as unstable as thin air.

“Asriel!” Chara shouted out, their anguished, betrayed howl vanishing against the howling of the wind through the ravine, the rushing of the river below growing louder and louder as Chara fell through the air with 9S.

“You came back wrong, Chara!” Flowey cackled. “The heartache you feel is the cost of your ‘love!’”

9S reached out for his pod—153 was always there for him to use as an impromptu glider in situations like these—only to remember that Pod 153 was no longer at his side. Instead, his hand curled around one of the severed ropes drifting through the air and latched onto it, the rough, braided fibers scraping against his leather gloves as he gradually came to a halt, grasping with all his might to stay above the rushing water below.

Chara fell past 9S and threw out their hand, grabbing 9S by his free arm and pulling him down further; the two finally came to a stop with only a few centimeters of rope left. At the same time, they hit the side of the ravine wall, the impact knocking the wind out of 9S and sending a wave of noise through his visual processor. The phone fell from 9S’s coat pocket and tumbled into the rapids below, gobbled up by the ravenous current.

9S looked down. Chara looked down, too, then looked back up at him. They were panting, their eyes wide and wild. “C-Can these newer models swim?” they asked.

“Not easily,” 9S answered. Water was difficult for androids to master. Not that swimming was difficult—all of the various strokes and techniques were well within the realm of possibility for an android—but their bodies lacked buoyancy. Androids swam like rocks…and sank like them, too.

“Centuries of innovation,” Chara grumbled, looking back down at the river, “and nothing to show for it.”

In the dark, 9S spied the telltale pale spots of ice floes drifting down the black river. If he let go, timing his fall just right, he could land on one of them and drift downriver, but it would be risky. If he missed, he’d end up at the bottom of the river and at the mercy of its currents.

But what good would that do? 9S only had two options: head toward town and rendezvous with 2B, then head off in pursuit of 6E, or double back to the Ruins and get Toriel to safety. This river didn’t seem to be connected to the one that ran past Snowdin, so dropping into it wouldn’t bring him into town, and the other side of the ravine was currently inaccessible. This ruled out his first course of action, so all 9S could do was find Toriel and keep her safe.
Keep her safe for 2B. 9S knew that 2B and Toriel had grown close. A blind man could see the way the old queen-in-exile doted on 2B. And although 2B tended to hold her emotions as close to her chest as she could, 9S could see that she reciprocated Toriel’s affection in her own way. 9S liked her, too. The three of them were a bit like a family... something he couldn’t let 6E destroy.

He couldn’t let YoRHa keep taking. Not from 2B. Not from him.

He looked back up to the top of the ravine. There was about a fifteen-meter climb to the top—doable, but not with one arm. “Chara, how about you let go of my arm? Grab onto my legs so I can climb up.”

Chara carefully relocated to 9S’s legs, freeing his arm and allowing 9S to grasp the rope more securely. 9S took a deep breath and began his ascent, hauling himself up only a few centimeters at a time thanks to the weight hanging from him, the rough ropes grinding against exposed skin on his palms where his gloves had worn away. Come on, 2B... Please tell me you and Undyne heard all that. Please tell me you two know where to go...

As 9S climbed up, an indistinct shadow glided across the ravine, its passage slow and all but invisible against the sky until it landed.

And 6E’s smiling face popped over the edge of the ravine, illuminated by the floodlights provided by her pods. The light shone directly into 9S’s face, blinding him for a fraction of a second until his visor automatically compensated.

6E was crouched over the dangling rope 9S was clinging to, both Pod 042 and Pod 153 hovering over her shoulders. “Oh, Nines. Fancy meeting you here!” She reached down and grabbed the rope. “You aren’t using this, are you?”

2B and Undyne had heard everything, and 2B wasted no time hurrying along that well-traveled path out of the valley and up into the forested plateaus which led back to the Ruins. Undyne trailed behind her, huffing and puffing in the frigid, wintery air as she struggled to keep up with the android’s sprinting speed. The flashlight held in her hand illuminated the snow in front of 2B, making the churned-up white snow glitter and the dotted trail of blood marring its surface shine.

Three black box signals entered the periphery of 2B’s radar, all clustered together straight ahead. None of them were moving.

Three? 2B wondered, the unexpected head-count filling her with a new sense of dread. 9S, 6E, and... who?

One of the ravines separating one plateau from another drew closer as the trees thinned out. The bootprints tearing up the snow grew farther apart as they approached the sheer precipice, the bloodstains heavier. 2B was not an expert tracker, but it didn’t take an expert to see that 6E had begun to run at this point, and as 2B came closer, she saw why.

The rope bridge had collapsed, plummeting into the river running through the ravine. Lights from the two pods under 6E’s command fell on a single rope that hung from the opposite side and the silver-haired boy hanging from it, another figure 2B didn’t recognize dangling from his legs.

“9S!”

9S’s head whipped around at the sound of her voice. “2B!” he called out, his voice echoing across the ravine. The rope jolted.
“Tooie! It’s about time, old friend!”

Undyne’s flashlight traveled up in a wide arc, centering on the other end of the ravine, further illuminating a pale-skinned, pale-haired android clad in patches of black armor, blood smeared over patches of exposed skin.

6E lifted the rope she held in her left hand, grimacing theatrically and reaching up to her bleeding shoulder. “I wasn’t sure how long I could keep waiting for you. M-My arm… I can’t hold onto this rope much longer…”

“Let him go!” Undyne shouted out.

6E smiled. “Are you sure?”

“Captain, I urge you to rephrase that,” 2B hissed.

“Don’t worry about me!” 9S shouted out from his precarious position as 6E let the rope slowly slip from her blood-slicked fingers. “She’s just trying to keep you from going after her! 2B, you have to —”

6E let go, and 9S was cut off by a scream as he plummeted to the bottom of the ravine. “Oops.” She stood up, her pods turning to face the other side of the ravine, momentarily blinding 2B until her visor polarized itself. “Y’know, Tooie, if you hadn’t hurt my shoulder, I’d have been able to hold on longer."

2B ran to the edge of the cliff, nearly throwing herself off it, staring down into the inky blackness blanketing the ground far below hoping to discern black from ebony. “Nines!” she cried out, desperately hoping her companion—her brother—had landed safely.

“See you on the other side, Tooie!” 6E shouted with a laugh as she stumbled off, clutching her side as her wound left a fresh trail of speckled blood across the snow.

She’s using 9S to keep you from catching up to her, 2B told herself, trying to quell her rising anger at 6E. It was an obvious tactic to stall her…and damn it, it was working. “Captain Undyne, what’s the quickest path down—”

Undyne patted her on the shoulder. “Let me worry about 9S. There’s another bridge about a hundred meters south of here.”

2B nodded. She knew what she had to do—that she had to catch up to 6E—but if 9S was okay, she wanted to be the first to know. And if he was hurt… she wanted to be the first person who came to his aid.

And if he was dead…

Undyne picked up on 2B’s moment of hesitation. “Look,” she said. “I don’t know Queen Toriel as well as you do. Obviously, you care a lot about her. Sure, she may be the ‘Coward Queen,’ but she’s still royalty, and…” She lifted her eyepatch and handed a spare flashlight to 2B. “I’ve got to do one thing right today. You’re a lot faster than me, so if anyone can catch up to 6E, it’s you.”

“Understood.” 2B saluted, holding her hand over her chest as if by instinct in the YoRHa salute she knew so well. “Glory to—” The oath nearly slipped out through sheer force of habit. “Take care of Nines, Captain.”

2B took off for the other bridge, glancing over her shoulder to see Undyne heading in the opposite
direction. As she ran along the edge of the cliff, the snow crunching beneath her shoes, the light from her flashlight bouncing across the ground in front of her, 2B hoped she was doing the right thing.

It was still such a strange feeling to have that hope, that uncertainty, that fear that your choice might prove to be wrong, even when one was spurred into action.

As soon as the rope had gone slack 9S had driven his sword into the sheer rock wall, thankful that his NFCS could call his weapon into his hand in an instant. It had slowed his fall to a halt, and now he dangled from the cliffside just as he had been doing a few seconds earlier… only now he had no way up. Chara hadn’t been so lucky. Once 6E had let go of the rope they’d lost their hold on 9S and plummeted to the ground like a stone.

9S glanced up at the other side of the ravine and saw two flashlights bobbing in opposite directions, wondering which would come to his aid, and looked back at the ground. He could make out some faint details on the riverbank below. He wasn’t very high up anymore; if he fell to the ground at this height he’d land relatively safely.

He hoped.

Slowly and with trepidation, 9S let go of his sword and fell.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on the riverbank, his cheek pressed against the cold, wet, water-smoothed stone. He’d broken the fall with his legs, one of which was now being tugged along by the river like a very large bone being dragged by a very small dog.

9S pulled himself away from the river and rolled onto his back, then sat up, ignoring the sharp, shooting pain running up his left calf and thigh. “Chara?” he called out, looking around to try and discern shapes in the darkness. “You’re being awfully laconic…”

An indistinct form, sable on onyx, struggled to sit up before collapsing.

“My brother,” they muttered, dazed, “is gone. Whatever that thing is… it isn’t him.”

“Friends today, enemies tomorrow, huh?” 9S stood up, favoring his leg—it was the same leg he’d injured earlier that morning when he’d fought with 6E and 2S, of course—and limped toward Chara. Somehow, he felt he understood them better… although they were still a loathsome, body-stealing creep. Should I tell them? he asked himself. About… the other Asriel we found?

Chara looked up at 9S, their maroon eyes shining faintly in the dark. As 9S’s eyes adjusted to the night, details jumped out at him… namely, the blood coating the side of Chara’s face and what looked like a rock lodged in their head.


The light faded from Chara’s eyes and 9S noticed with faint shock the black box signal on his radar vanishing from his HUD.

9S wasn’t sure what it felt like to mourn someone—after all, as far as he’d known, YoRHa’s backup system had rendered him and his comrades functionally immortal. Out of everybody in YoRHa, 2B and her kind alone knew what it meant to be mortal, having inflicted mortality on their peers so often.

Yet 9S found himself holding his hand over his chest in a silent salute, a salute to an android who’d been forced into the same line of work as 2B and had harbored the same resentment toward their
masters that 9S now felt.

2B dashed through the forest, darting through gaps in the trees on a direct course to the Ruins. She wasn’t on any trail or road anymore—a disadvantage compared to 6E—but at least she could run at full speed. All she had to do was head west at a slight northward angle, and god willing, she could still head 6E off.

Toriel Dreemurr was beyond the shadow of a doubt the kindest person 2B had ever met. And the first time 2B had met her, she had regarded the old woman with nothing but suspicion and killed her without a second thought.

Because she had been different. Strange. Because 2B hadn’t known what she’d been dealing with or what kind of world she’d become a part of.

Now that 2B had gotten to know Toriel, now that she knew what a kind and caring person the queen-in-exile was… 2B couldn’t bear to lose her. Almost as much as she couldn’t bear to lose 9S.

6E stood in front of the great stone door, her armor pulled off in asymmetric patches. She was doing her hair back up in twin pigtails, wrangling the thickly-curled silvery-lilac locks and whistling. 6E had always liked to look her best before, during, and after a kill. The android laid a hand on the door, her other hand reaching to grab the odachi floating at her back.

2B thanked her lucky stars she wasn’t too late. She’d made it in the nick of time! With a hoarse shout, she drew her sword and met 6E’s blade, the two of them grappling in the darkness.

“2E! You’ve made it!” 6E used the long blade of her odachi to force 2B away; 2B dug in her heels as she locked her blade against 6E’s and stood her ground.

While 14E had excelled with the odachi, it had been due to years of careful mastery. 6E did not use the sword the same way its original owner had, and did not take proper advantage of its length. Longer was not always better—Often, longer was unwieldy and inconvenient. For all the times 2B had lost in practice duels against 6E, that odachi had never bitten into her side while in 6E’s hands the way 14E had commanded it. 2B used her shorter range to her advantage, placing herself between the door and 6E and driving 6E back as their swords ground together.

“I thought you’d take a lot longer,” 6E taunted 2B. “How’s Nines?”

2B said nothing as she pushed herself against 6E’s strength, her blade sliding along the length of the odachi as she forced 6E to dig in her heels.

“Oh… Don’t tell me you didn’t go after him.” 6E put on a face of exaggerated faux-concern. “Whatever happened to the bond you two shared?” As 2B came closer 6E twisted her sword and caught the side of her neck; it was a shallow cut but it still bled profusely as the steel blade slid across it.

Before the blade could remove her head 2B tucked in her legs and rolled across the ground, sweeping out her leg to catch 6E’s ankles. 6E buried her sword in the ground, leaped into the air to avoid 2B’s sweeping kick, and pivoted around the sword before coming to a landing and withdrawing the odachi from the ground.

2B was shocked at the display of agility. 6E was still bloodied from her injuries. She should have been effectively hobbled, easy to kill. But of course, 2B had always underestimated 6E at her own peril.
Metal rang against metal as the slender blade of the Virtuous Contract locked against 6E’s long odachi. Straining her arms against 6E’s superior upper body strength, 2B wrenched the blade aside with a desperate parry. Maneuvering around 6E, she spun in a vicious pirouette, her lashing foot connecting with her opponent’s wrist and knocking the odachi out of 6E’s hand. Before 6E could summon it back to her hands 2B swiped the sword out of the air, holding it in her off hand as she swung her Virtuous Contract; 6E ducked, the blade just grazing her hair, and retaliated by driving her knee into 2B’s face.

2B fell to the ground, blood pouring from her nose as she picked herself up.

“Pod 042, Pod 153,” 6E called out, “please be less useless.” The pods obliged—begrudgingly, 2B thought, although she might have just imagined their hesitation—and laid down suppressing fire, forcing 2B to scramble to her feet and back off.

Diving through a hail of bullets, 2B swung at 6E’s unprotected midsection. Her sword clanged against a shimmering shield summoned by one of the pods, leaving 6E unharmed. 2B swung again and again with both swords, drawing sparks as energy shields appeared and dissipated one after another.

6E grunted in frustration as 2B bore down on her, glaring at the pods floating over her shoulders. “You may go on the offensive any day now, Pod 042…”

2B’s own support pod obliged her request, opening up and loosing a bolt of yellow-white lightning that latched onto 2B’s chest like a claw and yanked her forward. As 2B’s feet skidded across the snow Pod 153 fired a laser and just barely missed, the beam ripping across the back of her ragged and bloodstained blouse, exposing the bare skin of 2B’s back to the frigid air.

The shirt had been a gift from Toriel, and between the bloodstains, the shredded left sleeve, and now this, it was more of a dirty rag now than an article of clothing. But 2B had no time to dwell on that.

6E drew back her fist and punched 2B right in the throat, her knuckles crushing 2B’s throat as the energy wire released its grip on 2B’s shirt. As 2B collapsed on top of 6E, 6E drove her armored kneecap into 2B’s stomach. If 9S hadn’t patched up 2B’s wound earlier that day, the pain alone would have incapacitated her.

2B dropped the odachi, which returned dutifully to 6E’s hand, and raised her own sword just in time to parry a strike that would have cleaved her in two.

2B wrested the blade away, ducked under 6E’s subsequent wild strike, and pinned 6E to the stone door, burying the Virtuous Contract up to its hilt in her gut. A spray of blood marred 2B’s face, leaving red freckles across her pale cheeks.

A pained smile slowly grew on 6E’s face as she looked down, then back up at 2B, a faint flicker of awe in her eyes, a recognition that at last, the pupil had become the master. “Good work, 2E.” She coughed, blood trickling from her mouth and coating her lips and turning them cherry-red. Her face was pallid with agony, her breathing rapid and shallow, her pupils dilated. “I hope you’re proud of yourself. That old woman… You’ll be happy to know she feels no pain right now.”

I’ve saved her. A relieved half-smile tugged at the corner of 2B’s mouth. She’d done it. 6E had failed, and now this nightmarish gauntlet of a day could come to an end. Once 6E expired, 2B would open that stone door and follow the corridor behind it and there Toriel would be, safe and sound, and at long last 2B would be free to put everything behind her. She and 9S could finally embrace their new lives.
It was over. 2B took a dazed step back, hardly believing it was true, the Virtuous Contract sliding halfway out of 6E’s body. 6E reached down and clasped her hand around the hilt of 2B’s sword as it protruded from her stomach, her fingers brushing against 2B’s as the life drained from her body. Was it a glitch in 2B’s visual processor, or were 6E’s eyes glimmering with an unnatural pale violet glow as she stared past 2B?

Blinking and refocusing her eyes, 6E drew herself closer and laid her hand on 2B’s shoulder, pulling herself along the blade embedded in her abdomen. Her foggy breath was hot on 2B’s cheek as she whispered into 2B’s ear, “In fact, Toriel will never suffer again…”

6E held out her blood-slicked hand, fingers twitching in her death throes and brushing against the edge of 2B’s visor. A tongue of lavender-lilac fire wreathed 6E’s fingertips and traveled down her arm, conjured out of thin air as if she had become a sorceress, the pale violet light flickering and plunging her face into ghoulish chiaroscuro.

“…My child.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter was a little late, I was writing it and the next chapter together and hoo boy, the next one's gonna be nearly twice the length of a normal chapter. I'll try have it published just a few days from now so the cliffhanger doesn't drive you guys too crazy.
Chapter Summary

Everything that lives is designed to end. We are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death. Is this a curse, or some kind of punishment? I often think about the god who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle... and wonder if we'll ever have the chance to kill him.

~ 2B

Chapter Notes

Musical accompaniment

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When the light of a flashlight swung across the bank of the river, 9S expected to run into 2B, not Undyne, but found himself relieved when the Captain of the Guard came to his aid. 2B had done the right thing. She’d gone after 6E first because stopping her was more important than rescuing him.

“Hey, Nines, you all right?” Undyne called out as she drew closer.

9S nodded as he limped toward her. “Yeah. Thanks, Captain.” He looked up at the sheer cliff wall. “Think we can still catch up to 6E?”

Underneath her thick, furry coat, Undyne shivered. The climate was wearing her down. But it didn’t strip the exhilarated grin from her scaly face. “If you’re up for it. Your leg’s…”

“Fine,” 9S insisted. “I just have to walk it off.”

Undyne led him to the path that wound up the side of the plateau, 9S sparing a single glance over his shoulder at Chara’s body before departing. The android gazed with sightless eyes, a faint memory of betrayal and anguish still burned into them like a brand.

2B pulled away from 6E as the horrible words sank into her ears, sliding her blade out of 6E’s abdomen, dazed as she was engulfed by a creeping horror colder and darker than the frigid night air.

Toriel will never suffer again.

It was painfully obvious what she meant. When 2B had caught up with 6E and had seen her by the door, 6E hadn’t been preparing to enter. She’d already come back.

A part of 2B wanted to sink to her knees. A part of her wanted to cry, another wanted to scream, one wanted to throw herself to the ground and bury herself in the snow, one wanted to run past 6E and make a mad dash through the tunnel to Toriel’s home because it couldn’t be true, it couldn’t be
possible, 6E couldn’t have gotten here so much sooner than 2B, she couldn’t have…

Emotions are prohibited. Emotions are prohibited. Emotions are prohibited. Emotions are…

Despite the mortal wound she’d suffered 6E stood up, sloughing off her torn-apart armor to reveal bloodied bare skin and the same kind of white singlet 2B always wore beneath her clothes. Helices of lavender fire wrapped around her body like snakes and licked at her wounds, binding to her exposed skin like sutures and covering up exposed patches of her chassis.

“With this kind of power at her disposal,” 6E sneered, gesturing with a hand wreathed in flames, “Toriel could have fought back. And she may have even been strong enough to hold me off until you arrived… But she knew better than to resist me. She made it quick. Painless. It was the right thing to do.”

6E waved her fiery hand, leaving a trail of ghostly sparks meandering through the air in its wake. “I didn’t gain much else from the old goat’s soul,” said 6E, “other than a lovely recipe for homemade butterscotch pie. If you come with me back to YoRHa I could bake one for you if you’d like. Would that make you feel better, my child?”

2B finally managed, in her shock, to squeak out a single word in a voice that was so much smaller, so much shakier than she’d intended, a single word in a voice that was nearly a whisper. A word she’d known, but had never in her life needed to use. She barely even heard it.

6E didn’t either. “Ah,” she sighed, “there’s that look again. You know, when I told you about 14E,” she told 2B, licking her lips, “and I saw the look on your face when you realized you would never see her again, I was overjoyed. I could scarcely contain my glee. She was such a poor fit for you, 2E. You deserved so much better. Someone who could set you right.”

“Why did you do it?” 2B shouted out, spurred into action by her own horror and pain to raise her sword against 6E. 6E easily overpowered her, as if the fire wrapped around her body was augmenting her muscles, and 2B fell back. “She… she couldn’t have hurt you!”

“No.” 6E snapped her fingers and let a tongue of lavender flame shoot from between her finger and thumb, tearing through 2B’s cheek like a bullet. 2B cried out and stumbled backward, falling to the ground, her mouth filling up with blood as the stench of copper stung her nostrils. “But she was hurting you. I could see it in that adorable little show of affection from this morning. Look at yourself. Look, 2E.”

2B spat out blood and shook her head.

“That old nanny goat changed you, and not for the better. And it’s not just her. You’ve grown so attached to so much, you’ve become chained to this wretched place like a prisoner. It’s weakened you. It’s dissolved away your resolve, your commitment… My god, 2E,” 6E laughed, “you’re pathetic!”

6E let the fire she’d conjured crawl up her arm, across her shoulders, and down to the tip of her sword, bathing its shining blade in phantasmal lavender light. “Doesn’t it feel awful? You see, with a big heart like yours, I have so many ways to hurt you, so many precious things I can take from you… but the most you can take from me is my life.” Her laughter cut through the cold air. “You see your disadvantage, don’t you, Tooie? You can’t hurt me anywhere near as much as I can hurt you!”

The cold, overwhelming agony filling 2B’s chest, this feeling that made her feel so small and so weak, vanished as 6E’s derisive laughter pounded against her eardrums. Data streamed across her HUD, a series of readouts and targets appearing all across 6E’s body and pointing out weak points. It
was as if 2B could see through her. This wealth of information… it could only have come from a support pod with intimate knowledge of her enemy’s condition. Was this Pod 042’s doing?

Regardless of where the data came from, 2B took advantage of the targets, taking note of every fragile joint and unhealed injury her HUD pointed out to her as she charged with renewed determination. Half-hearted gunfire whizzed past her as the pods lamely tried to slow her approach.

2B was finished holding herself back. She cast aside her mentor’s mantra and let her rage fully consume her. *I can’t hurt you as much as you can hurt me? We’ll see about that.*

Each strike took 6E by surprise as 2B all but dismantled her. First, she aimed for 6E’s left shoulder, a spray of blood following in the wake of the shining white blade. Next 2B slid past 6E, the slippery snow carrying her along, and struck 6E in the side, the Virtuous Contract tracing a scarlet fissure in 6E’s pale flesh. 2B’s foot collided with the back of 6E’s knee, sending the murderous android to the ground before she drove her sword through 6E’s other knee.

2B withdrew the blade, wiping it on one of the few remaining unstained patches of her clothing before raising it high above her head. Her HUD pinpointed the back of 6E’s neck—the weakest part of her body; a strike there would kill her instantly—but 2B angled the blade away from it. She’d always been a consummate professional—she had always tried to eliminate her targets as quickly and painlessly as possible—but 6E was *not* 9S.

2B wanted her to die *slowly*. She wanted to *torture* 6E for what she’d done. She didn’t want to permit 6E to die until she’d paid for the life she’d stolen.

“You’ve finally learned.” 6E shook her head. Lilac flames rippled over her body as she shot up, the fire dutifully knitting her broken skin back together, her hands—bare, but covered in gauntlets of amethyst fire—catching 2B’s blade on the downswing. “Your old master was a fool, and all her students turned out like her! Like *you!* Why?” She swatted 2B’s blade out of the air before conjuring her *odachi*, the swing of her long, fire-wreathed blade forcing 2B to retreat.

“Because,” 6E shouted out, “it was always wrong to suppress our emotions! We androids were built to *love* slaughter, *revel* in carnage, and as an Executioner, your duty is not to quell your emotions but *embrace* them with a wholeheartedness and zeal no other android can match! You should have *cherished* the moments you spent killing 9S!” She flung out her arm and a burst of flame cut through the air. 2B tried to dodge the blast, only for the fireball to shatter against her hip, setting her clothes alight. As the flames licked at 2B’s waist 6E bore down on her, a flame-wreathed fist crashing into 2B’s chin and knocking her off her feet.

2B felt (and more than that she *smelled*) the sizzling of her synthetic flesh as she sailed through the air and collided with a fir tree. She found herself nestled in a bed of needles for a brief instant before she slid to the ground, the tree’s snow-laden branches depositing their contents on top of her. Mercifully, the snow put out the flames and spared her any further burns.

“Do you understand it *now*, 2E?” 6E shouted. “Are you finally willing to accept who you were made to be?”

2B pulled herself up to her knees, needles brushing her shoulders, snow dripping down the bare skin of her back, the charred remnants of her clothes falling away from her low-cut singlet—the only part of her YoRHa uniform she continued to wear. “We… *we were made in the image of our human masters,*” she gasped. “If… if they *could* find a purpose other than to fight… then…”

6E swung her fire-coated sword through the air, leaving violet afterimages trailing in its wake, and with her free hand snatched 2B by the throat and lifted her off the ground. Her body, lit by the
eldritch fire climbing like vines across her, long tongues of flame trailing behind her back like wispy wings, looked nearly divine: YoRHa’s own fiery seraph.

2B felt 6E’s fingers curl against her trachea like a vise, stifling her breath. A red haze began to seep through her vision, warning messages propagating across her HUD. It was beginning to hurt to focus on anything but the sound of her foe’s voice…

“You wouldn’t believe how good it feels, 2E, to have this kind of strength flowing through your body…” 6E raised her face to the sky, closing her eyes in bliss, dropping 2B unceremoniously to the ground. “Imagine, 2E, the two of us returning triumphantly to YoRHa with such magic coursing through our veins, clinging to us like second skins... How unbelievable that such a wealth of power was sitting here, unnoticed, all these millennia!”

2B took so deep a breath she nearly choked on it.

“Follow me, return to my side, and we’ll bring this power to the surface—or stay,” 6E shouted out, raising her sword over 2B, “and let me erase your defective heart from this world!”

“Proposal: Unit 6E should refrain from causing Unit 2B additional harm at once.”

Pod 042 and 153 hung behind 6E, opened up their hulls, and unloaded the full force of their destructive abilities onto their master, two beams of searing energy lancing out at 6E’s unprotected back.

6E whirled around, conjuring a wave of pale violet fire to defend herself from the attack and consuming the pods. Both pods emerged from the flames, smoke and ash trailing from their hulls, as they opened fire and targeted 6E with all the precision they had lacked earlier, forcing 6E to scamper through the forest, her burning aura setting branches and needles alight where she passed through.

2B found herself regaining her strength, galvanized as her and 9S’s trusted companions fully regained their senses of loyalty.

“Damned pods!” 6E snarled, tearing through Pod 153’s hull with her fiery odachi as a salvo of bullets from Pod 042 slipped through her fiery armor and loosed a spray of blood from her abdomen. Thoroughly bisected, the black pod fell to the ground.

2B rushed at 6E, aiming to impale her yet again; 6E sideswiped 2B and kicked her ankle out from under her. As 2B lost her balance and fell 6E wrapped her arm around her and pinned 2B to her chest, rendering her a living shield to hold off Pod 042’s attacks.

6E dug her fingers into the burn marring 2B’s side, driving thoughts of combat from 2B’s mind as her nerves cried out. With her other hand she probed the shallow—but still profusely bleeding—cut running across 2B’s neck and collarbone. As 6E’s fingers wormed their way into the wound, prying it further open and running bloodied fingertips over 2B’s numb chassis, 2B stifled what would have been a wretched scream.

2B tried to shove the pain from her mind, but what replaced it was a maelstrom of emotional anguish of equal magnitude. She’d sacrificed 9S to catch 6E... and it had been for nothing. She’d still been too late—and now, here 6E was... using Toriel’s soul, the culmination of her entire being, like it was a fucking battery.

She felt something warm and wet press against the back of her neck, and it took 2B a second to realize she was feeling 6E’s lips on her skin. “Oh, dear, 2E,” 6E whispered as she clutched at her, “you’ve got a boo-boo... would you like mommy to kiss it and make it all better?”
Pod 042 hovered in front of the two androids. If the pod had had a face, 2B was certain it would be drawn in a tight scowl. “Request: Unit 6E will release Unit 2B without further harming her. This support unit will not make this request a second time. You have ten seconds to comply.”

“Or what?”

The pod said nothing, unable to admit but knowing perfectly well that to hurt 6E, it would need to further injure her captive. As long as she was forced to play this role as a living shield, 2B couldn’t count on her pod to save her.

“Aww. Isn’t that cute?” 6E dug her fingers deeper into 2B’s wounds. “Darling, you’ve even inspired your own pod to turn on its master. I’d be impressed…” She tugged at 2B’s burned and lacerated flesh, peeling the edges of her wound away from her chassis. “If I wasn’t so livid.”

Pod 042 may have been powerless to harm 2B even for the greater good… but 2B did not have such limitations. She held out her sword, flipping it to a reverse grip. “Go to hell, 6E,” she snarled, driving the blade into her own stomach and impaling both her and 6E.

Next to the pain 6E was inflicting on her, the sword in her gut was nearly a mere pinprick to 2B. She’d positioned the blade to pass through a part of her torso containing little in the way of essential machinery, but hoped she’d gotten 6E where it would hurt the most. 2B grabbed the hilt with both hands and twisted, prompting a ghoulish howl from 6E as she staggered backward and pulled herself off the impromptu skewer. Freed, 2B ducked and rolled out of the way as Pod 042 unloaded on 6E, clutching at her wound as she yanked out the sword; blood and other synthetic fluids pumping through her body leaked out and dripped onto the snow.

With a savage roar, 6E swatted Pod 042 out of the air just as she had Pod 153, tearing through its silvery hull and aiming a blast of fire at its exposed innards. “Damn traitor!” she snarled, bearing down on 2B with her long, fire-coated odachi in hand cutting blazing arcs through the air.

2B scrambled out of the way and with two clean strokes of her sword severed a long, thick length of a tree trunk as she put her distance between herself and 6E. As the treetop fell 2B grabbed the liberated segment of the trunk, her fingertips digging deep into the wood until she had a firm grip, and leaped off of the stump, cutting herself a platform higher up as by decapitating another tall coniferous tree.

Ignoring the error messages flashing across her HUD and the pain shooting up her side, 2B perched on the treetop, sword in one hand and length of lumber on the other, and swung the log like a battering ram. She released her grip and let it sail through the air toward 6E, a large, thick, heavy, improvised projectile with the speed and force of a cannonball.

With a blossom of fire conjured in her free hand, 6E burned the wooden bullet to cinders, laughing at the ease of it all.

2B leaped off her perch behind the projectile log, using the flames as they dispersed as cover; for a split second as she came into view her opponent’s face registered shock. With a mighty swing of the Virtuous Contract 2B lopped off 6E’s left arm at the shoulder, hitting the ground on unsteady legs behind her and tumbling through the snow until she came to a stop lying on her back.

2B raised her head, hoping to see her hated foe bleeding out on the ground. Instead, she saw 6E standing above her with her sword held in her one remaining hand, her complexion livid, chords on her neck standing out as she scowled at 2B.

6E drove her odachi into 2B’s shoulder, just under the edge of her collarbone, and into the frozen
ground, burying it up to its hilt.

The pain was excruciating, finally wrenching a hoarse, agonized scream from 2B’s throat.

6E crouched down and picked up 2B’s sword, admiring the ivory-white blade of the Virtuous Contract as tongues of lilac-colored flames climbed up the sword, then stood up, admiring her handiwork as she panted with exertion, the lavender fire wreathing her body casting an eldritch amethyst glow across the snow and flickering shadows through the trees.

“Do you believe it now, Tooie?” 6E asked. “Do you understand now what makes you broken? Are you prepared to move past them? Or must I sever more of the chains anchoring your heart?”

With her free hand, 2B reached out, trying to grab the sword’s protruding hilt, but the agony wracking her body made it nearly impossible, and her arm went limp at her side.

“No? We’ll see how you feel about coming with me once I’ve come back with your precious Nines’ head in my hand.”

“No!” 2B shouted out, her strangled cry empty and impotent as 6E walked away, whistling.

She lay there as 6E left her behind, the snow numbing the pain engulfing her as she looked up at the stone ceiling wreathed with dark clouds.

Black sky. No stars.

Once again, a good person was dead. Once again, it was 2B’s fault. It followed her like a curse. Even here, in this sanctuary, wherever 2B walked, death followed.

But never for her.

Never, never for her.

Wherever 2B walked, death followed, if not by her hand, then by someone else’s.

The tip of the blade nicked Toriel’s throat and at that exact moment the old monster’s attacks instantly ceased.

2B’s attack, however, did not; the blade kept going, piercing Toriel’s neck just above her collar. Gouts of blood poured down her violet robes, staining them an even deeper black in the flickering and fading firelight.

Toriel gasped and fell to her knees, eyes wide and unfocused, as 2B yanked out the blade. With a weak laugh, she spoke her last words.

“Now I see who I was protecting by keeping you here. Not you... but them…”

She left nothing behind but a bleached pile of dust settling atop a stained and ragged violet robe.

Had Toriel died like that to 6E’s blade, too? Had she died in despair, knowing that 6E would go on to kill more innocents?

Innocent.

That was what Toriel was.
On the surface, nobody was innocent. Everybody had blood on their hands. People like *her* did not exist.

And now, thanks to 6E, one person like *her* no longer existed. 2B couldn’t help but feel that in some small way, a rare, tiny part of the world, so minute but so important, had forever ceased to exist.

*I could undo this,* 2B realized.

*I could erase this horror from history. Just as I did the last time.*

*I could return to the beginning and set everything back the way it was.*

*I could bring her back to life.*

But she knew that in returning to that zero point, that moment she’d come back online after her flight unit had crashed, she wouldn’t just erase this horrible day from her life.

She would lose more than a week.

Her time spent with Toriel, Papyrus and Sans, Alphys, and even Undyne. Discovering Asriel in his strange new form and meeting his eccentric new friend. Helping Alphys prepare her gift for the captain she carried a torch for. Even the “date” 2B been dragged on, the unexpected high point of this miserable day, that moment 2B had allowed a clearly lovestruck Undyne to kiss her even though 2B did not reciprocate her feelings.

The time 9S had sat next to 2B on their first night under this same stone sky and, holding back tears—he’d still *believed* in YoRHa at that point, and the conflict between his duty as a soldier to return to the battlefield and his desire to explore this world at his leisure had been tearing him apart—asked her if the two of them could stay, if only just for a little while, hoping her answer would validate a choice he’d been too afraid to make for himself.

9S.

Nines.

She would erase him again.

Erase him like every other 9S. Like every other 9S, the boy he’d become over the past week would live on only in 2B’s memories. The 9S who’d gaped at 2B in amazement after she’d thrown a snowball at his head. The 9S who’d thrown himself into danger to repair 2B when she’d fallen ill. The 9S who’d made friends with the monsters down in this underground realm so easily (a brief stint as a wanted man notwithstanding). The 9S who wore those adorable pajamas to bed and looked so cute with 2B’s hairband tucked behind his ears. The 9S who’d called her his… *older sister.*

Every Nines had loved her, but no Nines had ever called her that.

Try as she might, she would never be able to recreate him, just as she never could recreate any of the other Nineses she’d killed. The next 9S would be different, and in what ways 2B could not say.

But even so…

2B wanted Toriel back.

She wanted to hug Toriel again. She wanted Toriel to hug her again. She wanted to feel that kindly creature’s furry paw around her hand again. She wanted to share more of those tentative, tender
moments between an old woman who missed having a family and a girl who had never known what it was like to have one.

Snowdin’s general store had a small selection of clothing for the town’s less-winter-adapted citizens—small enough that it wasn’t hard to try on every possible combination of outfit, which had been what Toriel insisted 2B do.

“My Type-B uniform is sufficient,” she’d informed Toriel.

The old ex-queen had not taken that for an answer. “Sufficient? Dear, you are practically nude in that… thing.” She clutched the ragged cloak that made up her disguise tighter around herself. “Are you not cold?”

“My model type is rated for full efficiency in temperatures ranging from minus forty degrees to one hundred degrees Centigrade.”

Toriel merely sighed at 2B’s technical specifications. “True as that may be, I suppose… you cannot wear the same thing every day.”

2B merely looked down at her dress. “I don’t see why not. It is made of self-cleaning nanofibers.”

“If you wear black all the time, everybody will think you are in mourning.”

“Why does that matter?”

The queen’s next sigh was heavier, more exasperated, and with a slow, sad shake of her head she thrust a pile of clothing into 2B’s arms. “Please, 2B, try on one outfit. Whichever you’d like. The change will make you feel better, I assure you.”

With that, she’d directed 2B to a fitting room.

With a quiet, resigned sigh 2B closed the door behind her, locking herself in a cubicle scarcely wide enough for her to spread her arms out, and stripped off her gloves, peeled off her boots, removed her skirt, and pulled her bodice over her head, reducing her to the standard white singlet beneath her uniform. She neatly folded her clothes when done and set them on the narrow bench next to the stack of clothing Toriel had picked out for her.

She picked out the first two items in the stack. A simple button-down blouse, white cotton. Equally-simple slacks. Khaki. They fit well.

In the thin, floor-length mirror mounted on the wall, 2B saw someone who was certainly not a soldier staring back at her. She didn’t look like YoRHa anymore. In fact, she didn’t look like any android she’d ever seen before. Her transformation left her awestruck.

Toriel rapped on the door. “2B, have you chosen something yet? May I see it?” she called out in a soft, quiet voice.

2B found herself taking a deep breath, as if revealing her chosen outfit was as nerve-wracking as leaping into a den of machines, before letting the door to the fitting room swing open.

“Oh,” Toriel said.
“Oh?”


2B didn’t know how to answer. Was she ready for this? A clean break from her past life? Was she as prepared as she’d thought to accept that her old life was truly over?

“Wait. I wish to see something. Remain here until I return.” Toriel hurried off, returning a moment later with a flat, paneled wool hat and a scarf, both the same shade of pale gray-blue. Brimming with excitement, she nestled the cap atop 2B’s head and tied the scarf around her neck. “Please, my child, tell me what you think!”

For once, 2B didn’t know what she thought. She looked back at the mirror, then back at Toriel, waiting for an answer to come to her.

One did not. She could not put the emotion running through her head into words.

The smile vanished from the old ex-queen’s face. “I—I haven’t pushed you into anything uncomfortable, have I?”

“No, I—” 2B shook her head. “I… like this. But why are you doing this for me?”

“Well, I suppose… it has just been a very long time since anybody has needed my help dressing themselves,” Toriel admitted. She placed her paws on 2B’s shoulders and pulled her in for a hug. “For what my opinion is worth, I think you look adorable.”

Muscles tugged involuntarily at the corners of 2B’s mouth. “Your opinion, Your Highness,” she whispered, “is worth very much.”

2B pushed the memory aside, squeezing her eyes shut to dull the pain and staunch the flow of tears, hot and salty on her skin against the frozen pinpricks of snowflakes speckling her skin. Save for executing 9S, the one activity she hated above all else was crying, and it was fitting that she usually did both simultaneously. There was no worse sensation than the gaping hollow it left in her chest and the pit in her stomach, as if more than just tears exited her body in the process.

6E had been right. 2B was soft now, weak, vulnerable because for once, 9S wasn’t the only person in the world she cared about. The heartache she now felt… that was the price of love. Just as 6E had suggested, because 2B had allowed yet another person into her heart, she was…

Broken.

But… if androids like her were built to do nothing but kill, why were they made in the image of humans? Why allow them to weep at all?

“Q-Q-Query: Un… it 2B. I-Is… Is Unit 2-2B funct-t-t-tional?”

She opened her eyes.

Black sky. No stars.

2B turned her head, seeing through a veil of tears the blurry sight of her downed and mangled
support pod, its sheared-apart silver hull a black silhouette against the snow, dragging itself toward her with its single remaining manipulator arm.

“Quer-Query: is U-U-Unit 2B…”

“Affirmative,” 2B answered. In the several years she’d been active, she’d been overjoyed to see a pod on only a few occasions. This was one of them. “Unit 2B… is functional.”

“A-Analysis: Unit 2B is… is… in… jured…”

2B nodded. “Yes. Unit 2B is injured.”

“Analys-s-sis: Unit 2B is hurt.” Pod 042 reached her side, its cracked and sheared hull, frigid from the cold air, brushing against the skin of 2B’s shoulder through her sleeve. Agonized and battered servo matters whined and whirred as the pod lifted its claw and wrapped it around the hilt of the odachi plunged into 2B’s shoulder. “State… ment: P-Pod 042 will… assist.”

The sound of her pod struggling with what little life it had left to free her was so horribly pathetic it made 2B want to turn her ears off. The blade pulled out a handful of centimeters and 2B gasped as fresh jolts of pain traveled from the wound across her body like the ripples of a stone skipped across a lake.

The blip of an approaching black box signal appeared on 9S’s HUD, and as he ran down the trail leading through the woods he informed Undyne.

“Th-Think it might be 2B?” Undyne asked, grinning through chattering teeth.

“If we’re lucky,” 9S drew the Cruel Oath. Nothing that had happened today had been lucky. If 9S had been afflicted by the same mental deficiencies that compelled humans to gamble, he’d have thought he was “due” for some luck. He knew, though, that such superstitions of probability were foolish to entertain.

As the blip came closer and closer 9S pulled ahead of Undyne and left her behind, the captain faltering under her own lack of stamina (compared to an android, of course) and the harsh climate taking its toll on her body.

It was unfathomable that 2B would need his help at all. Not 2B. Not the strongest android he’d ever known. But 6E… just being around her did something to 2B. It cut through the stoic facade she kept up. He didn’t know much about 2B’s relationship with 6E, but he did know that 6E’s mere presence was like poison to her, eating at her like acid etching through metal, and 9S wondered if it was because 6E was everything 2B was supposed to be.

He had to get to 2B.

Before it was too late.

True to his intuition, the android who came down the path to meet him was none other than 6E, stripped of her armor, minus an arm, covered in blood, but triumphantly wielding 2B’s own sword as a strange amethyst-colored aura surrounded her.

She’d fought. She’d fought like hell.

And it was obvious who the victor had been.
With a wild, vengeful battle cry 9S attacked, the fear that 2B had been killed pushing all sense of logic and reason from his head. At that moment he became less a Scanner and more a berserker motivated by sheer rage and hatred.

Virtuous Contract met Cruel Oath, a blood-soaked ivory blade against a sword colored a polished brassy bronze-copper, sparks flying between the two of them.

Even with one arm, 6E was a formidable foe, and she laughed as she rebuffed 9S’s assault. “Getting in on that vengeance a little early, are we, Nines?” she asked, giggling as she handily knocked 9S to the ground.

Further incensed, 9S pushed onward, a flurry of strikes driving 6E back before she locked her blade against 9S’s. “Where’s 2B?” he shouted at her, the spit that flew at her face sizzling as it met her aura. “What have you done to her?”

6E’s blood-soaked grin stretched from ear to ear. “Why, I killed her. With her own late master’s sword! Just as I’m going to kill you with her sword…” The Virtuous Contract inched closer to 9S’s face as 6E forced him onto his knees. “Which will in the near future become my sword…”

“You won’t have a future!” 9S retorted. With an anguished howl tearing through his very soul he parried 6E, forcing himself back on his feet and planting his foot on 6E’s torso. 6E stumbled backward but did not fall; the pale violet aura surrounding her congealed into translucent wisps of lilac fire and shaped themselves into an ethereal arm to replace the one she’d lost against 2B.

9S stared on in shock, barely comprehending what he was seeing, as Undyne caught up to him with her spear at the ready. “Wh… What the hell are you?” he gasped.

“I guess,” 6E said with a grin as she flexed her fiery bicep and curled her ethereal fingers around the hilt of the Virtuous Contract, a twinkle in her eyes, “you can say I’ve got royal blood.”

Undyne rushed past 9S with an enraged roar, arcs of lightning trailing like streamers off of her, and with a single swing 6E cut her down.

9S watched the Captain fall, a trail of sparks and dust flying from a gaping wound in her side nearly bisecting her, the moment seeming to freeze time around it.

He stumbled backward, his legs sluggish despite every subroutine in his body screaming with adrenaline, as 6E raised her sword and prepared to do to him what she’d done to Undyne so easily.

Undyne had never known Queen Toriel Dreemurr. Only what she’d read in the history books, the lessons she’d half-slept through in school while daydreaming of glory and adventure.

History did not speak kindly of Toriel—a woman who had cast her kingdom aside in shame while her husband announced a plan to bring hope back to the Underground—the way it spoke of King Asgore. Yet, as Undyne had trained under Asgore, as she had found herself under his kind and careful tutelage, she had seen how much Asgore still pined for her and how empty his home still felt even so many years later in those quiet moments between the two of them when Asgore felt permitted to show weakness over a cup of his favorite tea.

Asgore still loved Toriel. Now she was gone. Even though Undyne never knew the exiled queen, she could anticipate Asgore’s despair were he to learn what happened here tonight. She could feel the sorrow he would feel as acutely as if it were her own.
That despair and the despair Undyne had felt the instant that fiery blade had chewed through her coat, armor, scales, flesh, and bone alike were both beyond anything she had ever felt.

Of course, her training had prepared her to handle the knowledge that someone she’d sworn to protect was dead. Through rigorous exercises and role-play she’d taught herself to never give up, to not let the knowledge of failure overwhelm or paralyze her, to keep on fighting and make the bastards pay.

But no amount of training could tell you how to handle a mortal wound. Those things—wounds like the one she’d just been given—they dusted monsters instantly, the killing intents behind them often so strong that a monster’s morphogenetic field would break down without a moment’s hesitation.

Undyne could feel her body splitting apart, like any second now she would scatter into a million pieces carried on the cold wind.

But something kept her going.

▫▫▫

2B took a deep breath as Pod 042 silently lamented the horrible damage it had occurred and its inability to help free 2B from the sword pinning her to the ground. “Pod 042… it’s okay.”

A feeble orange light blinked within the pod’s torn and mangled chassis. “N-Negative. Unit 9S is—is in… dan… ger. S-Scans detect… black box signal… heading this way. D-Direct collision… with 6E.” 042 pulled the blade out another few centimeters. “Statement: Unit 2B’s p-physical condition is directly correlated… to U-Unit 9S’s p-physical condition.”

2B mustered a weary, appreciative smile. Pod 042 had always known her so well.

“Let me handle it.” 2B lifted her hand, her numbing fingers sliding off Pod 042’s claws as she tried to grasp the hilt itself.

Pod 042 tried to pull the blade out another few centimeters, only for its claws to slip away from the hilt. Its arm hung frozen in place, its servo motors still protesting.

2B’s fingers curled around the hilt and she picked up where her pod had left off. She could hear faint screeching as the sharp blade ground against her metal endoskeleton and subdermal chassis. Every throbbing ache made the world around her just a little darker, just a little colder.

*Nines.*

She kept going.

▫▫▫

A glowing spear cast a blue-green light across the snow and drove shadows from the surrounding spears as Captain Undyne of the Royal Guard stood between 9S and 6E despite nearly being torn asunder. Her spear, held in a death-grip, crackled and pulsed, bolts of lightning rhythmically curling around it. Static, warm and numb, washed through her body and those of the androids in time with the pulses.

The look on 6E’s face was almost *worth* the agony tearing Undyne apart. The crestfallen, gobsmacked “you-should-be-dead” look, the “what-the-hell-are-you” look, the “how-can-this-be-happening” look.
“Deep… deep in my soul…” Undyne huffed, the reverberations from her spear striking 6E’s katana sending electric jolts through muscles that desperately wanted to unknit themselves, “there’s a burning feeling I can’t describe… a burning feeling that won’t let me die.”

That sensation, that strange feeling of fullness in her heart that pushed against the emptiness filling her body, chained every cell of her body to its peers.

Determination.

Slowly but surely 2B worked the sword out of her body, willing herself to feel a single-minded determination blocking out everything else. The pain was excruciating. In the minutes that passed her vision gradually became grainier and lower-resolution, shadowy trees black against the black sky growing progressively blockier and blockier.

Determination.

“This isn’t just about monsters, is it?” Undyne asked, forcing 6E to dig in her heels as strength renewed flowed through her veins, electricity carried on her blood as it spurted from her wound and splattered on the churned snow beneath her feet. “I know what kind of person you are. If you get past me… you won’t stop with us, will you?”

It didn’t take long for the hilt of 6E’s odachi to rise so high into the air that 2B could no longer reach it, try as she might to stretch her arm far enough. The blade wasn’t even halfway out, the rest of its length buried in the frozen soil beneath her.

Fresh tears sprang to 2B’s eyes behind her visor as her arm fell limply once again to her side. What was she going to do now? She wouldn’t be able to catch up to 6E like this. She was going to lose everything else.

“Papyrus… Alphys… Asgore… Everyone… everybody in this kingdom… and even beyond…” Lightning crackled around and through Undyne’s body just as fire wreathed 6E’s android frame, aquamarine needles darting between severed muscles and bones and winding through the gap between flesh, cradling her heart and forcing it to keep pumping, forcing her lungs to keep expanding and contracting, forcing her gills to keep flapping. “Everyone’s hopes. Everyone’s dreams. Vanquished without care or reason, just to sate a lust for death…”

Pod 042’s battered and beaten arm whirred back to life and it reached over to 2B’s face, brushed a lock of her hair away from her cheek, and tucked it behind her ear. “State… ment: I h-h-have the auth… ority to c-c-close Unit 2B’s tear… d-ducts… if Unit 2B would p—if you w-w-w-w-would… pre… fer…”

2B remembered the sight of 9S falling dead to the ground. Again and again. A sword in his back, in his chest, across his throat, through his eye. She knew what it looked like to watch him die.

There were so many times he died by her hand where he looked almost… peaceful. As if he’d
accepted his fate. He would not experience such bliss if 6E killed him.

If 9S was still alive, 6E would surely make certain he died slowly and agonizingly. Not just to sate her psychopathic lust for violence, but to prove to 2B once and for all the folly of her feelings toward him.

“No, Pod 042.” Steeling herself and squeezing her eyes shut, 2B curled her fingers around the blade itself, the sharp edge cutting into her skin. “That… will not be necessary.” She did her best to pull the sword out even as her fingers slid up the blade and blood trickled down the polished steel.

2B wouldn’t let 6E hurt 9S. No matter what.

“But I won’t let you do that!” Undyne shouted, gritting her teeth as she struggled to both keep herself whole and hold 6E back. “Right now, everyone’s hearts are beating as one! I can feel their hearts and hear their thoughts, their hopes, their dreams! I, Undyne, the Spear of Justice, the hope of the world…”

2B sucked down and expelled lungfuls of air with every few centimeters the sword slid out, willing the pain away, until at last the sword, all 170 centimeters of its blade, came free and fell out of her blood-slicked grip. She screamed as the tip of the blade slipped out.

For a few seconds, all she could do was lie there in the snow, panting and gasping for air as the wound tunneling through her shoulder pulsed and throbbed.

At last, a breakthrough, the pain flooding her body replaced by a rush of endorphins forcing the last clouds of agony from her mind. Lightning rippled across her scaly muscles as Undyne broke 6E’s stance and shoved her to the ground.

Undyne stood tall, twirling her spear as lightning bounced between it and the electricity curling around her body, feeling stronger and more determined than she’d ever been before. “I, Undyne, will strike you down!”

6E took a combat stance, the amethyst aura surrounding her sparking and spitting as it blazed anew, her face a mask of indignant rage, as if Undyne’s continued existence, her determination, was offensive.

Undyne found herself smirking. “You’re gonna have to try harder than that.”

“Query: U-Unit 2B… do… you… f-f-f-for… give… me?”

2B sat up. Grateful gulps of nourishing air slowly brought her fading systems into a stable, albeit undesirable equilibrium. Her right arm was numb and limp from the shoulder, where 6E had impaled her; her left arm worked, but the fingers on her left hand were barely mobile, the skin around the inner joints of her knuckles flayed and bloody. Mingled snow and sweat soaked her back, the cold air setting on it like flies on a dead animal.

She looked down at Pod 042, reaching out with tortured and frozen fingers to caress the poor pod.
“It’s okay. I—After all we’ve been through, I knew you would come around eventually, programming be damned. Thank you, Pod 042. For what you’ve done for me here.”

“Analysis: Unit 2-2B. Y-You are at mi—minimum c-combat effect-t-tiveness. I… am s-sorry.”

“You did your best. You are a pod. That is all you can do.”

“S-Statement: I—I have en—enough energy to r-run one final program…” Pod 042 tried to wave its arm. It hung motionless in midair.

2B nodded. “Understood.” She did what she could to scoop the pod up, cradling it under her remaining functional arm, and rose to unsteady feet. “We… only get one shot. Point me in 6E’s direction.”

Flames danced through the air, setting trees alight with reckless abandon as 6E dodged salvo after salvo of spears. The magical energies nourishing her body made her far faster, far stronger, and far more durable than any enemy 9S had ever found himself fighting save for the most advanced Goliath-class machines, and even with Undyne’s incredible power at her disposal, icy fear gripped 9S’s black box.

9S staggered back, throwing off his coat as hungry flames engulfed it and letting the cold air seep through his shirt and prickle his skin. Blood oozed from a wound in his side where 6E’s sword—2B’s sword, it had to still be hers, 2B couldn’t be dead—had bitten him.

“9S!” Undyne called out, her voice hoarse from screaming, her spear twisting around 6E’s sword as the two of them fought for an opening in each other’s defenses. “Hack her so I can pin her down!”

“Got it!” 9S called out in return. He hated having to relay his plans so obviously in front of the enemy, but that was the price you paid when your only ally was made of meat. Or meat and magic, or whatever monsters were made of.

Undyne engaged 6E with renewed zeal to keep her from going after 9S, crackling lightning and crackling fire meeting each other and throwing whirling eddies of sparks through the air. The two of them fought like titans, primordial elemental forces clashing with the zeal of an apocalypse in miniature. The chaotic patterns of lavender and aquamarine were almost beautiful, although 9S had no opportunity to dwell on them as he held out his hand and tried to get a bead on 6E through the maelstrom.

The world around him vanished—replaced with the familiar monochrome world of hacking space, a world where he was a god.

Bypassing 6E’s firewalls was easy. The defenses guarding her motor systems were nothing for a master hacker like 9S. He darted through barriers and barricades, laying waste to digital defense emplacements with the goal to inflict as much damage—permanent damage—on 6E’s systems as possible.

But to 9S’s surprise, lavender fire—the same fire wreathing 6E’s body—crept into hacking space, surrounding him like invading kudzu vines, tightening around him. Try as he might, as adept as he was, nothing he did could clear away the literal firewall blocking his paths. It was as if the magic integrated with 6E’s body was creeping into her systems like a three-dimensional object invading the two-dimensional world, an invader incapable of being fully comprehended within hacking space yet capable of affecting it.
What the hell is 6E?

9S screamed as the feedback overloaded his systems, yanking himself out of hacking space as his visual processor glitched out with wild abandon and his limbs seized up. He fell to the snowy ground, writhing as his limbs contorted themselves, wheezing and gasping for breath. All of the visual data on his HUD—health readouts, radar, sound data, *et cetera*—turned to gibberish.

“The energy of ten thousand monsters courses through my body!” Undyne shouted out, her spear dancing around 6E as bolts of lightning shot up from the ground around her and froze into place, creating an ethereal forest within the forest. “Their combined hopes, their dreams, their rage screams at me to defeat you!”

6E took the grandiose speech in stride as she held her own against the captain’s furious attacks, her face contorted in a grimacing rictus as emerald faerie-lights crept up her legs and rooted her to the spot. With the android pinned and writhing uselessly, Undyne drew back her fist, a crackling spearhead wreathed in bluish sparks and arcs of lightning coalescing over her knuckles. “Spear of the Undying, strike down my foe!”

Undyne’s mighty spear-strike tore through 6E’s magically-conjured arm, reducing it to a flurry of sparks, and macerated the flesh on the left side of her torso, prompting the android to wail in pain as electricity coursed through her body, leaving livid and jagged scars radiating across her skin like cracks in a pane of glass. 6E flew through the air, her own fiery aura failing to catch up with her body and hanging in the air like a ghost before dispersing, and collided with a tree, the impact of her fall tearing it to pieces.

Undyne collapsed to her knees, spent, dust trailing off her body as she panted and gulped every breath of air as if it could be her last, the electric aura surrounding her growing fainter and fainter.

9S pulled himself to his feet, hardly believing what he’d bore witness to, and made his way to Undyne’s side. Her scaly face had gone gaunt, giving 9S the strangest impression she was somehow being hollowed out from the inside.

“Who’d have thought,” 9S said, “that you monsters had a berserker mode, too?”

Undyne smiled weakly. “A what?”

“Older YoRHa types had them in lieu of a self-destruct system. When engaged the android would overclock all of her systems until they burned out. Pretty useful. Not sure why they got rid of it.”

Undyne’s smile turned into a laugh. “Yup. That’s me, all right…” She sighed, gazing into the smoldering trees. “I think I’m spent. Dunno how much longer I’ve got. When you get back to town… tell Alphys I—I really liked dating her, okay?”

9S nodded. “I will. Fighting at your side has been an honor, ma’am,” he told her, holding his hand to his chest.

The silence that had overcome the din of battle and blanketed the forest vanished as with an enraged and agonized scream 6E pulled herself to her feet, her aura still flickering faintly around her as it sought to hold her battered, burned, bloody body together. Her skin was split open in dozens of places, the edges of the holes all cauterized and blackened, revealing the pale and soot-smeared shell of her chassis beneath the thin layer of synthetic flesh and muscle.

9S forced himself to stand, drew his sword, and charged at 6E. He had to keep fighting. He couldn’t let 6E get away. He couldn’t let her live! If it was the last thing he ever did, he had to send her
straight to hell!

His hoarse battle cry caught 6E’s attention, but only barely, and with a sadistic grin she tossed aside her sword—knowing she didn’t need it to defeat him—and grappled with 9S. With only one arm she snapped 9S’s right arm like a twig, bending the joint in his elbow so far in the opposite direction 9S could hear the servos within whine and scream over his own screams of agony before the mechanisms broke down. She went to work on his legs next, her stomping feet cracking 9S’s chassis and breaking the mechanisms and bones within, hobbling him.

6E flung 9S’s battered and broken body away and as he hit the ground he tried to scuttle away, pulling himself with his remaining good arm, nearly weeping from the pain. Crippled, humiliated, anguished. He and Undyne had given it their all. 2B was dead and—

And he couldn’t do anything.

Forget vengeance for 2B’s sake. He couldn’t even look after himself.

“2B…” he whimpered, trying in vain to escape 6E as she loomed over him—she was savoring every second he spent lying helpless before her, and he knew it—and hauling his battered body through the snow, “I… I’m sorry…”

“Oh, you should be, darling.” 6E conjured the Virtuous Contract back to her hand. “You know, Nines, when I said I killed her with this sword… I was lying. Actually, I’m keeping her alive long enough to bring her back your head.”

Pod 042 guided 2B along as she stumbled through the forest. 2B picked up the pace as much as she could despite her body’s protestations, one thousand ways 9S could die running in a loop in her head.

At last, in a clearing in the forest, she caught up.

6E stood in front of 9S, the flaming aura surrounding her weak and faint as if she’d reduced the reserves of magic lent by Toriel’s soul to its dregs. 9S was crawling away as best he could, his right arm and both legs burned, bloody, and mangled. He was panting, his face ashen, his visor crumpled and hanging askew and letting one of his eyes peek out from under it.

At last, this time 2B wasn’t too late.

2B stood behind 6E as her foe took slow, deliberate steps toward 9S. 6E was too busy relishing in the terror writ all over 9S’s face to notice 2B. She took a deep, shuddering breath to fill her aching lungs, aiming Pod 042 as best she could. “Pod 042,” she whispered. “On my mark. Laser.”

She swallowed the last of her trepidation.

It was time to end this.

“GET AWAY FROM HIM, YOU BITCH!”

Pod 042 exploded in 2B’s grasp, showering her with white-hot shrapnel that set her clothes aflame and chewed through her skin and the hard android chassis beneath with equal ease.

6E turned around to face the source of the outburst just in time for a burst of white-hot light to strike her between the eyes, vaporizing her head, burning away first her hair and skin and synthetic carbon-
fiber muscles, then eating away at her metal skull until nothing remained but the sharp smell of burnt ozone and atomized alloys. The fire climbing her body burst into a flurry of impotent sparks.

6E’s decapitated body, smoke curling from the blackened stump of her neck, remained standing for a few seconds before crumpling to the ground.

2B lay sprawled on the ground, her synthetic fluids—blood, coolant, oils, various electrical fluids—pooling around her through tattered clothes and shredded skin, all of the shards of Pod 042 embedded in her body forming pinpricks of agony as bright and multitudinous as the stars in the sky. A constant low beeping in her ears made her condition clear even without her HUD flashing rows and rows of error messages before her eyes, as it was doing now.

Condition critical.

It hurt even to breathe.

“N—Nine…”

Although her voice was quiet, 9S heard her calling his name and pulled himself over to her, his single visible eye widening as he gazed in horror at her wounds. Even though 9S was close enough to her that his nose nearly touching hers, 2B couldn’t see the blue in his eye. Everything was gray now, her visual processors too weak now to discern color.

“2B…” he gasped, his voice shaking as he reached down and curled his fingers around the back of 2B’s neck, helping her raise her head. “God, you’re a mess.”

“Is s-she dead?”

9S nodded as he did his best with his remaining functional arm to prop 2B up, supporting her with his own body. He didn’t look much better than her; shards of synthetic bone and cracked subdermal casing jutted out of the broken and shredded flesh of his legs and right arm, synthetic fluids pouring from lacerations in his skin.

“Mission complete… Unit 6E… is dead.” 2B felt lightheaded. “I… It’s… pretty bad,” she asked, “isn’t it?”

“You’ll be fine.” 9S laid his head on her shoulder. 2B gasped and stifled a scream as the weight of his head pressed down on her wound, and with nearly-paralyzed fingers hooked his collar and pulled him along until he was resting his cheek against her bosom instead.

“Sorry,” said 9S, curling up next to 2B as the slow rise and fall of her chest soothed him.

The warmth of his body, torn and mangled as it was, brought just as much comfort to 2B as the weight of his head pressed down on her wound, and with nearly-paralyzed fingers hooked his collar and pulled him along until he was resting his cheek against her bosom instead.

For once, she…

2B swallowed hard as the text scrolling across her HUD became more frantic.

For once, she would die before him.

“Nines, I…”

9S put a finger to her lips. “Shh. Don’t strain yourself.”

Undyne limped over, her once-cerulean scales pale and pallid as gray-white dust flaked off her body.
"Alphys is in town. She'll fix you two up. Don’t worry. It’s over.” She fell to her knees in front of the two androids, pulling off her eyepatch to reveal both her weary eyes before reaching out to help 2B and 9S remove their visors. “I—I’m sorry we couldn’t save the Queen, but… despite everything, I’m just glad you guys are all right.”

9S chuckled at Undyne’s choice of words.

“Okay… for a certain value of ‘all right,’” Undyne admitted.

The gladness 2B had felt seeing 9S alive began to fade. She knew she was dying. And when she did, when the last electrical signal in her silicon brain fell silent, the reset would roll on, an inexorable, involuntary process that would carry her back to that single turning point in her life to do it all again.

Though time had only tied itself to her lifespan once she’d passed through the Barrier—an aftereffect of its magical energies, she supposed—this was just another manifestation of a curse she knew intimately.

She would live. She would live eternally. Everybody she loved would die. Everybody she cared for would die eternally. Only she alone would persist. That was how it always was. That was how it always would be.

“Nines…” She hooked her fingers into his tangled and blood-matted silver hair. Why did it always have to happen like this? Why couldn’t she for once just live with 9S? “I—I don’t want to go…”

“You’ll make it, 2B,” 9S insisted.

“You don’t understand.” 2B shook her head, then she glanced up at Undyne. “… I have to tell you both something. I don’t know why this happens. But… when I die… time turns itself backward. Back… to the time we first came to this place. Everything that has happened since then will be erased. You… Toriel…”

“So she’ll be alive again?” Undyne asked.

2B nodded, her response brightening the captain’s eye.

9S took the news better than 2B had expected. “Well, um… that, uh, kinda explains a lot. I sorta got this feeling you’d been here before and weren’t telling me.”

“I don’t want to erase you again, but…” 2B sniffled. “But I wish this day had never happened,” she whimpered.

Undyne let out a bitter half-laugh and nodded. “Me too. Well… most of it,” she admitted.

“Most of it,” 2B agreed. She thought she knew which part of the day Undyne was referring to. “Captain… I’m surprised you feel the way you do.”

“H-Hey. You may be a bit of a wallflower,” Undyne said, forcing a snagletoothed smile as she brushed away the hair that fell in front of 2B’s eyes, her fingertips leaving behind traces of dust that clung to 2B’s skin, “but you’re gorgeous and a badass to boot. I—I’m proud to have been your friend, 2B. And you too, 9S.”

“You won’t be for long,” 2B said, lamenting the cruelty of this cycle she always found herself trapped in. “No… I—I’m not going to make it. This world… these memories… the time we spent together… will all be erased.”
“Then,” Undyne said faintly, “I—I guess we’ll see each other soon, 2B. Let’s hope we’ll be friends again.” With that the captain smiled at 2B one last time before crumbling away, leaving nothing behind but a cold wind whistling through the trees.

Silence blanketed the forest one more time, a silence broken only by the slow beeping that served as a constant reminder of 2B’s encroaching mortality.

“C’mon, 2B,” 9S insisted, reaching up to caress 2B’s face, her touch light and warm on her bloodied and burned skin. “You’ve survived worse.”

“With the Bunker and the backup system, I have,” 2B clarified. “I’m sorry. The you that exists at this moment, Nines… will never exist again. It’s our curse.” She craned her neck and looked up at the black, indistinct sky. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“With the backup…” 9S took a deep breath. “2B. When you go back in time… only you remember what happened, right?”

2B nodded.

“So everything goes back to the way it was when you started… except the data stored within your brain?”

“Yes. I—I suppose.”

“You can transmit data back to the past.” 9S’s voice began to brighten. “2B, anything you store in your memories, you can bring back with you!”

2B understood what 9S was figuring out, but shook her head. “It won’t work, 9S. An image file of your consciousness… would take too long to transmit. More time than I have.”

“Oh, come on, 2B. I just have to store the past week. And even then, I can use thin provisioning and cut down on the file size by deduplicating my memories,” 9S explained, his words nearly tripping on themselves on the way out. He was smiling the way he always did when he figured something out. “When we reset, just have me hack you and pull the relevant files out. Then I’ll remember this, too.” His fingers gripped her tighter. “I’m not gonna let you lose me again, 2B.”

2B sighed, almost not wanting to believe there could be such an easy way out. “Do it.”

9S closed his eyes, laid his hand on 2B’s forehead, and began to collect his thoughts. 2B felt snatches of sights and sounds flit through her head too quickly for her to dwell on as 9S set up a partition in her mind and began depositing his memories, the core of his self. She had too much respect for 9S to peek at his memories, but a few of them flashed past her mind’s eye too vividly for her to ignore. She could see herself from his eyes in brief flashes, herself as 9S saw her, and read a snippet of text stating that her eyes were the same shade of slate-gray-blue as the surface of a lake during a rainstorm.

2B couldn’t help but smile. That was what he thought of her? It was so stupidly poetic, she wanted to gag on it.

After a long while, 9S collapsed in 2B’s lap. “It… it’s done. Fingers crossed.”

2B stroked his hair, her aching, half-frozen fingers catching on snarls and snags as they raked through his matted silver locks. She let her tears flow freely now. “Nines…”

“It’ll work. I promise.”
“All the memories, all the experiences I’m about to erase… not just yours, but everybody’s—just to save two people… Nines, tell me this is the right thing to do. Tell me it’s okay to let go. Tell me and I’ll believe you.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” 9S assured her. “Don’t worry so much. 2B, I… I’m not sure we’re just the sum of our memories anymore… Sometimes I feel like… deep down, subconsciously, I know things that have happened to other versions of me. I think everyone else is like that, too. Our souls… they hold more than mere data, even for us androids, and they follow us, no matter what body we occupy…”

“Thank you.” 2B closed her eyes. She laid down and let the still, gravely silence filling the forest envelop her. Even the gentle buzz of her black box and 9S’s, both humming in harmony, faded away, as did the softness and warmth of his bare neck beneath her hand. In spite of 9S’s enthusiasm that his plan would work, she could not help but feel she was on the cusp of losing him again. In her last moments, she longed only to hold him, her only family, closer, to be reassured by his presence before her body failed at last and this world was consigned to oblivion.

The last sensation she felt was the sensation of a pair of tear-wetted, chapped lips brushing against her cheek.

The last thing she heard was 9S’s voice, a softly whispered and faltering I love you, 2B.

2B thought she said I love you too in response but could neither hear or feel if she really had.

Please, 2B pleaded in her head to whatever force in the cold, indifferent universe might listen, if you would just let me have my Nines, if I could just salvage some of him this time…

[of course]

Chara found themselves alive again, and more than that, they found themselves somewhere they never would have expected to turn up after a reset.

Well, they said to themselves, fighting the urge to laugh, this… is interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Ending C: lingering [C]urse

[of course]

So………

That was Route C.

And with that, my backlog is obliterated, so the updates might come a bit slower from here on out. Stay tuned for Route D!
Chapter Summary

Hello children, it's time to start Route D! Let's see what everyone's up to in the post-reset world!

Chapter Notes

Thanks for waiting so patiently for the next chapter after the Route C finale, I'd have been able to get it out a few days earlier if I hadn't been busy polishing up the final chapters of my other in-progress fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Asriel cherished the time he spent with Emil.

The prince hated the body he was trapped in—this ugly round metal thing, hard and cold with jagged edges, and covered in rust and moss. But it wasn’t so bad. Emil didn’t like the body he had either but shouldered his burden (as best he could without shoulders) with infectious cheer. When Asriel fell asleep in Emil’s little shack tucked away in Temmie Village, the boyish-voiced stone orb cradled in his metal arms, he hardly cared that he didn’t have his fur anymore.

He and Emil were alike in so many other ways, too.

Emil had problems with his memory too, so when Asriel pondered the massive blank spots in his life he could not recall (like how he’d ended up like this and what had happened to Chara), Emil was there to commiserate. The two of them shared what little they did remember over the course of the day they spent searching for the one other thing that Asriel and Emil found in common between the two of them.

Both of them loved flowers.

Asriel was partial to the golden flowers that grew in scattered places throughout the Underground. They were more like weeds than flowers, to be honest—hardy and tough, they grew everywhere and dug in their roots. Chara had loved those flowers. They had spoken of them often, the flowers that grew in their hometown, and—

Come to think of it, Asriel had no idea how those precious golden flowers had made their way down here. Chara had occasionally despaired of the lack of familiar flora in the kingdom and wished they could go back to the horrible, violent, evil world of the surface if only to bring down one of those sweet flowers. Someone else must have brought them down here in the long centuries Asriel had been dead.

Emil’s favorite flower couldn’t have been more different from those golden flowers. It was called a Lunar Tear, and the way Emil spoke of it, it must have been beautiful and sweet-smelling beyond compare. Lunar Tears were nothing like Asriel’s favorite flowers: they were fragile, needy creatures,
Difficult to grow and harder to keep alive. Emil had rolled into the depths of the Underground in search of just one of those flowers and had become trapped by the Barrier, but in all the time he’d been down here, he’d never been able to find one while searching on (proverbial) foot.

Like Asriel’s precious golden flowers, Lunar Tears meant something important to Emil. Even if he couldn’t quite recall what that was.

After the two of them had met, Asriel spent an entire day carrying Emil around and exploring parts of Waterfall the stone head could not reach on his own. At last, just as they both began to feel fatigue setting in, they found a single Lunar Tear nestled among a cluster of buzzing Echo Flowers. The flower’s silky white petals glowed with a soft white light, and Asriel and Emil basked in that glow for what felt like hours.

A flicker of memory came back to Emil. He said the flower reminded him of… a girl with silver hair he’d once known (Asriel wondered if that kind, yet icy woman who’d found him the other day was related to her somehow). And he remembered carefully cultivating a field of Lunar Tears and doing all he could to guard them against the encroaching and all-consuming desert.

With that soothing vision of a whole field of shining Lunar Tears in his head, Asriel fell asleep that night with Emil at his side. He dreamed of electric sheep grazing in that field.

But the next day, he woke up alone.

All alone, and with the Lunar Tear he had worked so hard to help Emil find nowhere in sight.

Asriel trudged through the slick, mossy tunnels of Waterfall, calling Emil’s name with the harsh, robotic, ring-modulated voice he couldn’t help but speak in.

 underscore underscore underscore

During her late afternoon workout, Captain Undyne of King Asgore’s Royal Guard stumbled and nearly fell off her treadmill, struck with a sense of deja-vu so powerful it was unlike any she could remember feeling before.

Shrugging it off, she stepped off the treadmill, mopping sweat off her damp, shimmering blue scales and downing a bottle of water to quench her thirst. As she caught her breath, snatches of visions drifted through her mind like fragments of a half-remembered dream, and Undyne found herself struggling to hold onto them for some reason—she’d never had to try so hard to recall a dream like this before.

It had been the strangest dream. There were two humans who’d fallen into the underground, yet instead of capturing them and bringing them to Asgore to save the kingdom, Undyne had, of all things, befriended them. One was a boy with silver hair. He was a huge dork and a nice kid, but if you got on his bad side he turned into kind of a psycho. The other was an older girl, maybe his sister? And despite having a pretty stoic attitude she’d been gorgeous, like someone out of one of Alphys’ animes.

And their names were—

What were their names again?

Undyne shook her head and draped her towel over the handlebars of the treadmill, then went back to her routine. Within a few minutes, the last vestiges of the dream and the sense of deja-vu that had nearly paralyzed her had faded away completely. She moved onto weight training and bench pressed two other members of the Guard.
Doctor Alphys, Fifty-Seventh Royal Scientist of the Dreemurr Dynasty, had been feeding the Memoryheads when the same feeling that had overcome Captain Undyne reached her.

Two humans. No, not humans, machines. Androids. Both with silver hair, one a boy, the other a girl. And their names were…

Did they even have names? No, numbers. Nine and Two.

One of the Amalgamates let out a mewling burst of static and prodded Alphys’ foot, begging for an extra morsel of food. The pins-and-needles sensation shocked Alphys out of her reverie, and she thought nothing more of her weird daydream as she stooped down to attend to the living monuments to her scientific follies.

The numbers kept coming back to her throughout the day, popping out at her the way a word would on the first day she learned it, but those numbers, nine and two, meant nothing to her except that they added up to eleven.

Toriel was tidying up the puzzles littering the ruins of Old Home, re-calibrating the myriad mechanisms in place which served as ancient fusions between diversions and door keys. She kept close to the entrance to the cavern where she’d laid her adopted child to rest so many years ago in case a new visitor fell into the mountain from the outside world. For some reason, she felt that today of all days, another human child would show up.

Eyeing the yellow petals littering the cobblestones with distaste, Toriel figured that the beastly flower who tormented the poor inhabitants of the Ruins may have had the same intuition as her. With a scowl, she finished outlining the correct sequence of switches for one puzzle on the wall (in case a child came through and needed help solving it). Before she could put away the piece of chalk she’d been using, though, she remembered something.

Ah, yes! That was right! She’d found a gift for 2B and 9S! After she’d gotten the call from Sans that morning and been warned that trouble was afoot and she was in danger, Toriel had decided that those two androids would enjoy a token of her appreciation once the threat was dealt with.

Toriel rummaged through her purse, looking for the nice little trinket she’d found for them in the Ruins. It had been a…

What had it been again?

And who on Earth had it been for? Toriel had lived alone here in the Ruins for nearly two decades since the last human had fallen down and (regrettably) passed her by. Had she decided to get a present for the nice fellow she traded jokes with through the stone door to Snowdin?

No. Whatever it was, it had been for two children—

What were their names? 2B and 9S?

Yes, that was it. Toriel scribbled the two names on the wall next to one of the switches just to make sure she wouldn’t forget.

2B and 9S.
Now, what could those numbers and letters possibly mean? Were they clues to a puzzle of some sort? Toriel couldn’t recall why she’d written them down, especially here of all places, but supposed the answer might come to her later as she made her way through the old ghost town she and her ex-husband had once called “Home.”

A dingy computer monitor in a dark room displayed a series of linked parallel lines, some short, some long. A short, stocky monster in a disheveled blue coat observed the output, occasionally tapping on the screen with a bony finger.

A little under nine days between resets this time. Longer than the last dozen, at least. So at least there was that silver lining. Tibia honest, nine days sounded like more of a blessing than it probably had been. Had his past self lived each of those days wondering if the next day would be the day his little world came to an abrupt end?

It was a stupid question. Of course, he had.

Sans wondered if maybe this time he could coccyx the culprit behind these temporal shenanigans out of hiding and put a stop to it, or if that would be a waste of time, just as it had probably been a waste of time for the hundreds of other Sanses who’d ceased to exist after the last couple hundred resets. The only sign they had ever existed or that time had ever progressed beyond this day came from the readouts from the machine sitting in front of him.

Eventually, seeing the entirely non-existent fruits of his labors, Sans had just given up on trying to wrangle time.

However, time did still move forward, even if it occasionally looped back on itself. Sometimes whoever was controlling the flow of time would go back to the same origin point multiple times, but often the world would not reset to the same day or hour every time. Time sluggishly pushed itself forward in fits and starts like cars in gridlocked traffic, lurching along in frustrating spurts. Progress was made… but never very much. It had been going on like this for years—ever since Alphys had become the new Royal Scientist.

Of course, Sans had therefore suspected Alphys at first (and doubtless, dozens of erased alternate selves had followed up on that hunch), but the more he thought about that timid roboticist who didn’t even know a boson from a gluon, the less likely it seemed. Smart as she was in other ways, she had no head at all for quantum mechanics.

Sans trudged out of the lab. At the very least, no matter what changed, there was always still Papyrus, and there was always still Grillby’s, and he could take comfort in that.

Commencing System Check
Memory Unit: Green
Initializing Tactics Log

Do you think she will be okay?

Loading Geographic Data
Vitals: Green
Remaining MP: 100%
Black Box Temperature: Normal
Hmm. That’s odd… That other spirit, it’s…

- Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
- Activating IFF
- Activating FCS
- Initializing Pod Connection

“Statement: unable to establish a connection to the Bunker. Proposal: find a position free of signal interference.”

- Launching DBU Setup
- Activating Inertia Control System
- Activating Environmental Sensors

“2B, are you all right? 2B!”

- Equipment Status: Green
- All Systems Green
- Combat Preparations Complete_

2B squeezed herself free of the wreckage of her mangled flight unit, setting foot on the grassy, flower-dotted soil coating the ground.

She stood in a cavernous grotto, the only light coming from a small aperture in the ceiling dozens of meters above, filtering through the thick air and illuminating floating motes of dust. Yellow flowers — flowers with wide, bright petals—fluttered at her feet, disturbed by her landing. On the other side of the cavern stood crumbling pillars, a weathered and eroded brick wall, and a yawning, arched doorway. Torches lined the doorway but offered scant illumination.

Back in the Ruins. Back in the past. Once again, 2B had erased the world.

2B patted herself down, ensuring that she was still in one piece. The civilian clothes she’d picked out with Toriel’s help were gone, replaced with her standard black Battler uniform. None of the grievous wounds she’d sustained in her battle with 6E had carried over. It was to be expected, of course, but still a shock to find herself sent back so abruptly over a week into the past.

9S rushed to her side, taking her lightly by the arm. He, too, was pristine and unharmed, clad in the black frock coat that made up his standard Scanner uniform, his black visor obscuring his eyes but not the concern writ on his face. “Everything in order, 2B?”

He was fine and—

And the 9S 2B had known for the past nine days no longer existed. Just like all the others.

2B restrained herself. At least until 9S’s memories were restored (assuming his plan had worked), she had to pretend to be what she’d been a week ago. She couldn’t afford to slip up and drop her emotionless facade lest 9S find her “uncharacteristic” behavior suspicious.

Have faith, 2B told herself, glancing away from her partner as she swallowed a lump in her throat. Have faith in Nines and his plan. “9S, perhaps you should hack into my systems and make sure nothing is wrong.”

9S nodded. “All right. Take a seat while I run my diagnostics.”

2B sat on the mossy ground, leaning against the cooling metal hull of her flight unit, and closed her
eyes. A prickling sensation traveling up the back of her neck and crawling through her brain let her know that 9S had started his maintenance of her logic systems.

She waited with bated breath. Was the partition still there? Had 9S really found a way to use her brain to transmit data from the future to the past? When 9S found it—if he found it—would he know what to make of it?

“Something wrong, 2B?” 9S asked.

“N-Nothing.”

“Your black box temperature just ticked up a degree. I wanted to make sure you were feeling okay.”

2B nodded. “Your concern is appreciated.”

“Hmm,” 9S said, mumbling something as 2B felt a soft patch of static between her ears. It sounded like *huh, that’s weird*.

“What is it?”

“There’s a nonstandard partition in your brain. Any idea who put it there?”

“No clue.”

“Lemme take a look. ‘Date created’ metadata… nine days from now… not impossible, but definitely odd…” The sound of 9S’s curious muttering was soothing to 2B as she waited with bated breath to hear his findings. “…‘Readme dot text…”

Pod 153 chimed in. “Analysis: no traces of malicious software found.”

“Oh, good. Well…” 9S took a deep breath. “Here goes. Initiating data transfer…”

2B felt the pins and needles in the back of her mind run down her spine and suppressed a shiver as data flew invisibly between herself and 9S.


“Just a few more seconds. Don’t worry, 153, I’ve…” 9S trailed off. 2B opened her eyes and looked up at him as he stood there, mouth slightly agape, slowly reaching up and holding a gloved hand to the side of his head as the shock written all over his face grew more pronounced.

2B pulled herself to her feet. “9S, are you feeling—”

9S’s legs gave out.

2B was at his side in an instant, grabbing him before he could hit the ground. 9S was limp in her arms as she lowered him to the mossy ground, and once again, he seemed so fragile.

Pod 153 floated above him. “Analysis: Information processing exceeded the capabilities of Unit 9S’s central processing unit. Reboot in progress.”

2B hooked her fingers in 9S’s visor and lifted it up, watching his eyelids flutter as his systems came back online. “Nines,” she whispered.

9S smiled as his blue eyes opened. “How ‘bout that. You finally called me Nines.”
“Excuse me?” 2B asked him, confused. Of course, she’d called him Nines. The two of them were long past that point. He should know that now. Unless… “9S, did... *did it work?*

9S looked around the cavern. “Well, we both landed in one piece, so I’d say so. Anyway—”

“What is the last thing you remember?” 2B asked, cutting him off.

9S sat up, tapping on his forehead. “Hmm. Guess things are a bit jumbled up in here. You got shot down while we were strafing that machine airship.”

2B felt her face fall.

9S let out a nervous laugh. “Relax, Tubes. As you can see, I’m fine. Thanks for worrying.” He reached out for her shoulder.

2B shot up to her feet and 9S was left grasping open air as if she were afraid to let him touch her. How could it have gone wrong? How could the 9S she’d been so hopeful about preserving just be... gone, just like that?

“Something wrong?” 9S asked with a bemused blink.

“9S, stay here and take a minute to assess yourself for any injuries or irregularities.” 2B spun on her heel and walked off into the familiar Ruins. The distance between her and 9S grew. “I will scan ahead and assess the area.”

9S watched her depart, completely oblivious of the inner turmoil tearing through 2B’s head. “O-Okay?”

2B stormed through the Ruins, pushing through whatever puzzles impeded her progress, and kept her composure until she was certain 9S was out of range. Deep within the crumbling village where cobblestone roads intersected around an overgrown and vine-choked fountain that had gone dry long ago, 2B came to a stop. At the first point at which 9S’s signal had dropped off her radar, she fell to her knees.

And sobbed.

“Statement: Unit 2B, it appears an ailment is affecting your logical operations.”

“Shut up!” 2B doubled over, the torment of what she’d done—what she’d failed to do—tearing at her inner machinery like a hungry rodent that had made its way into her innards, her fingers tearing at her visor. She pulled it off her head, crumpling it in her face and throwing it to the ground.

“Proposal: return to Unit 9S for additional maintenance—”

“Pod 042, I order you to shut up!”

“Query: Unit 2B, are you all right—”

“Pod 042, I order you to halt all logical thought and speech!”

At last 2B was left alone in the village square with nothing but the sobs wrenching themselves from her hollow chest to keep her company. Things were supposed to be different this time. Things were supposed to be different this time! Things were supposed to be different this time!
Her fist pounded the cobblestones beneath her knees, cracking the stones. She’d killed him again. 9S was gone again. Forty-seven times she’d killed him now. Forty-seven times! Why couldn’t she stop? What was wrong with her?

2B kept driving her fist into the street over and over again, once for every version of her partner—her companion—her friend—her family—she’d obliterated, until her glove was as shredded as her skin, until synthetic blood dripped from her knuckles onto the crumbling stone, until the pain signals began to compete with the pressure squeezing her chest.

“Statement: boy, you sure are a mess, 2B.”

2B wiped at her eyes. Dancing in front of her was a grinning flower.

“What’s the matter?” Flowey asked. “Someone like you ought to be used to erasing people, I’d think. Remember our first little trip through this miserable little place? How easily it all came to you? What happened to the 2B who killed without hesitating?”

With an enraged growl, 2B swiped at Flowey, only for the flower to wriggle just out of her reach.

“Aw, don’t let it get to you. Sure, maybe poor Nines grew more in the past eight days than he had in his entire life, and sure, maybe he won’t ever develop into the same person you had the misfortune of killing, and sure, maybe you’ve erased something truly beautiful and unique from the world…”

2B lunged at Flowey with her sword drawn, but he was too fast even for her and popped up a safe distance away on the lip of the dry fountain.

“So, why’d you do it? Got bored with him, maybe, and figured it might be nice to shake his Etch-a-Sketch clean and give the wheel another spin?” Flowey wiggled underground and did not pop up again, but continued to speak to her. “Or… or maybe you reset because you didn’t catch up with 6E in time to save Toriel. You chose that doddering old cow over your only friend, didn’t you? Boy, I bet that’s eating away at you.”

2B lunged at Flowey with her sword drawn, but he was too fast even for her and popped up a safe distance away on the lip of the dry fountain.

“Or, why’d you do it? Got bored with him, maybe, and figured it might be nice to shake his Etch-a-Sketch clean and give the wheel another spin?” Flowey wiggled underground and did not pop up again, but continued to speak to her. “Or… or maybe you reset because you didn’t catch up with 6E in time to save Toriel. You chose that doddering old cow over your only friend, didn’t you? Boy, I bet that’s eating away at you.”

With roving eyes 2B scanned the area, fist clenched around her sword.

“Or… is it? Admit it, 2B. You don’t love Nines as much as you think you do, do you?”

2B paused, her breath caught in her throat.

“And… you don’t love him anywhere near as much as he loves you.”

Her sword flew through the air and impaled itself in the vine-choked statue standing in the center of the fountain. “Shut up!”

“There are things I know about 9S that you’ll never know. Because you erased him. But you’re the apple of his eye, the center of his world, the dearest and darlingest (and only) member of his family. You’re the most important person in his life. That boy would go to war for you if he only had the chance. And that’s the one you threw away!”

2B fell to her knees once more as she buried her face in her hands. “Stop it! You could never understand, you soulless abomination!” she choked out. “How could you understand love? You aren’t even the real Asriel!”

There was no answer. And as the silence lingered and stretched 2B realized that, having exacted enough torment upon her, Flowey must have taken his leave and found a quiet place to savor the pain he’d inflicted.
2B curled up in the middle of the road and tried to face the cruel hand time had dealt her.

This pain wasn’t worth it. She should have clung to life. She should have fought harder. She shouldn’t have let herself care about anybody but 9S.

“You poor young thing. That miserable creature was torturing you, wasn’t it?”

A soft, heavy paw fell on 2B’s shoulder. 2B glanced upward and gasped in spite of herself.

“Oh, dear, you look like you’ve seen a ghost! Do not be alarmed—I mean you no harm. I am Toriel, caretaker of this place.” The old monster towered over 2B, smiling sweetly as she always did around her. “What is your name?”

2B stiffened and shrank away from Toriel’s touch as if it were poison. She couldn’t deal with this. Not now. Not like this. Not after she’d already lost Nines. Why couldn’t Toriel have been anywhere but here?

“It is okay,” Toriel insisted. “You are safe here.” She wrapped her arms around 2B the same way she always had, and that was too much for 2B to handle.

Immediately, 2B pulled herself away and stood up straight. “Pardon me, ma’am. I do not require your assistance.” The words tasted like oil in her mouth. It was always this way when she met a new 9S. Putting up those walls around herself always felt vile, but it was easier than keeping all those emotional nerves exposed and raw.

“Er… Are you sure?” Toriel asked, eyeing 2B with a skeptic glance.

2B bent down, picked up her visor and put it back on, then called out to her pod, “042, resume all logical processes.”

Pod 042 hovered to her side. “Statement: logical processes resumed.”

“Toriel…” 2B paused. What did she have to say? Would it be better to say nothing to her at all? “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is 2B.”

There was an instantaneous flash of recognition on Toriel’s face as if for a fraction of a second she had remembered the future 2B had erased. “Oh. What a nice name!” She clasped her paws together. “Well, 2B, regardless, I would appreciate your company—if it is not too much trouble.”

“Already making friends here, huh, 2B?”

2B glanced over her shoulder at the unmistakable sound of 9S’s voice. There he was, his pod at his side, with a sideways smirk on his face as he strode down the abandoned road. “9S,” she breathed, guilty over leaving him behind to wallow in her misery, “I’m so—”

“Hey, don’t worry about it!” 9S reached out, laying a hand against 2B’s arm as his smile grew.

Before 2B could react 9S hugged her, wrapping his arms tightly around her and resting his cheek on her shoulder. “I’m sorry, 2B,” he whispered, trembling just a little as he held her close. “I—I didn’t expect the memories to take so long to sink in.” His voice cracked. “You were really scared, weren’t you?”

With a slow, unsteady motion 2B returned the hug, gingerly, half-disbelievingly as she pressed her counterpart closer. Had she and 9S finally cheated the curse that followed her no matter how far she fled it?
“Do you really remember everything?” she asked.

9S laughed as he hung his head on 2B’s shoulder. “Yeah. I… I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but I can’t believe it actually worked.”

“You shouldn’t have, you idiot.” 2B reached up and playfully patted him on the back of his head, tousling his already-mussed silver-white hair. He felt so much more solid to her now than he had before, and 2B hugged him as if she would never let him go again, grateful the visor did such a good job of covering her tears—tears not of grief, for once, but of relief. “But it’s nice to have you back, Nines.”

Starting over had always been hard for 2B—and it still was. But at least this time she didn’t have to start from scratch. This time, she’d managed to save someone.

She and 9S took up Toriel’s offer and followed her to her humble house, and life began anew.

6O loved to stare at the Earth.

Through the wide windows in the central corridor of the Bunker’s main deck, the Earth would lazily swing by, filling up the portholes like a great leviathan swimming past a submarine, a beautiful cloud-streaked orb of blue and brown and green (but mostly blue).

It was strange how from this distance the strife consuming her home planet’s surface was completely invisible… yet 6O knew that down there were hundreds of elite YoRHa units striking from orbital bases just like this one to assist the tens of thousands of scattered androids in their struggle to repel the machine lifeforms running amok across the planet.

6O could get lost in that sight of the Earth, just as she often got lost in the sight of the magnificent flora and fauna that still lived and thrived down there despite the long, long wars while monitoring 2B. She would sometimes work up the courage to ask 2B to look for a specific flower or animal she’d read about and take a picture of it for her records. She always felt such a fluttering in her chest when 2B acquiesced to her requests.

2B…

She’d been MIA for a few days now after the assault on the Goliath-class flying machine. When the Fifth Air Squadron had finally brought the behemoth—a veritable floating battleship and factory in one—down, there had been a weary cheer from everybody in Ops… but 6O had only found herself staring at the static on her monitor, silent and forlorn. She and 21O had shared a knowing, sad glance.

Of course, 2B would come back, but why was it taking so long to restore her and 9S from their backups? 6O felt so listless without her.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

6O was startled out of her musings by the android who’d walked up beside her. The intruder was nearly her doppelganger: the same face, but hair a pale lilac instead of blonde and eyes purple instead of blue.

6E laid a “comforting” hand on 6O’s shoulder. “Sad about 2B, huh?”

6O found 6E unsettling for multiple reasons. Not only did she have no concept of personal space
whatsoever, not only did she have a reputation for making her sparring sessions with other androids as bloody as possible, not only did she speak to everyone like they were the best of friends... she was built with the same personality template as 6O, and that one fact revolted 6O beyond measure. Deep down, did 6O, a humble Operator, really have the potential to be that?

Wishing she were anywhere else right now, 6O nodded.

“Well, just hang tight, darling. I’m gonna talk with the Commander about leading a search-and-rescue team.” 6E smiled. “Why don’t you tag along?”

“T-To the surface?” Type-Os were designed to support field agents from the safety of the Bunker. They had no combat subroutines and relatively frail bodies. 6O would give anything to be able to walk on the surface of the Earth herself, but she didn’t relish getting inevitably killed by machines. Due to the relative safety of their lifestyles, Type-Os backed themselves up far less frequently than other YoRHa units, and usually didn’t bother with full memory backups at all.

6E patted her on the head. “Oh, darling! Of course not! I’d like you to come with me to see the Commander.”

6O trailed behind 6E to Ops, the center of YoRHa’s complex nervous system, and took the elevator down to the floor, flanked by rows of Operators just like 6O dutifully monitoring their assigned units on the ground. It seemed busier than usual today, which made 6O glad she wasn’t on schedule while 2B was gone. Then again, perhaps her coworkers would be less busy if she were there to take up someone else’s shift.

Commander White ran the Bunker from the floor of Ops where she could easily bark orders at all the Operators on staff and expect them to be relayed immediately to every unit in the field and did so with an efficiency that was at times brutal. She struck a pale figure in a sea of black uniforms: a white qipao clinging to her body, a long ponytail of ash-blonde hair spilling down her back. Her eyes, cold and green, could paralyze with a glance—or, at least, that’s what it felt like at times.

“We have been deliberating your request, 6E,” said the Commander. Black-armored Type-B and Type-E units accompanied her with swords at their sides as she held her hands clasped behind her back. “I have decided that Unit 2B and Unit 9S shall be restored from their backups.”

6E’s face fell, while on the inside 6O was elated. “Commander,” 6E insisted, “I know 2B is out there. We can’t just leave her out there to fend for herself.”

“We have received no black box signals, nor pod signals, from either unit since Operation Argama concluded. We should assume 2B and 9S are no longer active, especially this many days after their disappearance.”

“With all due respect, Commander, 2B isn’t stupid enough to—”

The Commander drew her riding crop from her side, leveling it at 6E’s neck. “Choose your words carefully, 6E. You are not among equals.”

6E glanced at 6O. “Back me up here, dear,” she whispered.

“I think it’s a good idea,” 6O offered, timidly raising her hand. “Um, I—I mean restoring them from their backups. You’re right, Commander.”

6E glared daggers at her before softening her gaze as she turned back to face the Commander. “Commander, I have too much respect for 2B to believe she died in that operation. And that mountain is a huge blank spot. There’s something fishy about it. We shouldn’t restore her from her
backup until we know she's—"

“First off, misfortune befalls even the best of us.” The Commander’s gaze softened. “However…”

“Excuse me, if I may interject?”

A Type-B unit wedged herself between 6E and 6O, addressing the Commander. As a Type-B, she wore the same kind of elegant black dress and asymmetric visor as 2B, but that was where any similarities between the two androids ended. This one was skinnier, more of a beanpole as far as physique went, and had shoulder-length reddish-brown hair pulled away from her face with a hairclip.

The Commander turned to face the intruder. “And you are?”

“Unit 13 Type-B, ma’am. My apologies; I couldn’t help but overhear. You would agree that our resources are spread too thin to mount a search-and-rescue mission, especially in light of our recent engagements with the machines, wouldn’t you?”

6E was livid at 13B, but deep down, 6O was delighted.

The Commander nodded. Turning to 6E, she said, “Unit 6E, you could learn a thing or two about sensibility from 13B. 6E, 6O, 13B, you are dismissed.”

6E stormed unhappily out of Ops.

With a smile on her face, 6O headed back to her quarters. She couldn’t wait to get back to work. More than that, she couldn’t wait to see 2B again! Just imagining the sight of her made 6O’s spirits lift, especially when her thoughts drifted to that beautiful face and certain… other features of 2B’s anatomy. The one thing 6O wanted to see more than the surface of the Earth was 2B in her quarters wearing nothing but her singlet—or perhaps even nothing at all…

“Excuse me!”

6O stopped in her tracks, jolted out of her amorous reverie as she made her way down the corridor. She turned around and saw 13B briskly jogging over to her.

“Oh, uh… Thank you,” 6O said, trying hard to pretend she didn’t feel as though her uniform had shrunk two sizes as 13B caught up to her, “for what you said to the Commander back there.”

“It was nothing.” 13B smiled. “I simply despise wastefulness.”

“Thank you, nonetheless. 2B means a lot to me—” Embarrassed, 6O clasped a hand over her mouth. “Er, um, I-I mean…”

“No need to feel embarrassed. She means a lot to me, too.”

Relieved, 6O sighed and returned the other android’s smile. “Really? How do you two know each other?”

13B simply laughed. “Ah,” she said, “one could say I’ve been in her head.”

Chapter End Notes
(obligatory video to play after reading this chapter)
Chapter Summary

9S learns some jokes (probably from Sans) and can't wait to try them out. 2B discovers the joy of reading.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for over 2,000 views! You guys are the best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After the reset had wiped their slates clean, 9S and 2B spent the next week of their lives re-establishing the bonds they’d formed with the monsters living in Snowdin, and 9S had to admit, it was harder than he’d expected.

For the past week, 2B had been stoic, stony-faced, and withdrawn, even around Toriel. And when 9S turned his charms on the likes of Papyrus, Sans, and the other inhabitants of Snowdin, he’d found himself hiding aches in his heart as well. The way it felt seeing these monsters—ones he’d so quickly grown to see as neighbors and friends—fail to recognize him could only be described as a kind of betrayal, and 9S began to wonder if perhaps he was experiencing something akin to the pain 2B must have felt every time he’d met her for the first time.

No wonder she’d always been so reluctant to open up around him. If 9S had been forced to deal with this stuff almost a hundred times in a row, it probably would’ve broken him too.

At least Papyrus had wrangled the two of them that soon-to-be abandoned cottage, just like last time. At the very least, that was constant.

As he and 2B ventured into Waterfall to cross paths with (and hopefully befriend) Undyne, 9S tried his best to put a positive spin on things.

“Think of it this way,” he told 2B. “We know exactly how to push her buttons now. If anything, it’ll be way easier than it was last time to earn her trust!”

“Perhaps.” That was all 2B said in response. Her tone was cold and clinical, reminding 9S of the way she’d used to behave on missions.

“C’mon, 2B. You know how much Undyne values enthusiasm. Brighten up a little!”

2B did not brighten up. In fact, if anything, the world around her seemed to grow just a little bit darker.

“I know how to lift your spirits,” 9S drawled, lightly nudging 2B in the side. “Knock knock.”

2B shook her head and picked up speed. 9S walked faster to match her pace and easily caught up.
“Knock knock,” he repeated.

With a sigh, 2B gave up. “Who is there?”

“Banana.”

“Banana who?”

“Knock knock.”


“Knock knock,” 9S insisted.

“Who’s there?”

“Banana.”

2B didn’t say anything.

“C’mon.” 9S patted her on the shoulder. “Now you say—”

“I don’t see the point,” 2B said.

“Tooobiiiiieeee…” 9S whined.

2B rolled her eyes. “Banana who?”

“Knock knock.”

“How much longer does this go on?” 2B asked. 9S said nothing in response, so after an awkward few seconds with nothing but silence save for a few echoing drips of water in the distance to fill them, 2B added, “Who’s there?”

“Orange.”

“Orange?” 2B gave 9S another befuddled glance. “Orange who—”

9S let his smile widen into a grin. “Orange you glad I didn’t say ‘banana’ again?”

“Yes. I am.” 2B hurried away as if 9S’s joke had offended her.

“Wait, 2B!” 9S reached out, his hand wrapping around 2B’s wrist. He really felt as though he’d done something wrong, even though he was just trying to act the way he’d always acted around 2B. “I—I just thought I’d cheer you up…”

“Your efforts aren’t necessary.” 2B pulled her hand free. “Thank you, 9S,” she said, sounding not thankful at all.

“What’s the matter with you?” 9S asked. “You don’t want to feel like this, do you?”

2B leaned against the slick, damp wall of the cave and slumped over. “No, of course not, but…” She sighed. “I… I need to.”

9S took a seat on the ground beside 2B, apprehensively laying a hand on her shoulder, worried she might rebuke him for it. To say he didn’t quite understand what 2B meant would be an understatement. “Hey, it’s all right. I know it’s tough, but…” Before 9S could say what he’d been
about to say, but at least you’ve got me, he realized that he didn’t know what he should say. “You
don’t have to…” he floundered.

“It’s different from before,” said 2B, laying her hand over his, the soft pressure holding 9S’s hand in
place. “I… I don’t have any missions to take my mind off this,” she murmured. “I can’t just shove it
all aside.”

“…This is about Toriel, isn’t it?”

2B shook her head. “Not her. Not this time. It’s about…”

“Undyne, then?” 9S hadn’t seen 2B spend much time with Undyne, but it seemed the two had
started to become more friendly to each other over the course of that evening before the reset. Was
that now weighing the most heavily on 2B’s conscience?

“That night, when Captain Undyne took me with her to… dinner,” 2B started, “she…”

“No way.” 9S nearly laughed. “That was a date, wasn’t it?”

“Of course,” 2B said, “I did not reciprocate her feelings. And when Doctor Alphys stopped by, it
became clear that Undyne felt more strongly about her than she did about me, much to my relief.
But… until that point, it almost felt good to indulge her. I enjoyed spending time with—”

“Did you kiss?”

2B tossed him a weary ‘I’m not in the mood for your shit right now’ glance.

9S looked away, an embarrassed flush heating his cheeks as he realized how far he’d stepped out of
line. “Sorry.”

“I just… need more time to process everything.” 2B tucked her legs against her chest, her fingers
kneading the hem of her skirt. “I know, we’ve had a week, but—I… I don’t understand why it’s
taking so long.”

“Wanna go back home and try this another day?”

2B shook her head. “If you feel ready, go ahead without me. Undyne took a liking to you far more
quickly, after all.” As she pulled herself to her feet, she forced a bittersweet smile. “I think I need
some time to myself to clear my head.”

“All right. If you say so.” 9S stood up. “Give me a call if you end up in trouble.”

“If I end up in trouble?” The barest hint of a wry grin tugged at 2B’s lips. “Surely a Scanner with
your analytical faculties must have realized by now that statistically, you are the most likely to need
my help.”

Ah, 9S thought, there’s the new 2B again. “Guess I forgot.”

2B ruffled his hair and walked off, her pod in tow. “I’ll meet you back at the cottage, Nines.”

2B didn’t head straight for the cottage as she’d implied to 9S. Instead, she found herself wandering
the deeper, darker tunnels of Waterfall. She felt as though she were searching for something… but
what she was searching for eluded her, as if that memory had been lost like everyone else’s
memories. Had she lost something in the reset? Had a part of her not been salvaged, despite
everything else? What… or who did she expect to find?

Pod 042 alerted her to a gathering of machine lifeforms on the periphery of her radar; hoping that perhaps destroying some machines like old times would help her clear her head, 2B drew closer, trudging through the damp tunnels.

While she walked through the subterranean marshes, passing pools filled with luminescent algae and echo flowers whispering scattered wishes to the gem-studded ceiling, 2B could not help but ponder her battle with 6E, the scars still fresh on her mind even now, even a weak later.

6E had referred to the people 2B had grown to care about as “chains anchoring her heart.” And when 2B thought about everyone whose lives and memories had vanished after the reset, she really did feel as though something heavy and smothering had wrapped itself around her black box, binding it in her chest.

Perhaps people like her were meant to be alone, after all.

It was only after a few minutes of hearing it that she remembered what the buzzing in her ear meant, and by the time she did, the rising cacophony made 2B feel as though the electrical currents running through her circuitry were swimming through mud. She pressed her hands to her ears in a vain attempt to block out the sound, panting as the synthetic muscles in her chest tightened around her lungs and shortened her breath.

The memoryheads—that damned scatterbrain of a doctor hadn’t fed them, and their psychic distortion, detectable only by synthetic lifeforms, was at full strength! 2B collapsed to her knees, her breath catching in her throat, the world flickering and swimming around her as everything started to go dark, fearing that in just a few minutes she’d become like the shambling, incoherent machine lifeforms that wandered these tunnels—

Pod 042 announced something, its cool and collected voice swallowed up by the sound of a dozen swirling tortured souls babbling in unison. “Pod 042,” 2B choked out, “h—help me get to—c-call Ni—Ni…”

“M—Miss 2B?”

2B woke up, her head miraculously clear, and saw the featureless, moonish face of a stubby machine looking down at her, its blinking optical sensors glowing green. Her fight-or-flight instincts flared up and she pulled herself off the ground, drawing her sword—

The stubby let out a frightened wail and backed away, holding its long, spindly arms over its face. “Don’t hurt me, Miss 2B!”

2B’s fingers fell away from the hilt of the Virtuous Contract. “Asriel, is that you?”

Asriel’s eyes grew just a little brighter. “Miss 2B!” he bleated. “I—I’ve been looking all over for you…”

He… He remembers the reset, too? 2B thought, shocked.

Pod 042 curled its grasping claws around 2B’s shoulders to help her stagger to her feet. “Statement: when this machine lifeform drew near, this support unit would have intervened,” it said, “however, this unit felt an unexplainable need to spare its life.”

2B patted the pod on its silvery hull. “Good decision, Pod 042. This is Asriel. He is not a hostile machine.”
Taking inventory of her surroundings, 2B realized she was just a few meters away from where she’d collapsed. A smooth trail led through the mud covering the ground leading up to where she stood, and a hand raised to the back of her head to feel mud caking her silvery-white hair confirmed what she’d suspected: she had collapsed due to the mental strain and someone—likely Asriel—had dragged her out of the Memoryheads’ range.

“You saved me, didn’t you, Asriel?” 2B asked, patting the poor machine on the head.

Asriel nodded. “I’m trying to mark off where the voices start,” he told her, pointing at a line of white chalk running up the wall near where 2B stood, “so that people don’t wander in and get hurt. You should pay attention next time… d-dragging you out was really dangerous!”

“I am sorry. I’ll keep a closer eye on my surroundings from here on out.” 2B stared intently at Asriel, feeling something about him was out of place. “Asriel… where’s Emil?”

The machine looked around. “I, uh…” He sniffled. “He…"

2B managed to rush to Asriel’s side just as he began to bawl his optical sensors out.

“I—I woke up and he was gone, and I—I can’t find him,” Asriel sobbed, “and I don’t know h-how to get to Temmie Village, I’ve been looking for a week and I just keep getting more and more and more lost! I w-want my mom!”

2B knelt down, patting the machine on his head. “Um… don’t cry…”

“I—I miss him so much, Miss 2B, what if something h-happened to him? We’d just found one of his f-favorite flowers, too… What happened to us? What’s going on?”

2B sighed, and with trepidation explained to Asriel that how time had been reset, not particularly eager to explain the role she’d played in it.

“Oh… You messed up…” Asriel moaned, forlorn.

2B nodded. “Yes. I messed up. I’m sorry about Emil, Asriel. If we find him, he might not remember you—”

“It’s okay. I mess up a lot, too. And Emil… he already has problems remembering things,” Asriel said, a note of brightness entering into his electronically-modulated voice, “so it’ll be okay!”

2B almost admired Asriel’s forced optimism. “Why don’t I help you find Emil?” she asked.

“Really?” Asriel asked.

2B nodded. “Pod 042 and I will find him easily.”

“Oh, thank you, Miss 2B!” Asriel wrapped his arms around 2B’s waist. “A-And, after we find Emil… can you take us to see my mom?”

2B rubbed the machine’s head. “Yes. I… think I can manage that.”

The two of them ventured further into the marshy caverns of Waterfall. While Asriel did not know the way to the village, he had gotten very familiar in his wandering with the positions of other machines trapped in the Underground. To 2B’s surprise, Asriel mentioned that not only were most of the machines harmless, some even talked like he did (though they had few means to help him). 2B felt a twinge of sympathy that Asriel had spent so long lost and alone down here, but the boy seemed
to have weathered that loneliness and fear and had come out just a little braver and just a little more resourceful for it.

As the caverns grew just a bit brighter, illuminated by luminescent violet crystals poking from the slick, rocky walls, 2B heard tinny, distorted music, its pitch shifted by the Doppler effect. Whatever the source was, it was drawing nearer.

And someone was singing along with it—if one could call that caterwauling singing.

“Statement: unknown wheeled vehicle approaching. Proposal—”

“Every day’s a sale! Every day’s a win! Better buy now or you’ll cry all night! Every day’s a sale! Every day’s a win! Every day is great when you’re—”

2B artfully dodged the trolley careening her way, pulling Asriel free of its path. The ramshackle vehicle ran over her foot, fell on its side, and promptly righted itself, plumes of black smoke trailing from its exposed engine.

Atop a lashed-together pile of junk dangling precipitously from the scrap-metal car was a familiar stone head, its face carved in a permanent ghoulish grin.

“Hey, 2B! Howdy, Asriel! It’s me, your friendly neighborhood bric-a-brac vendor, Emil!”

2B pulled herself to her feet, favoring her aching foot (no serious damage, but the weight of an entire car over such a small surface area did hurt plenty) and wiping muck off her sleeve. “Hello, Emil,” she said, unable to help but smile.

Asriel was ecstatic. “E—Emil!” He ran up to the car, reaching with the spindly arms of his machine body to grab hold of the talking orb. “Where’ve you been? You—I was really s-scared!”

“Aw, sorry, Asriel! I missed you, too!” Emil smiled (but of course he did—he didn’t have much of a choice). “I wanted to go out looking for you, but I had to build this cart first so I could move around without getting stuck like last time, and so I had to start making money, and so…”

As Emil and Asriel reunited, 2B wondered why this strange stone head with the boyish voice had gone through the reset with his memories intact as well. What was it that made some immune and others not?

“Statement: Emil appears to be selling useful material,” said Pod 042, scanning the heap of junk Emil had been carrying around.

“Yup! Prices so low, you’ll need a greatsword to slash them more—any lower would be illegal, really!” Emil gave his little sales pitch as Asriel continued to rub his head, the little prince taking solace in his presence. “So is there anything I can get you, 2B?”

2B rummaged through the junk. Emil seemed to have weapons of every type, armors (nothing anywhere close to as strong as her own chassis, though), and clothes, including a blue dress so skimpy it might as well have not existed at all. At last, she pulled free a two-handed greatsword with a straight and double-edged blade nearly as long as the odachi of her old master.

“Like it? That’s Caladbolg, the sword of an ancient Irish king! Only 250,000 G!”

2B frowned. She didn’t have that kind of money on her. “You said your prices were so low, they were almost illegal,” she said.
“Yup!” Emil replied. “I’m selling that one for ninety percent off!”

2B put it back and took out a black dagger with a white hilt, its blade just shorter than the length of her forearm. “What about this one?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s Carnwennan, the dagger of an ancient English king! 160,000 G for that one. And that’s seventy percent off!”

2B pulled out another sword, a slim and slender knightly sword with a single-handed golden cruciform hilt and a silvery blade that glistened with a rainbow sheen, like an oil slick. It was much less heavy than Caladbolg, though it hardly made a difference to someone with 2B’s strength, and a more manageable length as well. “And this?” she asked, hoping to hear a reasonable price.

“That’s Joyeuse, the personal sword of an ancient French king! That one’s 50,000 G. And at a price like that—”

“I’ll take it.” 2B exchanged currency with the odd merchant and immediately registered the sword to her NFCS, allowing it to float at her hip, ready to spring to her hand at her command.

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you!” Emil said, all smiles, as he rolled himself back up onto his mountain of wares. “Now I’ll be on my way—a merchant’s always got places to be!”

“Wait!” Asriel cried out. “Um… E-Emil, do you wanna come with us a-and see my mom? She’s really nice!”

“Yeah! But I promised an old turtle I’d have a bunch of stuff to sell to his store by tonight.”

Asriel looked about as crestfallen as a stubby could. “O—Okay…”

“But tomorrow works fine!” Emil started the car again (somehow) and backed away. “You’ll know where to find me!”

Pod 042 nodded. “Statement: Position of Emil marked on Unit 2B’s HUD.”

2B glanced at her radar and saw (to her surprise) a little icon shaped like Emil’s face inching away from her position. “Yes, we will.”

The two of them journeyed out of Waterfall, passing through Snowdin, and drew nearer to the Ruins.

2B and Asriel stood in front of the great stone door leading into the Ruins—the stone door Toriel always kept shut (although 2B knew full well how easy it was to open it). Grabbing a knocker set into the mountain wall, 2B brought the heavy brass weight down three times, and in the distance, the muffled toll of a bell rang out three times.

Asriel shuffled uncomfortably, his ungainly mechanical feet digging into the snow.

“It’ll be all right,” 2B assured him.

“What if she doesn’t believe me?” he asked. “What if she thinks I’m ugly?”

“She wouldn’t.” 2B had to admit that she, too, was nervous, though she hid it well. She still had difficulty feeling comfortable opening herself up to Toriel, still irrationally fearing that if she did, death would soon follow.
The stone door creaked open just a hair, a slit between door and mountain growing just wide enough for Toriel to peek through. “Ah! Hello, my child!” She pushed it open the rest of the way, smiling as she caught a better look at 2B. “What brings you all this way?”

2B took a deep breath. “I—”

“Hi, Mom!” Asriel shouted, hopping forward and giving Toriel about as loving a hug as someone with his shape could give.

“Uh…” Toriel looked down at the stubby little machine with its arms wrapped around her hips with a slightly embarrassed, confused look on her face. “Er, hello… I do not believe we have…”

“That is your son, Toriel,” 2B told her. “This, while it may seem hard to believe, is your son, Asriel Dreemurr.”

“How did you…” Toriel looked at 2B, eyes wide, and then at Asriel, eyes wider, and then back at 2B, eyes even wider. “How is this…” Her voice faltered and quavered.

Then, finally, Toriel collapsed to her knees, throwing her arms around the little machine containing her long-dead son’s consciousness and weeping. “Oh, Asriel! My darling, my dear, my child… How long have you been like this? How did this happen? I am so sorry, Asriel…”

“I’ll explain as much as I can,” said 2B, “but would prefer to do it inside.”

Toriel nodded, lifting Asriel up off his feet and cradling him under her arm. 2B could see the old monster-woman strain, but was shocked at her strength nonetheless—machine lifeforms were many things, but light was not one of them. “Yes, of course. In that getup, you must be freezing.” Of course, Toriel spared a second to pull the violet, loosely-crocheted shawl from her shoulders and throw it around 2B’s. “Come in, please.”

2B explained what had happened to Asriel as best she could without mentioning anything about Alphys’ ill-fated experiments or her travels through time. Toriel spent the whole time doting on Asriel, loving him just as dearly despite his unique condition. As the exiled queen caressed her son’s rusted metal body, softly muttering tender and caring words of comfort, 2B felt glad there was something to keep Toriel’s attention. You need not spare a hug, she thought, tugging Toriel’s shawl tighter around her shoulders in spite of herself, for a bringer of death such as me.

Yet still, 2B stayed, deep down longing for the exiled queen’s presence even as she feared to admit it. She stayed while Toriel managed to tuck Asriel into bed. She stayed while Toriel plucked a dusty old book from a dusty old shelf and, choking back tears, asked Asriel if he remembered what chapter they’d left off on. She stayed while Toriel opened the book and began to read from the first sentence of the first page.

“Once when I was six years old,” Toriel read, “I saw a magnificent picture in a book, called True Stories from Nature, about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a boa constrictor in the act of swallowing an animal. Here is a copy of the drawing…”

Long after Toriel had put her miraculously-resurrected son to bed, long after she had retired to her own bed herself, 2B pulled out and began to peruse the book Toriel had been reading to Asriel. It was a bizarre story, the kind of story 2B felt no one on the surface had ever told—or had reason to tell—for thousands of years (certainly, no one in YoRHa had time or temperament for such bedtime
stories). Yet perhaps because it was so antique, 2B found it oddly fascinating.

In fact, the book—the early chapters in particular—reminded her of 9S in its playful sense of humor, and 2B asked her pod to record the pages as she read them so that someday she could share the story with him, illustrations and all.

Parts of the book were not funny, though, and those were the parts which stuck with her.

“I am looking for men,” said the little prince. “What does that mean—‘tame?’”

“Men,” said the fox. “They have guns, and they hunt. It is very disturbing. They also raise chickens. These are their only interests. Are you looking for chickens?”

“No,” said the little prince. “I am looking for friends. What does that mean—‘tame?’”

“It is an act too often neglected,” said the fox. “It means to establish ties.”

“But to establish ties?”

“Just that,” said the fox. “To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world…”

“I am beginning to understand,” said the little prince. “There is a flower… I think that she has tamed me…”

“It is possible,” said the fox. “On the Earth one sees all sorts of things.”

2B found herself unable to stop reading, even as the hour grew late.

So the little prince tamed the fox. And when the hour of his departure drew near—

“Ah,” said the fox, “I shall cry.”

“It is your own fault,” said the little prince. “I never wished you any sort of harm; but you wanted me to tame you…”

“Yes, that is so,” said the fox.

“But now you are going to cry!” said the little prince.

“Yes, that is so,” said the fox.

“Then it has done you no good at all!”

“It has done me good,” said the fox, “because of the color of the wheat fields.”

When she had finished that particular chapter, the one about the prince and the fox, 2B, possessed by some almost uncharacteristic sense of curiosity (or perhaps even awe), read and re-read it several times, as if she could not believe the words as they appeared on those fragile paper pages and had to make sure she was not imagining them.

I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me.

And that is sad. But you have hair that is the color of gold. Think how wonderful that
will be when you have tamed me! The grain, which is also golden, will bring me back
the thought of you.

At long last, she set the book aside. For such a silly, whimsical story, a ludicrous story about a child
who lived on a rock floating through space and a flower who spoke to him, it seemed somehow truer
than all of the most factually-accurate mission reports she’d ever read. Somehow, this absurd piece of
fiction reflected the world better than anything else in the world.

9S discovered things like this book, remnants of the old world, all the time. Fantasy stories, poetry,
simplistic books meant for unsophisticated children (in a world where there were no children), and
everything in between. 2B had always considered such things unworthy of her time and his.

If only she had known that in these frivolous works of art lay the answers to her heartache.

Operation Befriend Undyne had been a rousing success… or, at least, 9S felt as though it had. She’d
been hostile at first, but as soon as 9S had pulled up his shirt, peeled away the outer layer of his skin,
and showed off the mechanical parts comprising his guts, her hostility had ceased (who knew just
saying you were an android could get you out of so much trouble? Why hadn’t 9S thought of this
before?) and Undyne had gotten a lot friendlier.

She’d even started to teach him how to cook. 9S wasn’t so sure she knew how to cook herself, but
had dutifully followed her instructions.

And that was why Undyne’s curiously fish-shaped house was now a smoldering pile of ash, and
why Undyne was now staying with Papyrus and Sans, even though she hated the cold, and why 9S
had ended the day with a bath, washing the soot and the smell of smoke off his skin (lest 2B worry
about his safety).

2B came back to the cabin late, which didn’t bother 9S in the slightest, as Pod 153 had been able to
track her black box signal and the signals from Pod 042 with ease. 9S had known full well that 2B
had spent several hours at Toriel’s home and felt glad that she was once again beginning to feel
comfortable around the people she’d grown to care about. Undyne would surely enjoy meeting 2B in
the morning, especially since 9S had introduced 2B as “the strongest, most beautiful warrior on the
surface of the Earth,” a phrase which had done much to endear him to the captain.

2B and 9S sat beside each other on the side of the bed, 2B wrapped in a blanket and loosely-
crocheted shawl with her uniform hanging up on a rack to self-clean, and 9S wearing a set of
pajamas he’d bought at the local store to replace the clothes he’d had in the old timeline. “So,” he
said, resting his head on 2B’s shoulder and fighting the urge to yawn, “good day?”

2B nodded. “Good day,” she repeated.

“Knock knock.”

2B’s answer came after a nervous pause as she recalled 9S’s last attempt at a joke. “…Who’s there?”

“Boo.”

2B glared skeptically at 9S. “Boo… who?”

“I know I suck,” said 9S, grinning, “but I didn’t think my sense of humor was bad enough to make
you cry.”
“Pfrgh…” 2B held a hand to her mouth and suppressed an undignified snort. And then her shoulders began to shake, forcing 9S to fall back onto the bed, and she started to laugh.

9S could hardly believe it at first. 2B was laughing. He’d never heard her voice sparkle like that.

Or… maybe he had, or rather another long-lost version of himself had… and maybe that was why he kept trying to make her smile.

Chapter End Notes

Take a look, it's in a book, Reading Rainboooow...
Chapter Summary

Now that we're all caught up with 2B and 9S, let's see what Chara's up to!

Also, remember 13B and 5E from Chapter 13?

(musical accompaniment)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chara prided themselves on adaptability. A Character-type was adaptable by necessity, willing and able to react to any unforeseen circumstance and any radical change in their situation.

Never in a thousand years had they expected the reset to send their soul flying all the way from the humble kingdom beneath the mountain all the way to YoRHa’s orbital base of operations. Never in a thousand years had they anticipated that their soul would have chosen to follow the body of this Type-B unit instead of returning to their corpse. If anything, Chara had been most expecting to end up inside 2B’s head again.

But life was nothing if not capricious.

Chara had full control of the android designated 13B—well, almost full control. The original android’s mind was still stored in this body and continued to resist Chara’s actions, although 13B’s area of influence only extended as far as a few fingers on Chara’s left hand. 13B spent most of her time berating Chara inside their head as they adjusted to life on the Bunker.

The fight 13B put up actually made Chara glad their plan to take control of 2B’s body had failed. 2B was nothing if not fiercely determined; even if Chara had managed to place themselves in the driver’s seat, 2B would likely have had very little trouble forcing them back out.

So, Chara thought, acclimatizing to the monochrome halls, the sparse quarters, the legions of combat-ready androids in black uniforms (some of which 13B considered friends), this is what YoRHa became. A recorded transmission from the so-called “Council of Humanity” echoed through the station and Chara nearly laughed at the farce. They really were going all out in the charade, weren’t they? And they had Chara to thank for that.

This… this drab, boring ring floating above the Earth, this fortress of lies guarding a monument to nothing… this was what Chara had killed their own friends, their only friends, to create, so many years ago.

It was hideous.

Chara had spent about a week in the Bunker and they hated it already. They belonged with the monsters, with their family, with the only people in the world worth caring about—not here mingling with YoRHa. They still had business to attend to in their old home. However, they supposed they would deign to stay here for the time being in the hopes that something useful would reveal itself to them. After all, given Flowey’s betrayal, their original plot had gone up in flames… and they needed
to be prepared to launch their counterattack.

So what are you? 13B asked as Chara glanced in the mirror and used a small pair of scissors to tidy up their hair. They’d given it a bit of a trim to keep in line with their original body, styling it into a short bob (13B had not liked it). A machine intelligence? she spat. Were you created by the aliens? Are you some new type of logic virus?

Heavens no, Chara replied. I despise the machines as much as you do. You can call me an apostate of the human gospel.

Whatever you have planned for YoRHa, it won’t work! Chara’s left hand jerked and spasmed as 13B asserted her defiance, the scissors flying through the air with them and leaving a thin, shallow cut across Chara’s cheek, right under their left eye.

Chara let silence fill the air as a dot of synthetic blood welled up from the cut.

There was a knock on the door to 13B’s quarters. Chara suppressed the twitch in their fingers, laid down their scissors, wiped the blood from their cheek, and went to the door, letting it slide open.

On the other side stood two combat androids, one with a thin face, close-cropped black hair, and an elegant dress—the same as what 13B and 2B wore—and one with sharp, hawkish features, long, wavy red hair, and a black cloak. 7B and 5E, two close friends of 13B who wouldn’t leave Chara alone.

They were talkative (or at least 5E was), troublesome, and above all, annoying, and Chara was rusty and out-of-practice.

Both androids knew 13B too well. 5E was an Executioner who’d met 13B while stranded in a machine-occupied desert. The two had escaped by the skin of their teeth to a Resistance camp and had since then become all but inseparable. As for 7B… Chara couldn’t help but find themselves glancing at 7B’s breasts (hints of her bare skin exposed by the ornate keyhole pattern cut into her uniform) and knew even without pawing through 13B’s memories that 13B was quite infatuated with her.

Hey! Whoever you are, don’t look at her like that! You creep! 13B shouted at Chara.

“Hey, Thirteen.” 5E planted her hands on her hips. “Ready to head out? Let’s not keep the boys in the hangar waiting!”

“Of course,” Chara said. “Lead the way, you two.”

Well, Chara told 13B as they walked through the Bunker behind the other two soldiers, isn’t this fortuitous? You’ve been assigned to a mission with your best friend and your crush…

If you do anything to hurt them, 13B snarled, I’ll…

And why on Earth would I do that? Chara asked. Or… do you want to give me a reason to hurt them?

13B was silent. Chara’s few disobedient fingers came back under their control.

That’s a good girl.

“Hey, Thirteen.” 5E patted Chara on the shoulder. “You kinda spaced out there. Something wrong?”
"Oh, um—" Chara cleared their throat. "Nervous, I suppose."

"Yeah." 5E laughed, tossing her auburn hair over her shoulder. "It's not often we all get to go on missions together." She drew closer and whispered in Chara's ear, raising a hand to hide her mouth. "Might just have that opportunity to ask out 7B, huh?"

"The thought hadn't even crossed my mind."

"Huh. You sure you're okay?" 5E asked.

"I'm perfectly fine," Chara insisted. *Although I haven't quite been feeling like myself lately,* they thought with an inward chuckle.

*Whatever you're planning,* 13B said, *you'll never get away with it. They'll see through you in a second—you're not even trying to act like me!*

7B glanced back at Chara over her shoulder, her beady eyes smoldering. "13B. You're taking point on Operation British. Aren't you?"

Chara shrugged. "I guess. You two have been briefed, haven't you?"

5E shook her head. "We just know we'll be in low Earth orbit for it. Commander trusts you to fill us in, I guess."

Chara wrapped their visor over their eyes and pulled up 13B's mission logs on the HUD. "Operation British. Controlled destabilization of an abandoned machine weapons platform from the First Machine War," they summarized. "If all goes as planned, the largest fragments will fall into the Earth's atmosphere and collide with a machine factory on the southern coast of Australia."

"So we just have to push it over?" 5E asked, the excitement beginning to fade from her face. "Any hostiles?"

"5E? The word, 'abandoned.' Does it mean anything to you?" 7B asked.

"Who knows? It might have active self-defense systems, even now." Chara looked through the rest of 13B's logs to piece together more information. "The satellite drifted into a shoal zone quite some time ago, making maneuverability difficult. Chances of successfully and accurately hitting our target are about 17 percent."

7B cracked her knuckles. "Oh. Good. A challenge."

As the trio passed a bank of black refrigerator-sized access terminals lined up against the corridor's pristine white walls, 5E broke away from Chara. "'Scuse me, girls. Gotta back up."

7B crossed her arms and shook her head. "Now, 5E? You should have done it in your quarters. Like a sensible person."

"Yeah," 5E said, hooking herself up to the terminal through an access port on the back of her neck obscured by her long hair, "but then if I die, I won't remember the past five minutes."

7B suppressed a groan and tapped her foot impatiently while 5E uploaded a copy of her consciousness to the Bunker's server. The backup system truly was ingenious; when their masters had laid the groundwork for YoRHa, Chara had never imagined they'd live to see such a system come to fruition.
Well, technically, they hadn’t.

7B glanced at Chara, who tried their best to look flustered under her gaze. “And you? 13B?”

“Oh, I was a good girl and backed up in my quarters,” Chara replied with a sly grin. “Like. A sensible person. You see.”

7B smiled a bit at Chara’s playful imitation of her terse speaking patterns, and 13B fumed to herself inside her mental prison, evidently upset that Chara was doing a better job of flirting with 7B than she’d ever been able to do.

As 5E pulled away from the access terminal, Chara took her place. “Excuse me—I just have to check on something.”

A life lived under that mountain—with technology so many thousands of years behind what was possible on the surface—had taught them a lot about low-tech ways to exploit computer systems. And their work so long ago with YoRHa’s architects had left them very well-informed regarding the blueprints of devices like these. Emitting a long and complex series of hypersonic tones, Chara tricked the terminal into allowing them root access, displaying a list of recently-updated android image files on their HUD. 5E’s was at the top, of course, with 7B’s a few entries further down.

*How the hell did you do that?* 13B gasped. *That—I don’t have a hacking module, you can’t—*

The most advanced technology, Chara explained, is all too often vulnerable to the most primitive of tricks.

They selected 7B and 5E’s backups, issued a text command to delete all associated image files, and exited the terminal.

*You— 13B sputtered. If they get destroyed, they’ll be reset to their factory defaults! They won’t be them anymore!*

Chara followed the other two androids to the hangar. *Then we should all do our best, then, shouldn’t we? Behave yourself, don’t distract me, and your friends will be spared the tranquility of death. Make yourself a nuisance, and…*

They let their threat hang unsaid in the open air.

Three flight units with androids cradled in their bellies cut through the darkness of space, slowing down as the debris-laden shoal zone encasing the machine weapons platform drew nearer. Above them, the shadowed Earth formed a curved horizon in the vast expanse, only a handful of lights on the surface visible in the night.

The alien entities that had invaded the Earth on 5012 AD had focused very little on space, instead devoting their efforts to a ground invasion. Once the alien motherships had burrowed into the Earth’s crust, the perfunctory handful of satellites left in place by their machine footsoldiers had quickly fallen silent. It was as if they didn’t even care about the human refugees who’d fled to the moonbase YoRHa was sworn to protect.

Of course, they didn’t. Chara knew full well there was nothing on the moon worth defending, save for a server loaded with scraps of human knowledge, fabricated recordings, and a skeleton crew of maintenance androids. To bury the truth, after all, one must first know it. And the truth was that after the pandemic that had swept the Earth in the mid-twenty-first century and the complete and utter
failure of Project Gestalt thousands of years later, no human being would ever walk the surface of the Earth—or any other celestial body.

An image of an android wearing a veil over the lower half of her face superimposed itself on Chara’s HUD. [13B, this is 87O. You’re getting close to the target. There’s too much interference in the shoal zone for long-range communications, so we won’t be able to monitor your progress. Be careful.] The Operator’s voice came directly into Chara’s brain, bypassing their ear altogether—a necessity in the vacuum of space.

Chara spoke in the same way. [Roger that, Operator. Signing out.]

That’s not how I usually talk to 87O! She’ll suspect something right away! 13B crowed.

Chara ignored her and addressed the pod that managed their flight unit next. [Pod 413, assess the state of short-wave communications systems.]

The pod spoke in a soft, childlike voice. [Analysis: Interference for short-range communications will be within acceptable levels.]

As jagged fragments of long-destroyed space stations filled Chara’s line of sight, they and the two androids following in close formation behind them took evasive action. While the smaller bits of flotsam and jetsam, scarcely larger than grains of sand and glittering in the untempered sunlight shining through the vacuum, were harmless to the armored flight units, larger pieces of debris could cause far greater problems.

With surgical precision 7B targeted and fired on the larger pieces that came too close, all but vaporizing them. 5E groaned about being stuck on space-janitor duty as the two of them cleared a path to the orbital station.

Chara felt one of the fingers on their left hand brush against a switch on their flight unit’s control panels and quickly retract, lighting up an amber dot in the corner of their HUD for a split second. As the rogue finger continued to twitch the light blinked in an irregular pattern.

Excuse me? Chara scolded their captive.

I can’t help myself if I’m nervous, 13B replied, a scowl audible in her voice. You didn’t back me up before you left!

[Hey, 13B, the distress beacon on your flight unit keeps turning off and on. Is something wrong?] 5E asked, her voice coming through crackly and punctuated with static as her transmission traveled through the stellar radiation filling the void.

Chara opened up a channel to 5E. [No, ma’am. Everything’s running smoothly here. The beacon’s toggle switch is just twitchy. My hand keeps brushing against it.]

[Oh, all right. As long as your critical systems are still fine.]

[I hope it’s not too annoying. I’ll ask the boys in the hangar to take a look at it when we get back.]

The weapons platform, bristling with artillery emplacements like a misshaped sea urchin, was battered and broken from millennia of disrepair. Patches of its hull had flaked off, revealing skeletal scaffolding; some of the debris comprising the shoal zone it had drifted into had come from its own body. The closer the three androids came to the satellite, the more gargantuan it grew; its disrepair showed that the spiny shell had been constructed around an asteroid a little under two kilometers in diameter. It was no Chicxulub impactor, not by a long shot, but for obliterating a machine factory
from orbit, it would do.

5E whistled. [We’re supposed to push that out of orbit?]

[We’re in microgravity. A simple push would be enough,] 7B chimed in.

[Right, girls, let’s get to work.] Chara transitioned from flight mode to attack mode, the flight unit elegantly unfolding into its more humanoid configuration, and touched down on the surface of the weapons platform.

As the trio of androids, under careful direction from the pods managing their flight units’ systems, began to nudge the derelict satellite into position, 7B found herself drawn to the annoying pattern of flashes 13B’s distress beacon was locked into. Each sub-second-long flash of the beacon appeared on 7B’s own HUD, the lengths of the pulses just a little too irregular to be a mechanical failure and too rapid to be simply the result of a careless hand.

In fact, the pattern of light and darkness, on and off, seemed almost like a coded transmission sent by a purposeful hand…

[Pod 612. Take the pattern of 13B’s distress beacon. And convert it into binary. Use the length of the smallest flash as a guidepost.]

[Acknowledged.] Pod 612 answered in its wheezing, gravelly voice. It ran off a string of gibberish text that scrolled across 7B’s HUD.

7B shook her head. [Pod 612. Convert 13B’s beacon into Morse code.]

[Analysis: The message is in shorthand. Query: May this support unit expand and display the message?]

[Yes.]

This time, the text was legible.

THIS IS 13B FOREIGN ENTITY INHABITING BODY CONTROL OVER ALMOST ALL MOTOR FUNCTIONS CLAIMS NO ALLIANCE WITH ALIENS OR MACHINES HAS PLANS FOR YORHA PLEASE KILL THIS IS 13B FOREIGN ENTITY INHABITING BODY CONTROL OVER ALMOST ALL MOTOR FUNCTIONS CLAIMS NO ALLIANCE WITH ALIENS OR MACHINES HAS PLANS FOR YORHA PLEASE KILL THIS IS 13B FOREIGN ENTITY INHABITING BODY…

7B found herself struck dumb. As the message repeated she froze, her hands drifting from the controls of her flight unit, paralyzing her unit. 13B was… infected by something? And wanted 7B and 5E to kill her?

Pod 612 ceased playback. [Statement: Unit 7B is allowing the satellite to drift off course. Proposal: regain control of flight unit and continue applying pressure immediately.] Red guidelines appeared on 7B’s HUD, indicating how much force to apply to stay on course and which direction to apply it.

[Yes. Sorry.] 7B placed her hands back on the controls and made the required course corrections.

[Pod 612. Forward message to Pod 024.]
She then opened a channel to 5E. *What do we do?* 7B asked herself. *Do we wait to complete the mission? Or should 5E and I turn on 13B as soon as possible?*

5E had a simple, decisive answer.

5E did not ask herself the same questions as 7B. When she received 7B’s message, she immediately abandoned her mission—ignoring Pod 024’s protests—and charged straight for 13B, running power through her flight unit’s heat saber to more easily cut through thick armor and swinging the massive blade in a ponderous arc through the vacuum.

13B’s flight unit leaped off the surface of the weapons platform in the nick of time, 5E’s strike only just managing to scratch its finish. As the flight unit tumbled through space, it transformed back into flight mode and strafed 5E, its machine-gunfire raking and pockmarking the patchy hull of the satellite.

*[Statement: Machine weapons platform drifting off course. Issuing revised course correction parameters.*]

New guidelines in flashing red drew themselves on 5E’s HUD, but she ignored them as she flew into the shoals, the mind-bogglingly gargantuan hulk of the night-shadowed Earth spinning around her. She opened up her comm channel to 13B—or, rather, the thing possessing 13B—as she fired on the clusters of debris it was using to hide. *What the hell are you?* she snarled. *What have you done to Thirteen? Oh, god, if you’ve hurt her—*

*[5E, what are you talking about? I’m right here!]* 13B’s voice came through laced with heavy static, a byproduct of the interference generated by the electrically-charged debris field.

5E kept firing in a wild arc, 13B’s flight unit dancing around the gunfire. [Don’t play dumb! We got her SOS!]

*[5E, calm down. You’re behaving erratically! Listen, the asteroid is hollowed out—stand down and meet me inside it and I’ll administer a logic virus vaccine for you and your pod—]*

*[I’m not infected! You are!] 5E touched down on a tumbling shard of the weapons platform’s hull and leaped off, propelling herself into 13B’s path; the heat-augmented saber affixed to her flight unit’s right arm clashed against 13B’s, throwing out red-orange sparks.

*[You used the beacon to tell your friends about me, didn’t you? Chara asked 13B. Clever girl! But I can’t let that slide!]*

The pod connected to Chara’s flight unit chimed in. [Statement: transmission received from Pod 612.]

Chara nodded. [Disregard. 5E and 7B have likely become infected with a logic virus. It may have been transmitted to their pods as well. I order you to close your short-range data ports and refuse all inbound connections for your own safety.]

*[Affirmative.*]
5E gritted her teeth as the force of impact jostled her in the cradle of her flight unit, slamming the back of her head against metal. Her visual processor flickered. [7B! I—I could use some help here!]

[5E. We have a mission. I intend to complete it.] 7B replied, terse and cool as always.

[7B!]

[You are a Type-E. Are you not?]

[I—] The words 5E had planned to say refused to come out. She was a Type-E, a type designed on the off chance that a Resistance android or another YoRHa unit would go rogue—rogue like that mythical A2 who was rumored to stalk the wilderness—and need to be exterminated. And 13B had gone rogue—not by her own hand but by the entity controlling her. But…

Type-E’s sometimes had to eliminate androids who were close to them. They even sometimes had to conceal their true identities and pretend to befriend possible targets, lying in wait to receive the orders to kill them. Those were the ones who broke down. Those were the ones who tearfully erased their backups before throwing themselves into deep space to drift forever or running into the wild blue yonder to be hunted down and slaughtered like animals as the veteran 14E had once done.

5E had never thought she would end up becoming one of those Executioners. [But… Lucky… she’s…]

5E panted with exertion as she adopted a fighting stance, holding one of her twin daggers in a defensive icepick grip. Broken machines littered the ground at her feet, yet more kept coming, filling the bottom of the rocky crevasse she’d fallen into. She parried a swing from one of the medium bipeds’ spears, driving her free knife into the machine’s metal belly. Before she could pull the forearm-length blade free, another machine charged at her. 5E stared ahead—

An oil-blackened greatsword cleaved the machine in two and soon dispatched the other machines accosting 5E. The beleaguered Type-E stumbled and fell to the ground, scraping her synthetic skin on rocks and jagged scraps of metal, as her savior stood above her with sunlight making her sienna hair glow like fire.

The other android knelt down and began applying staunching gel to 5E’s wounds. “You all right, pal?”

5E nodded, still overcome with exertion.

“I’m 13B. Who’re you?”

“5E,” 5E stammered, feeling self-conscious. Here she was, an elite combat unit designed to be so strong that she could even kill other YoRHa units, yet she’d been bested by a mere horde of machines. She was such a failure of a Type-E, the first time she’d had to terminate an android, she’d vomited.

“You’re a Type-E?” 13B asked, sounding shocked.

5E nodded. “I—I know what you’re thinking. An Executioner, and she can’t even beat a bunch of tin cans—”

13B laughed. “Nothing to be ashamed of! If these guys were easy to kill we’d have won
the war already! Besides, you sure took out a lot of the bastards yourself!” She helped 5E up, collecting the pair of knives she’d dropped and handing them back to her. “Most people call me Thirteen. Need my help getting back to the camp?”

5E gratefully took back her knives and nodded. “Thanks, Thirteen. Nice to meet you.”

“And my pals call me Lucky Thirteen, or just Lucky.”


From that day onward 13B and 5E were thick as thieves, close enough that they could have been sisters, sharing in laughter and in tears, in victory and defeat, in love and in heartbreak.

13B’s heat saber tore through the sword arm of 5E’s flight unit, severing it. 5E retreated, firing off a volley of missiles as she shifted back into flight mode. The loss of an arm would have left the flight unit ungainly and unbalanced if she were in Earth’s atmosphere; in space, with no air resistance, it made little difference. However, it left her with one less weapon.

13B’s flight unit retreated as well as the volley of missiles twisted and weaved through the vacuum of space, some impacting against large debris fragments, others zeroing in on the flight unit. White trails of exhaust particles from the missiles hung in the vacuum, ghostly fingers tracing the trajectory of the projectiles.

Chara strained to maneuver their flight unit as 5E’s missile salvo doggedly pursued them. Combat in space was a far greater challenge than they’d expected—they had never realized how much they relied on audio cues when fighting, and in the vacuum of space, even the wildest struggle produced nothing but silence.

[5E, this is your last warning!] Chara let a panicked tremolo enter their transmitted voice—all theater, of course. [Your logic systems are compromised! Let me help you!]

Stop it! Don’t you dare hurt her! 13B protested.

[Lucky, please!] 5E shouted. [You have to fight back!]

A stray missile impacted on Chara’s left wing, obliterating it—and one of the flight unit’s machine gun batteries with it. They flew back toward the weapons platform, swinging around one of the satellite’s derelict artillery cannons. The flight unit’s spindly “feet” punctured the patchy hull of the satellite and anchored the unit as Chara tugged on the cannon.

[Pod 413, authorize hacking and target this artillery battery.]

[Hacking authorized. Access to artillery battery controls granted.] The pod dutifully rerouted the controls, giving Chara control over the cannon they’d seized.

5E divebombed Chara, salvos of bullets dancing around Chara’s feet—but not coming close to the delicate center of the flight unit. Of course, she was trying to take 13B alive. She hadn’t realized yet that no matter what her relationship was to 13B, here, they were enemies.

As 5E came closer, Chara noticed out of the corner of their eye an enemy honing in on them at 6 o’clock—nothing but a blip on their radar to give away the attacker’s position. They whirled around, bringing their commandeered artillery turret to bear as the blip swirled 180 degrees on Chara’s radar
A lance of searing-hot plasma spewed from the old and battered turret in a wild and uncontrolled spray, piercing the “chest” of 7B’s flight unit and instantly vaporizing the android cradled inside.

5E couldn’t help but let out a silent gasp as what remained of 7B’s flight unit tumbled off the derelict weapons platform and into empty space, joining the rest of the wreckage floating in low Earth orbit around the satellite. [Pod 024, open up a channel to Unit 7B!] she cried out.

[Statement: transmission failed. 7B’s black box signal is no longer detectable.]

5E had never really liked 7B all that much and didn't know what 13B had seen in her (other than her well-endowed physique), but regardless of her feelings, 5E knew that she had born witness to an evil act. She let out a silent scream of rage, clutching the controls of her flight unit in an iron grip and firing everything she had at 13B’s flight unit. That evil creature! Whatever sick entity had taken control of 13B had killed 7B—had forced 13B to kill 7B by her own hand! And all she could have done was watch in horror!

13B’s flight unit leaped out of the way, transforming back into flight mode to match 5E, and the two YoRHa soldiers danced around each other, ducking and weaveng through the growing cloud of debris. 5E’s attacks came closer and closer to targeting 13B’s vital areas even as wreckage pummeled her flight unit. Pressure squeezed against her eyeballs, her tear ducts desperately trying to leak their growing contents into the vacuum of space.

5E couldn’t deny it any longer. She had to free 13B. By any means necessary, she had to do whatever it took to spare her best friend from the anguish engulfing her. Her fingers curled around the triggers of the flight unit’s machine guns.

[I’ll do it, Lucky. I’ll kill you. I’ll put you out of your misery!] she shouted out.

13B dove back toward the surface of the drifting orbital weapons platform, using the forest of broken and disused artillery turrets sprouting from the satellite like a dead forest as cover. 5E followed, still firing everything she had. Gunfire and volleys of missiles tore into the weapons platform, kicking up showers of metal and clouds of pulverized rock.

[Don’t worry, Lucky!] 5E cried out. [I’ll make it all better! You and 7B will wake up in the Bunker and this whole thing will be like a bad dream!]

This was 5E’s job. And she would do it. For her friend. To spare her the awful memory of being forced to kill someone she loved. 5E alone would shoulder that burden. She alone would carry within her the memories of what it was like to watch somebody so dear to her she was almost a part of her die by her own hand.

She couldn’t help but laugh, laugh hysterically yet silently into the cold, cruel vacuum. Finally, at long last, she had become what she was meant to be. And all it took to complete her metamorphosis was...

[It’s okay, Lucky… I’m going to kill you, Lucky Thirteen!]

No! Please, god, no, stop! 13B cried out from their helpless position within Chara’s head. The fingers on Chara’s left hand scrabbled uselessly against the flight unit’s controls as 13B tried in vain
to exert all the control she had over her own body. It wasn’t enough to cause anything other than a minor inconvenience to Chara. Don’t hurt her, I’m begging you!

There’s no use in pleading with me to stop, Chara scolded 13B as their flight unit and 5E’s did battle. Chara fled into the winding, hollowed-out tunnels bored into the weapons platform’s rocky center with 5E in hot pursuit. They didn’t bother telling her they’d planned on eliminating her friends regardless of what she did—those two knew 13B far too well and would have sniffed Chara out sooner or later—but chose to twist the knife. It was you who pushed everything to its edge. It was you who led your friends to their destruction. But you cannot accept it. You think you are above consequences!

You’re a monster!

Chara grinned. At last, 13B, you understand!

The distress beacon on Chara’s flight unit began to flicker yet again, but whatever Morse code message 13B was trying to disseminate to her friend, it was futile.

[Whatever you are,] 5E howled, [whatever you’ve done to Lucky… whatever you want to do to YoRHa… it all ends here! I am a soldier in the Army of Humanity! I’ll fight to your last breath to protect the human race!]

5E entered the same tunnel Chara had flown into as she continued to shout hysterical epithets, firing off a volley of missiles as she shifted into attack mode. The projectiles and the ghostly white contrails they left behind filled the rocky corridor as at the same time Chara fired everything in their arsenal. The dueling salvos of missiles, equally matched, collided with each other, searing-hot gas and opaque debris clouding the tunnel.

Chara shifted their flight unit into attack mode and readied their heat saber.

No, no, please, I’ll do anything you say, please…!

5E’s flight unit flew out of the cloud enveloping the tunnel.

PLEASE, DON’T HURT HER!

[GLORY TO MANKIND!] 5E screeched, her voice overpowering even 13B’s desperate cries in Chara’s head.

Thanks to the all-obscuring cloud of debris and shrapnel, 5E didn’t see the saber until it was too late.

The tapered blade tore through the protective armor of her flight unit with deadly precision.

In her last moment of consciousness, 5E was grateful she had backed herself up. True, the version of her that would awaken in the Bunker would know nothing about the struggle that had taken place here, would know nothing of the horrible fate that had befallen 13B… but she would figure it out sooner or later, and then…

Then she would save 13B.

The thought of rescuing Lucky from the hands of the evil entity that had ensnared her… it filled 5E with determination.
As the blade skewered 5E’s flight unit front to back, 5E first lost feeling in her legs, then her waist, then her abdomen, and finally her chest all in the span of a single second before the superheated metal edge of the giant blade utterly incinerated her black box.

WHYYYYY? 13B sobbed as Chara slid the blade out of the flight unit’s chest, revealing a hole bored through the armor, its edges still glowing white-orange. The remains of the cradle that had held 5E in place were unoccupied save for a few disembodied extremities, charred and warped; all the rest of the android’s body had been reduced to a smear of carbon.

I’d have done anything you said! 13B cried. I’d have been good! I wouldn’t have gotten in your way ever again! Why? Why? What are you, even? What’s wrong with you?

13B’s mental shouts and pleas broke down and devolved into agonized, wordless wails as Chara returned to the surface of the weapons platform and began to carefully adjust the satellite’s trajectory, following their pod’s instructions to the letter.

Chara left the weapons platform behind as it slipped, slowly but inexorably, toward the Earth. 13B kept screaming and crying all the way, filling Chara’s head with an awful cacophony of misery as she wept like a child who’d learned about death for the first time. Functional immortality had left these androids naive and spoiled.

By the time Chara returned to the Bunker and landed their battered flight unit in the hangar bay, 13B had finally fallen silent. You wanted to know what I am, Lucky Thirteen? Chara asked as they let the flight unit unfold around them and drop them to the floor of the hangar. The technicians nearby took one look at the damage incurred and groaned, some throwing up their hands in dismay.

I am Chara, they told 13B, not sure if she was even listening. Perhaps the anguish had completely destroyed what remained of her mind. The demon that comes when people call its name… and brings the gift of death to immortals.

Chara walked down the corridor to their quarters in silence, still smelling the faint, metallic, almost sweet ozone-ish odor of vacuum lingering on their clothes and skin.

They returned to their quarters completely satisfied and went back to tending to their appearance, carefully adjusting the hue and saturation of their eyes to add a tint of red to the brown irises.

At last, they looked like themselves again. From that day on, Chara never heard 13B’s voice, nor did they ever feel their fingers tremble unbidden, again. Their body now was truly their own.

Later that day, when Chara submitted their mission report to the Commander, this is what they claimed:

Over the course of Operation British, YoRHa Units 7B and 5E began behaving erratically and opened fire on me. Since their support pods, Pod 612 and Pod 024, respectively, failed to restrict the functions of 7B and 5E’s flight units in order to subdue them, one can only assume they were compromised by the same unknown logic virus which manifested within my partners. After a pitched battle I neutralized both units and resumed the task at hand alone, re-positioning the weapons platform into an unstable orbit as directed to ensure its intended trajectory. My conjecture is that the logic virus was part of a defense mechanism employed by the platform, though why I alone was spared its ill effects I can only guess.
"5E, if you can hear me, blame this on the misfortune of your birth!"

Y'know, at first I didn't think this Chara would end up the *most* evil version of Chara I've ever put in a fanfic... but here we are.
Chapter Summary

It's time for 2B to get to know Undyne all over again.

The next morning, 2B found herself consumed by worry.

It wasn’t that anything was wrong. It was that there wasn’t anything wrong.

The last time she’d felt this good, it had been the morning of the day 6E had reared her ugly head.

As she chopped firewood for the town’s communal cache, 2B tried to focus on the amber half-sunlight providing the monsters who lived in this sleepy, snowy town with a semblance of dawn, to appreciate the way the fresh and untrod-on snowdrifts glistened and sparkled, to lose herself in the brisk and biting cold breeze which heralded the upcoming blizzard.

But something bad was going to happen.

2B just knew it.

“Pod 042,” she asked idly as the support unit floated over her shoulder, “do you have a bad feeling about today? Or is it just me?”

“Statement: current weather patterns indicate a growing cold front approaching this town. There will likely be a severe blizzard passing over this town as early as late afternoon. You are merely unconsciously picking up on subtle clues in the atmospheric pressure and temperature to arrive at the same conclusion.”

“Thank you, Pod 042.” As the Virtuous Contract sliced through another log, 2B sighed. There is nothing to be concerned about here. The danger has passed.

Or would 6E arrive again in just a few short days, bringing ruin upon this fragile world yet again?

2B set another log atop the severed tree stump which served her as a cutting board, raised her sword above her head…

And a crackling spear of turquoise lightning tore through the log, leaving two smoking, jagged, blackened halves as the spearhead embedded itself in the stump.

Undyne?

2B whirled around to face the direction of the attack.

And there she was. The Captain of the Royal Guard, wrapped in a thick, white fur cloak that rendered her nearly invisible against the snow, save for the brilliant blue sheen of her scales and the fiery mane of red hair flowing in a long ponytail over her shoulder.

And there was a crowd of monsters behind her—it looked to be nearly half the town.

“Y-y-y-you YoRHa Unit 2B!” Undyne raised her fist in the air and then leveled an accusing finger
at 2B’s chest. “I was informed by your brother that a warrior from the s-s-s-surface dwelt here, stronger and more beautiful th-th-than any of her k-k-k-kind!”

9S said I was the strongest and most beautiful android in the world? 2B thought, oddly flattered.

Undyne turned to her entourage, her teeth still chattering from the cold. “Look upon her! This is an android s-s-s-soldier, c-created by humanity to wage its wars!”

2B felt her hopes sink. Had 9S failed to befriend her, as he’d thought? Of course, she could beat Undyne in a fight if it came to that, but… she didn’t want to fight Undyne.

“You may have come here in peace…” Undyne conjured another spear, long and humming with electricity. “But if you really are th-th-the strongest warrior on Earth’s surface, then I am duty-bound to prove myself to you! Prove to me the s-s-s-strength of humans… and I will show you the strength of us monsters!”

With a flourish of her spear, Undyne threw the thick white cloak draped over her shoulders to the side. The furry coat vanished against the snow. Her armor beneath was light, thin, and form-fitting; ornate, yet unobtrusive.

2B’s spirits lifted as she realized that the captain was challenging her not to a fight to the death, but a contest of might. A challenge she was far more willing to accept. She took a step closer to Undyne.

“You must be the Captain Undyne I have heard so much about. I—”

“Hold on!” Undyne held out her hand. “That b-b-blindfold—take it off! I won’t fight you with a handicap! Fight with all your might, or d-d-don’t bother f-f-f-fighting at all! Last one standing gets the glory!”

“Very well.” 2B raised a hand to her visor, undid the knot tying it around her head, and let the strip of black cloth fall to the ground. “Shall we begin?”

“Wait!” In the crowd, Papyrus raised a bony hand. “Captain, er, 2B’s kind of my friend, so… whom should I root for?”

“The strongest!” Undyne roared, charging into battle.

Spear met sword; as the electric shaft of Undyne’s conjured weapon ground against 2B’s Virtuous Contract, 2B hooked her ankle around Undyne’s leg, sweeping it out from under the captain. Undyne rebounded gracefully, her spear probing the limits of 2B’s agility as she thrust the spearhead at 2B’s torso.

2B grabbed the spear shaft in her off hand, twisting it as she grappled with Undyne. Her palms went numb as she clutched the spear, arcs of lightning dancing in the air and sending bursts of tingling radio-fuzz through 2B’s body where they connected. She threw the captain to the ground, the snow cushioning Undyne’s fall, and 2B tossed the spear aside; it shattered into a shower of sparks as Undyne leaped to her feet.

“Long ago, before anyone here was even born, the human race imprisoned us in this mountain! Our ancestors were told to be grateful their lives were spared!” Undyne’s voice rose over the clash of lightning on metal. “But those of us who were born in here long to see the sun and stars more than anybody else!”

2B fended off Undyne’s strikes. She knew two Undynes—the one she had fought to the death, full of rage and righteousness; the one she had befriended, passionate and competitive—and here, in this snowy field on the border of town and forest, she was fighting both of them.
The crowd began to chant Undyne’s name as she continued her furious counterattack. “We’ve always wondered how much stronger humans have become since they sent us here! But we’ve become strong, too!”

The butt of Undyne’s spear plunged at 2B’s chest, stopping short as a translucent, shimmering shield appeared in front of it. Still, the force of the impact sent 2B skidding backward.

“Pod 042, disengage auto-programs!” 2B ordered her support pod. If Undyne said she wanted a fair fight, she certainly wouldn’t approve of anything intervening on 2B’s behalf—whether defensively or offensively.

Pod 042 understood, and with a calm “Affirmative,” drifted away to observe from afar.

“You might not have a soul we can take, android,” Undyne snarled as she and 2B fought on in what was just as much a dance as a battle, “so I will take your pride instead, and deliver it to all who feel hopeless and dejected!”

2B scored a hit on Undyne, modulating her strength as much as she could and cutting a thin slice through the armor covering the captain’s torso. The shaft of Undyne’s spear knocked against 2B’s wrist, filling it with static, and as 2B’s fingers involuntary twitched, her sword fell from her hand.

“Hopes!”

Undyne followed up her strike with a spear-shaft to 2B’s abdomen, ripples of static spreading through the android’s body. 2B’s visual processor filled her line of sight with rolling bars of static and chromatic aberrations.

“Dreams!”

A scaly elbow collided with 2B’s chin, sending her reeling as pulses of prickling numbness still ran through her muscles.

“I, the Spear of Justice, will return these things to our world!”

Delivering hope to the hopeless. Being a pillar of strength for the weak. Making it easier for everybody else to believe that someday, life could be better. All this grandstanding and theater, all this burning passion she put on full display, the obsession with never giving up, no matter what…

At last, 2B fully understood Captain Undyne. What she did for these monsters was just what 2B and 9S and all the other YoRHa soldiers were supposed to do for all the Earth. To provide a vision of finality to a world caught in endless cycles of futility.

Undyne… You’re what we were meant to be.

2B regained her footing before Undyne could strike again, catching the captain by the arm and driving a fist into her solar plexus, driving all of the breath from Undyne’s lungs and forcing the livid gills running along the sides of her neck to gape like hungry mouths.

2B still didn’t have much experience fighting organic lifeforms, but when she saw the slits on Undyne’s neck flare open, she knew better than to let an opening go to waste, and with a side of her open palm delivered a chop to Undyne’s gills. The captain dropped like a bag full of scrap metal, too breathless to shout out.

The crowd went silent as 2B stood over Undyne. 2B let air creep back into her emptied lungs and static fade from her senses.
Undyne stood back up, panting for breath, and the crowd began to cheer once more. “A dirty trick,” she gasped with a yellowed, fangsome grin. “So that’s the strength of humanity, huh?”

She took a step back, and then another until she was standing next to the severed stump 2B had used for cutting lumber. Undyne reached down, dug her fingers into the wood, and with a fin-to-fin grin and a mighty roar ripped the stump out of the ground, roots and all, holding it triumphantly above her head as clods of dirt trickled from the exposed roots down to her fiery hair. Her eye twitched involuntarily.

“No tricks!” she shouted out, her breath clouding the air. “Just speed and strength! Fight like a monster, Unit 2B!”

The stump sailed through the air; 2B called the Joyeuse to her hand and with her new sword glittering in many colors in the morning light diced the projectile; Undyne was right behind it and with two spears threw herself into combat once more.

A strike, a thrust, a parry, a riposte; fleche, feint, remise; attack, advance, disengage. Sparks and flurries of snow danced in the air between monster and android, the sparks from Undyne’s spears hot, the snow kicked into the air by the agile footwork of the two combatants bitter cold.

2B’s heel snagged on something invisible—white, but not snow, lying in wait on the ground. Undyne’s cloak. She snatched it up and threw it in the air between herself and Undyne, then thrust through it with her sword.

It was a killing stroke—but not to Undyne. The captain was too good, and 2B knew it; the Joyeuse met only air.

Exhilaration rushed through 2B’s body, filling her brain with endorphins. This wasn’t a battle for survival. It wasn’t about completing a mission. It wasn’t even about training. It was unlike any fight 2B had been in before. It was a spectacle, a performance, a dance. It was fun.

The glimmer in Undyne’s single exposed eye as she and 2B, their weapons locked around each other’s, pulled each other closer. Bright, almost joyous. She was having fun, too.

Undyne began to laugh. “You’re good, 2B!”

The two combatants broke away from each other; Undyne struck the ground and a grove of lightning-spears burst from the snow, blue arcs of electricity dancing between plumes of snow; one spearhead on its ascent cut across 2B’s bare thigh, driving all feeling from her leg. 2B stumbled and drove the Joyeuse into the frozen ground for support as her right leg dangled, limp and devoid of feeling—the blade just sank too deep, too easily, for it to act as a crutch. An emerald glow crept up her body—merely a formality at this point, or at least until she regained the use of her left leg, but at least it kept her upright.

Undyne drew back her arm and threw a spear like a javelin; with reflexes as quick as the electric arcs that coursed from Undyne’s weaponry 2B snatched the spear out of the air in front of her.

2B’s numbing fingers clutched at the spear’s shaft just below the spearhead; the tip of the spear came within centimeters of the tip of her nose. The spear continued to try to push itself forward: the tighter 2B gripped, the harder it struggled.

As the spearhead came closer and closer, blurring in 2B’s sight, everything began to grow fuzzy and gray as electrical interference poured into 2B’s head. She kept holding on, all sensation vanishing from her hand; she only knew she was holding the spear tighter and tighter because its struggles
against her grew stronger and stronger. Undyne stood before her with her arms crossed, her grin growing even wider, her competitive fervor turning to admiration as she watched 2B wrestle with the spear.

The spear began to inch backward, even as the fuzzy numbness engulfing 2B’s hand spread down her wrist, her forearm, all the way to her shoulder, and at last 2B tore it from its frozen position and threw it aside. The emerald aura released her; she lunged at Undyne.

All 148 kilograms of 2B’s synthetic body collided with Undyne; Undyne, though quite tall and muscular, weighed only a little over half of that. Both fighters fell into the snow, skidding over a meter before coming to a halt, dusted with a sheet of churned snow. 2B felt the snow-mingled sweat coating her skin begin to freeze.

The crowd went silent once more, everyone waiting with bated breath to see who would rise first.

2B pulled herself onto her hand and knee, her right leg still refusing to follow her commands, although the numbness had faded to prickling static; her left arm, too, was devoid of feeling, though with great effort she could still move it.

“2B!” 9S pulled himself through the throng of onlookers, panicked. “Are you all right?”

2B glanced at him, nodded, smiled wearily, and then felt her arms give out, sending her back to the snowdrift. As the world began to swim around her, she saw Pod 042 drift over to 9S and heard it assure him that this had been nothing more than a friendly competition and that 2B’s vitals were completely stable.

Undyne shot up, raising a triumphant fist in the air despite her shivering. “And that! That! Is the strength! Of monsters!” she shouted out before she, too, fell over.

As the monsters crowded around their unconscious hero, clapping and cheering, 9S helped 2B sit up. “I—I guess I should’ve warned you… I told Undyne she could stop by and pay you a visit in the morning.”

“Oh.” 2B caught her breath as her visual processor began a long, slow stabilization process, gingerly rubbing her arm with the irrational hope that doing so could restore feeling to her deadened skin more quickly. “Perhaps…”

“I should’ve given you a heads-up, yeah, I know. I didn’t know she’d jump straight to wanting to fight you!” 9S pulled 2B to her feet, and 2B sharply hissed as she inadvertently shifted her weight to her still-thawing right leg, sending a thousand icy needles up her shin and thigh. “I’m so sorry. But I’ve got just the thing to make it up to you. C’mon, let’s go…”

“Wait!”

Undyne sat up, a toothy grin splitting her face, her single visible eye wild and burning with an unquenchable fire as the crowd parted around her. “2B… 9S… Don’t you dare think I’m done with you two yet!”

Y’know, this is gonna sound weird,” Undyne told 2B after several hot drinks, “but something’s been bothering me. The whole time I was fighting you, I felt something… strange. Like a warm echo in my head.” She paused to take a bite of a dripping, greasy hamburger, her fangs creating a ragged cross-section. “Something like… ‘I miss being friends with you.’” She snorted with laughter. “But that’s just ridiculous, isn’t it?”
2B picked at a plate of fries, perturbed more than slightly by Undyne’s musings. So Undyne, too, felt
defa-vu from the timeline that had been erased. “Not so. In truth, 9S and I have traveled back in time
from the future. We know you pretty well.”

Undyne, who’d been in mid-bite, spat a well-chewed mouthful of burger back onto her plate, nearly
choking on her own laughter. She pounded on the table, the force of the impact rattling every glass in
Grillby’s pub.

9S nudged 2B. “I wouldn’t have believed you, either,” he whispered.

“So what’s the surface like, anyway?” Undyne asked. “What are humans up to, and why’d they
build guys like you to do all their dirty work?”

“Well, about seven thousand years ago, an alien invasion force landed on the Earth and began
building an army of machines,” 9S explained, sipping a festive-looking drink Undyne had ordered
on his behalf. “After a little over a decade of fighting, the remaining humans abandoned the planet
and fled to a colony on the moon for their own safety, leaving us androids to fight on their behalf.
We’ve been fighting ever since.”

Undyne stared at him, nonplussed.

“At least, that’s what they say,” 9S mumbled. “The fifty-first century was a long time ago. Who
knows what really happened during the first war.”

“I think I buy the time travel story a little more, to be honest,” Undyne said. “I mean, you’re saying
humans have been stuck on the moon for the past seven thousand years? That’s the dumbest thing
I’ve ever heard! I mean, for the past couple hundred years, humans have been falling down here and
we’ve been executing them and taking… their… souls…” Undyne trailed off until finally she was
left sitting there, eye wide, mouth agape.

And then Undyne’s smile rebounded.

“Nah,” she said, “Your story is just bullshit. Heh. Humans on the moon.” Undyne returned to her
meal. “So,” she said, mumbling through a mouthful of beef, “you guys really like living in Snowdin?
It’s so cold out here!”

“Our model types are rated for full efficiency in temperatures ranging from minus forty degrees to
one hundred degrees Centigrade,” 2B explained.

“Look, no offense to the great people who live here, like Papyrus, and the Dogi, and Grillby… but if
there’s a nowhere, you guys are in the middle of it out here! Come on… you’re these… android
samurai warriors! From space! Like something out of one of Alphys’ animes!”

If this was the middle of nowhere, then 2B supposed nowhere was not a bad place to be.

“So why move in with Papyrus and Sans?” 9S asked.

Undyne shrugged. “Cuz they’re friends. And I mean, I can deal with Snowdin until I find a new
place to live.”

“What happened to your house?” 2B asked.

9S looked sheepish. “We kind of, uh…”

“…Accidentally set it on fire,” Undyne finished. “We just got carried away. I don’t know how
Papyrus does it, really. *His* spaghetti never comes out so incendiary."

“You might not want to stay here,” said 2B, thinking back to the ill omen she’d felt in the morning. “We’re expecting a blizzard later today. If I disliked the snow and cold as much as you do, I’d find somewhere else to spend the night.”

Undyne scratched at her scaly chin, pondering 2B’s warning.

“Statement,” Pod 153 chimed in. “Data analysis shows an estimated one hundred to one hundred fifty centimeters of snowfall within Snowdin over the next twelve hours.”

As Undyne continued to mull over her options, 2B got an idea. “I heard you and the Royal Scientist are friends. Perhaps you could spend the night with her.”

Undyne looked shocked at 2B’s suggestion. “Y-Yeah, but… that was a long time ago. We’ve barely talked since she got that position…”

“Well, what better excuse can you have to get back in touch?” 9S asked. “Besides, she’d love to meet a pair of real live androids, wouldn’t she?”

That changed Undyne’s attitude very quickly.

Before she knew it, 2B was following 9S and Undyne to Hotland to have what Undyne referred to as a “slumber party.”

Doctor Alphys never expected company. To say her living quarters, which occupied the mezzanine of the Royal Laboratory in Hotland, weren’t quite what some would call “presentable” was a slight understatement.

Well… Mettaton stopped by often, and most often uninvited and unannounced. As a courtesy, he never spoke a word about Alphys’ living conditions, though they no doubt disgusted him.

But the strewn-around blankets, pillows, and anime figurines on the floor, the posters plastered on the walls, the half-empty cups of soda lying on the counters, the stovetop that hadn’t been cleaned in months… they all meant something very important to Alphys.

They meant that this wonderful loft, this top-notch laboratory, this facility loaded with each and every state-of-the-art tool Alphys could desire… it all belonged to her, whether she deserved it or not.

When the buzzer rang, Alphys pulled herself out of her malaise, dragging herself downstairs to answer the door. “N-No visitors!” she called into the speaker before checking the camera.

Oh.

It was Undyne. Standing on her doorstep. Sweating like a stuck pig in the notorious Hotland heat.

The Captain standing there, the scales covering her toned muscles glistening with sweat in the wavering heat-haze, a big, goofy smile on her sweat-dripping face as she hefted a duffel bag over her shoulder, *god,* she was so unbelievably, inconceivably… *something* that all Alphys could do in response to the sight of her was stammer stupidly, “Undyne? I-I’m not home right now!”

Wait. What was she doing? Undyne was minutes away from dropping to the ground from heat
exhaustion, and here Alphys was, freezing up! “U-Um, I—I mean, uh…”

Undyne consulted with someone off-camera.

Moments later, the door slid open of its own accord. What looked like a silver-haired human boy took a deep bow and ushered Undyne in. “After you, ma’am,” he said. “Hi, Alphys!”

Undyne rushed into the lab, throwing her bag to the floor and gasping for air. “God… dammit… Alphys, why… does your lab have to be in Hotland?” she panted as the boy handed her a canteen of water.

“Um…” Alphys looked at Undyne, then to her apparently-human friend, and then to her other friend, who’d slipped in and closed the door behind her so silently that Alphys hadn’t noticed her until just now. “S-So, uh… what’s going on?” Oh, geez, Alphys thought, starting to panic, she’s here on Royal Guard business. She’s here to bust me for some crime, the amalgamate business probably, and these are her new enforcers!

Wait, why would her enforcers be humans? That doesn’t make any sense!

Alphys knew what doom felt like. She was feeling it now. “U-Um, I-I’ll come quietly, if you want! I—I mean, o-of course you want me to come quietly, l-look at me, I can’t put up a fight, I’m, uh…”

Undyne finished guzzling her water. “Cool it, Alphys! I just wanted to know if I could crash here for a few days.”

Alphys glanced at her loft, cringing at the sight of the mess strewn about. People expected a robotics lab to be messy (and hers certainly was), but not the place where you lived. Alphys was an adult. There were standards. “Er… um… well…” How could she let Undyne see her like this? How could she let Undyne know how she lived? “You see…”

“How ‘bout I sweeten the deal?” Undyne grabbed the arm of the boy accompanying her. “Look what I’ve got! It’s a real, live android!” She grabbed the other woman’s arm. “Two of ‘em! And they’ve got swords!”

The boy waved politely. “Hi, I’m 9S, and this is my sister, 2B. Do you have any questions?”

For Alphys, in that instant, her world changed completely. She did have questions for 2B and 9S. Dozens of them. And she wanted to ask all of them, all at once.

“What’s your skin made of? And your hair? Why do you look like humans? Do you have a bio-synthetic endodermis? What about your endoskeleton? Do you have an endoskeleton? What’s your power source? How do you handle heat dissipation? How fast is your CPU? Can you overclock yourself? Do you need to sleep? What about food and water? What about internal storage capacity? How are you making those swords float like that? Do you have reprod—”

“Hey, Alphys?” Undyne asked.

Alphys fell out of her groove, blinking a few times as the freight train that was her inquisitive mind stuttered and stalled on the tracks. “Y-Yeah, Undyne?”

“How about you help me unpack?” Undyne handed Alphys her bag. “And while you’re at it, can I use your shower?”

“U-Um…” Alphys’ eyes flitted back and forth. She didn’t have anything embarrassing lying around in her bathroom, did she? “O-Okay. Bathroom’s upstairs and to the left.” She took Undyne’s bag
and grunted as Undyne pulled her hand away; the bag felt like it was almost twice Alphys’ body weight. There was no chance she could lift it.

Undyne smiled and sprinted up the stairs, evidently grateful to be free of the indignities Hotland’s sweltering environment inflicted on her. “Thanks, Alphys!”

Alphys started to drag Undyne’s duffel bag across the floor, straining with all her might to move it a few inches. She was not by any stretch of anyone’s imagination a strong person, and Undyne had somehow fit what felt like all of her belongings into this one bag.

Suddenly, the bag felt much lighter, and as 9S grabbed a handle and lifted the bag, he smiled. “Here, let me help with that.” He turned to the gray-black machine floating at his side. “Pod 153, how about you answer a few of Doctor Alphys’ questions for her?”

The pod lit up. “Statement: this support unit is capable of sharing any non-classified information on the construction of YoRHa model androids. Response one: The epidermis is constructed from…”

The mezzanine overlooking Alphys’ laboratory floor was strewn with debris. Seeing it reminded 2B of the ramshackle Resistance camps back on the surface, the crude living spaces hewn from inhospitable patches of earth and broken buildings in the midst of enemy-controlled territory. Perhaps, due to her unsavory experiments and the near-crippling case of impostor syndrome she wrestled with, the troubled Doctor Alphys too was carving out a space to call her own in a part of the world that she felt rejected her.

That was to say, 2B did not find Alphys’ living quarters to be particularly or offensively squalid despite the doctor’s visible anxiety, and she and 9S had slept in far worse places (9S had to agree, although his terminology was far more delicate). Saying so had made Alphys look a bit more comfortable with Undyne’s idea of hosting a “slumber party,” though not as comfortable as 2B had expected. She had not intended to give Alphys a backhanded compliment.

As Pod 153 dealt with Alphys, 9S used the opportunity to dig through his own satchel. “Oh, hey, 2B?” he asked. “Earlier, I thought you might still need some cheering up, so I ran out and bought, uh…” He handed 2B a bundle of mint-green fabric. “This.”

2B took the bundle and unfolded it, revealing a matching pair of pants and a button-down shirt, both made from fleece so soft it felt as though it would melt in her hands. Stitched into the fabric were simple drawings of what looked like rabbits. Aside from the color and decoration, the outfit was exactly the same as 9S’s pajamas… which he had also pulled from his pack.

2B stared at the articles of clothing in her hands. “They’re, um…”

“Pajamas! Just like mine! I assumed a slumber party involved sleep, so I thought I’d come here prepared. I was gonna get you that pair the day 6E showed up and ruined everything,” said 9S, a flush of color coming to his cheeks as his speech grew more rapid. “The general store didn’t have them in stock until just yesterday. I—Um, I know you’re not the biggest fan of gifts, but…”

“Why the rabbits?” 2B asked.

“They’re bunnies!” 9S replied defensively, his words tripping over themselves. “Because ‘bunny’ starts with… ‘B.’” He looked down at his boots, a sheepish blush reddening his cheeks. “I—I know, it’s really dumb, isn’t it?”

2B held the clothes up to her chest and ran her fingers through the fabric, inwardly marveling at just
how soft it was. “I… I, um… I’m not sure how to say this, but…” She fumbled over her words. Her hands were shaking. How long had it been since she’d last accepted a gift from 9S? Was it really safe to do so now? “I… like them.”

9S’s eyes widened. “Y-You do?”

“Excuse me for a moment, Nines.” 2B took a moment to find somewhere private to change, carefully folding and setting aside her uniform, and then returned to find that 9S had changed clothes as well. She wrapped her arm around 9S’s shoulders, noticed how well his clothes matched hers, and couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey, 2B,” 9S said, still stumbling just a bit over his words. “There’s uh… something in your mouth I’ve never seen before.”

“Hmm?”

“Yeah, they’re these white things behind your lips. I think they’re called… teeth?”

2B rolled her eyes and rapped her knuckles against 9S’s head.

It was at that point that Undyne returned, fully refreshed and wrapped in a thick towel, her saturated hair hanging limp and heavy over her shoulders and covering her left eye; as soon as she caught sight of 2B, her jaw dropped. “Oh my god.”

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Slumber parties, it turned out, involved significantly less sleep than 2B and 9S had anticipated. In fact, the point seemed to be to not sleep for as long as possible, which Undyne achieved by insisting on painting everyone’s nails and Alphys achieved by playing odd videos she referred to as “anime,” which she claimed were ancient human historical records. 2B was doubtful, mainly because these videos appeared to be hand-drawn animations, but also because they were utterly ludicrous.

“It is the year 0079 of the Universal Century. A half-century has passed since Earth began moving its burgeoning population into gigantic orbiting space colonies. A new home for mankind, where people are born and raised… and die. 9 months ago, the cluster of colonies furthest from the Earth, called Side 3, proclaimed itself…”

“You should’ve seen us, Alphys!” Undyne crowed as she held 2B’s hand, brushing her fingernails with a shimmering blue lacquer. 2B kept her hand steady. This was a new experience for her, despite the several (dozen) times 6O had tried to cajole her into doing it. She’d never seen the point of painting her nails before—especially since her uniform included gloves.

Undyne chuckled. “This dweeb was so overconfident, she tried to fight me with a blindfold on!”

“That wasn’t a blindfold!” 9S protested, squeezing 2B’s shoulder. “If anything, 2B was handicapping herself by—”

2B cut him off. “Never mind, Nines. It was a fair fight.”

“I guess,” he huffed, nearly crossing his arms before realizing the polish Undyne had all-too-eagerly applied to his nails hadn’t dried yet.

“And a hell of a fight!” Undyne added. “If everyone on the surface is as tough as you, it must be a pretty dangerous place!”
9S smirked. “Well, not everyone is as tough as her.”

The night wore on. 2B didn’t find much interesting about Alphys’ much-lauded cartoons, although 9S certainly seemed enraptured by them (he had to know they couldn’t possibly be accurate historical records, right?). She huddled at 9S’s side as she let her fingernails dry, resting her head on his shoulder. A healthy and satisfying ache still suffused her body from her battle with Undyne, and as 2B allowed herself to fall asleep, she decided that her gut feeling from the early morning must have been mistaken. It had been a very good day.

And tomorrow… tomorrow would probably be a good day, too.

Tomorrow. In every Resistance camp, even in the Bunker as it hovered high above the Earth, every soldier, every technician, had on their lips and in their minds a common refrain: “Tomorrow, when the war is over…” And every day, they would reaffirm that mantra—because the war had to end sometime, didn’t it? And that day would surely be somebody’s tomorrow, if not theirs?

Tomorrow, when the war is over, we’ll build houses. Tomorrow, when the war is over, we’ll buy frivolous things at shopping malls. Tomorrow, when the war is over, we’ll eat better food, wear better clothes, spend idle nights with friends and family.

2B felt so fortunate to have stumbled upon this oasis. If a god of death had once cursed her, then now a god of life was smiling upon her.

▫▫▫

Chara awoke to the sound of gentle knocking on the door to their quarters, and with a wariness and caution reflecting their long history as a spy and saboteur let the door slide open.

Operator 6O stood on the other side, out-of-uniform, her long blonde hair done up in braids, her hands clasped nervously in front of her. “H-Hello, 13B. I heard about what happened to 5E and 7B and, um… May I come in?”

Chara would not have obliged 6O, but 13B probably would have—so Chara led her inside. “What can I do for you, Operator… 6O, was it?”

6O nodded as she looked around Chara’s sparsely-adorned quarters. “Well, I wanted to thank you for what you did for me last week, and see if you were doing okay after… you know.”

Chara smiled. “Thank you, 6O. Truth be told, I’m still having trouble wrapping my head around what happened. It’s so unusual for someone to just be… gone.”

6O laid a sympathetic hand on their shoulder. “I know how it feels. Earlier… we lost 9S on a mission. When 2B got back, we found that his backups were corrupted, too.”

“Corrupted, you say? Chara mused. Is that how they’re covering up 2B… 2E’s handiwork?

“It’s happened before. I can’t imagine how 2B must be feeling… she doesn’t act like she feels anything. Honestly, I wish she was as willing to let me help as you are.” 6O suppressed a sniffle, and for the first time, Chara noticed that her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. “I—I’m supposed to look after her and make sure she’s okay and I know she’s not okay, b-but…” She all but fell on Chara’s shoulder. “I’m so bad at my job!”

“I’m sure 2B doesn’t think that.” As Chara patted 6O on the back, they felt almost amused that the tables had turned so quickly. 6O seemed to struggle with managing her emotions—a far cry from her assigned field agent’s wall of emotional repression.
“She’s just too polite to say so,” 6O moaned. “I’m the worst… N-no wonder no one ever calls back after the first date…”

“Don’t you cry. Everything will be back to normal soon enough.”

“Everyone’s wondering who’s going to… to be erased next,” 6O admitted, sniffling. “All us Operators are safe right here, but… you’re worried too, aren’t you? Three backups fail on the same day…”

“It’ll all work out, don’t you worry.” Chara racked their brain for anything they might have picked up about 6O from their brief time trapped in 2B’s head. “So… I hear you like botany. You know, there’s a certain flower I’m fond of that I wonder if you’ve seen…”

The two of them sat and talked until 6O’s next shift began.

“Thank you so much,” 6O said as she stood up and made for the door, “for helping me out, 13B. S-Sorry, that’s kinda what I came to do for you, but I guess…”

“It seems we both needed each other,” Chara said. “Oh, and by the way, 6O? My friends call me Lucky.”


“My friends,” Chara repeated, smiling wider, “call me Lucky.”

6O lit up. “Oh! Thank you so much, Lucky!”

“Don’t mention it. Stop by any time.”

As the Operator headed out with a clearer head and a sunnier disposition, Chara wondered if perhaps their burgeoning plan had room in it for her.
Chapter Summary

Here it is, that 9S+Alphys content you've all been waiting for! Also, Chara can't stay out of trouble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alphys was the first to wake up the next morning (if it could even be called morning at this hour). In general, she didn’t sleep much. Or well. Or, sometimes, at all.

Especially not with Captain Undyne of the Royal Guard sprawled out over a pile of blankets on the floor, a single scaly leg dangling precariously from the railing overlooking the laboratory floor downstairs.

Normally Alphys would be giddy over having Undyne over like this—and sleeping so soundly, too, just like in one of Alphys’ friendfics!—but now it did nothing but make her stomach churn.

Undyne was so happy with her position. She’d worked so hard to rise up the ranks and all of her efforts had paid off handsomely. Her being the leader of the Guard made her one of the most beloved people in the whole kingdom, Asgore and Mettaton aside. She was a hero and a role model. The kids adored her. Their parents tended to like her too, although sometimes they found her to be just a bit too impolite, uncouth, or overzealous about beating people up, and worried a little about what lessons Undyne was teaching the kids.

And here Alphys was. A fraud who’d lied her way into the prestigious position of Royal Scientist. She’d puffed herself up in front of King Asgore and had been amazed to find her duplicity had paid off…and then she’d had no choice but to prove she’d really deserved the job. Of course, she couldn’t, because she didn’t. So far, her only accomplishment was (almost) finishing Mettaton’s latest body—she worried that when she finally did, he wouldn’t need her anymore. That, and utterly failing to replicate the DT energy of Asgore’s harvested souls and making a mockery of life and death in the process…

In other words, Alphys had accomplished nothing at all.

Why had she even wanted this job? For more funding, so she could play with better equipment? Had she really thrown herself into this hell just so she could have more fun tinkering around? Undyne had principles. She had passions she threw herself into, real passions, grand visions of what she could do for the world. She’d climbed so high because she wanted everybody’s lives to be better.

Alphys had just wanted to fulfill a promise she’d made to Mettaton. A promise she was too cowardly now to even acknowledge she’d made. No wonder he barely talked to her now.

And to make matters worse, Undyne was beautiful. Her thick, fiery mane of hair, her shiny scales, her eyeliner always so perfectly winged, her body so sleek and muscular. Even the pinkish scars crisscrossing her body were gorgeous! (And all Alphys could manage to be was dumpy, flabby, short, and yellow.) There wasn’t a snowman’s chance in Hotland that Undyne felt the same way...
about Alphys as Alphys did about Undyne.

Back before Undyne had been Captain Undyne, before Alphys had been Doctor Alphys, when their ambitions had just been daydreams, it had been so much easier. It had been easier to impress Undyne, to regale her with stories of human history (of course, it was all just anime and manga, but being a historian sounded so much more impressive than being a nerdy loser). It had been easier to be her friend.

It had been easier to be Mettaton’s friend, too.

Now both of them, Undyne and Mettaton, were celebrities, stars whose work made life better for everyone in the kingdom… and here was Alphys, the perennial loser who almost never left her lab. All her friends had left her behind.

All two of them.

Alphys tore her gaze away from the gentle rise and fall of her slumbering friend’s chest with a resigned sigh, focusing next on the twin androids who’d tagged along with Undyne. YoRHa Units 2B and 9S huddled together in adorable matching PJs, the latest visitors from the surface world to fall through the Barrier.

If Undyne had thought they were humans, she’d have brought them before Asgore already. If Undyne had known what Alphys knew—that the black cubes contained in those two androids’ chests produced just the kind of DT energy needed to break the Barrier—she wouldn’t have been so keen to befriend them.

If Alphys brought either one of those two to Asgore, the Barrier would come crashing down and the kingdom would be saved. She’d be the hero of the kingdom—the greatest hero in thousands of years. It would be her finest accomplishment as a Royal Scientist. She’d even surpass old Doctor Gaster (may he rest in peace, wherever/whenever he is) in accolades. Even Undyne would look up to her. She’d have nothing to fear from the skeletons in her closet or the abominations in her basement. Coming clean wouldn’t be so scary. No amount of failure would counteract such a resounding, historic success as delivering freedom to all the people in the kingdom.

She even could just open one of them up while they slept, pluck out his or her black box, and run it over to Asgore as fast as her stubby little legs could carry her, and then—

How could she even think about doing something so horrible to one of Undyne’s friends?

But they’re lying to her. If Undyne knew that those two had souls we could use to free ourselves, she wouldn’t want to be friends with them, would she?

Alphys pushed the intrusive thoughts out of her head. That wasn’t her! She didn’t even hate humans! She’d even been the only other member of Mettaton’s Human Fanclub back in the old days!

But these were androids, not humans, and—

“I’m so fucked up,” Alphys moaned quietly to herself, huddling atop her mattress, pulling her blanket over her head, and trying to force herself to get some sleep. But sleep just wouldn’t come.

Resigned to her insomnia, Alphys pulled herself out of bed and slunk down to her lab.

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9S awoke to a loud bang and a titanic clatter of metal coming from the lab downstairs. In the
distance, Alphys swore. Yawning and stretching his arms, he consulted his internal chronometer and
found it was still so early it could barely even be called morning.

2B lay at his side in a nest of blankets. 9S poked her. “Hey, 2B,” he whispered. “Did you hear
that?”

She curled up, still fast asleep, unconsciously tugging her blankets tighter around her. Not wanting to
wake her, 9S got up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and trudged in the direction of the commotion,
Pod 153 dutifully following him.

As he came down the stairs he spied a lit-up portion of Alphys’ laboratory floor, in which the tiny
yellow scientist was staring, distraught, at a pile of broken machinery and metal scraps lying at her
feet, a little ventilation mask hanging from her neck. Behind her was a deep vat of steaming,
shimmering, bubbling solvent. “Alphys? You all right?”

Alphys noticed him, stripping off a pair of thick black gloves. “Uh—Yeah, yeah, I’m, um, okay. I-I
didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“Nah. What’s up?” As 9S approached the wreckage he spotted the disemboweled remains of various
machine lifeforms—stubbies, bipeds, and a few models even he didn’t recognize. He’d almost not
realized it at first, because so many of the parts had been polished and cleaned. Machine lifeforms
never stayed this clean for very long, and the sight of a machine you could nearly see yourself in was
a rare one.

“I woke up early—um, I, er, couldn’t sleep, so… I like to tinker when I can’t sleep.”

“I’m the same way. Kinda.” 9S found himself struggling to think of what to say. His mind kept
running back to the things he and Alphys had done together that she no longer remembered, the way
she’d been there for him when he’d froze up trying to operate on 2B. “Of course, I tool around
with software, not hardware. Um, m-mostly.”

Was this how 2B had felt around him all the time?

9S nudged a chrome-plated pile of pieces from a stubby’s hull with his foot. His own face, stretched
by the curve of the polished surfaces, looked back at him in several distorted reflections. 9S marveled
that Alphys had even gotten the rust out from the rivets. “So… cleaning these parts, huh?”

“I-I mean, I can’t use ‘em if they’re covered in rust and moss and slime and stuff.”

“Yeah. Gotta say I’ve never seen one of these bastards look so shiny.”

Pod 153 examined the pieces. “Analysis: These machine parts have been coated with a thin,
nonstandard layer of chromium.”

“I’m just degreasing and pretreating this junk right now,” Alphys explained. “Then I-I’ll get an
electroplating bath set up, y-y’know, to chrome them up like that one.”

9S turned his attention to the two hemispherical halves of a machine lifeform’s head. Alphys hadn’t
reached it yet—she hadn’t even hollowed out the guts. “Y’know, these headpieces here…” He
reached down, pulling the machine’s innards (including its toothy mandibles—why did these things
have teeth if they didn’t have mouths?) and leaving the two halves of the head hollowed out like a
gourd.

He placed the halves of the head together around his own head, carefully lining the neck-hole up
with his own neck, and held it in place. “On the surface, some people in the Resistance take these
guys’ heads and make helmets out of ‘em.” 9S’s voice echoed through the cavernous space as he tried to align the machine’s eyeholes with his own line of sight. Finally, after some finagling, he could see Doctor Alphys again, although that was about all he could see. She seemed to be trying not to laugh. “It’s kind of a fashion statement.”

“Statement: Unit 9S has dramatically decreased his peripheral vision to an undesirable degree. Proposal: Unit 9S should remove improvised headwear.”

9S let the two halves of the stubby’s head fall to the floor with twin clangs. “Normally, you’d make adjustments to the neck-hole, weld the edges together, and leave some of the guts inside so you could connect the optical sensors directly to your own. Otherwise, it sucks and is worse than useless, as Pod 153 here pointed out.” He crouched down and picked up the hollow hemispheres. “Wanna do these parts next?”

Alphys pulled her gloves back on and pulled her ventilation mask over her snout, muffling her voice. “Uh, sure!” She pulled out a pair of long metal tongs, grasped one of the hemispheres, and turned around, carefully lowering it into the vat. The solvent churning within eagerly ate up the browned, algae-streaked metal.

9S tried to lean in for a closer look, but Alphys held him back. “Wait! You, uh, shouldn’t—you don’t want to breathe that stuff in.” She pressed a button on the side of her workstation, causing a hooded fan overhead to whirl to life, sucking up the wavering, shimmering fumes. Actually, she wasn’t sure if that mattered to androids.

Alphys picked up the other half of the head—the half with the eyes. “So, um, this Resistance… what are you resisting?”

“Those things.”

She dropped the head as if scalded by it. “Oh.”

As 9S sifted through the machine parts and helped Alphys clean them, he told her about the surface. About the war, the machines, the Resistance, and YoRHa. He felt more at ease the more he talked to her. She might not have remembered the time she’d helped him with 2B’s surgery—it felt like a lifetime ago to 9S, anyway—but she was still the same old Alphys.

“So, uh, you guys… you, uh, probably wanna leave and get back to your jobs, huh?” Alphys asked as she used a pair of tongs to pull a freshly-cleaned morsel of metal from the solvent bath and set it aside to dry.

“Considering the cost of leaving here, I think we’re okay with staying. Besides, I’m not in any hurry to get back to YoRHa,” 9S said, as charitably as he could. “There’s a lot of information to collect down here. And it’s pretty nice to get a taste of what peacetime is like.”

“Well, um,” Alphys started, laughing nervously, “T—Technically, I guess, we aren’t—I mean, broadly speaking, we’re at war with humans. Kinda.” She kicked at the remains of a machine lifeform’s arm. “Kinda like these robots you’ve been fighting, huh?”

“I don’t think it’s the same. Humans did you guys wrong before any of you were even born. And then they forgot about you and left you here to rot. I’d be pretty angry, too. But these machines… they’re invaders. Colonizers for some nebulous alien empire.”

“Kinda like the Zentradi?”

“The what?”
Excited, Alphys began to babble. “Oh, there’s this series—we should watch it!—where humans invent giant robots to fight these alien invaders! There’s a big war, but, um, okay, so there’s a war, and the humans are really on the back foot, but then—then they find out that all they need to do is share their arts and culture with the Zentradi and make them become peaceful!”

9S tried—and failed—to hold back a laugh.

“I-It’s a really good anime!” Alphys insisted, beginning to blush. “There’s a spinoff show that’s really good too, where the hero pilots a robot that plays music at his enemies!”

“You think we just need to play music at these guys and they’ll stop fighting us?”

“I—it could work, couldn’t it?”

“Statement: according to historical records, the last android to attempt this pacification tactic died horribly.”

“Thanks, Pod 153. Gotta admit,” 9S said, catching his breath, “if we wasted all our time with this war when we could’ve just sung songs at them, that’d be pretty hilarious. But those things… they can’t be reasoned with, they can’t be bargained with… they don’t feel pity of remorse or fear… and they absolutely will not stop, ever, until we’re all dead.”

But there were some peaceful machines, or at the very least, neutral machines out there, weren’t there? There were always reports of machines that would barely even notice you existed no matter how hostile you were to them, and other rumors—always dismissed as just that, rumors—of entire colonies of machines disconnected from the global hive-mind network that held no ill will toward androids. There were even a few machines in here, in that weird village full of Temmies, that might have met that description.

Maybe the idea that all machines were evil was just propaganda, just like the regular transmissions from the Council of Humanity. Maybe it wasn’t true.

Maybe none of it was true.

Maybe the reason why 2B had kept being ordered to kill 9S was that there was no Council of Humanity, that there was no lunar colony full of refugees.

After all, Chara had been the one to spread that gospel, right? They hadn’t said anything to 9S about that theory being true, merely about it being one of the dozens of competing theories vying for credibility.

“That’s what they say about humans, too.” Alphys sighed. “You know Mettaton?”

9S tried not to remember Mettaton.

“Before I built that body for him, he was the leader of the Human Fanclub. And, um, the only member. Until me. I, uh…” Alphys twiddled her thumbs, blushing. “I always thought humans were pretty cool, ’cuz they made so much cool stuff.”

“I mean… they did make us androids.”

Alphys laughed. “You guys are pretty cool too, all right. I’m, um…”

9S took a seat next to the dwindling pile of uncleaned machinery. “Something wrong?” he asked, knowing full well that Alphys had a lot of skeletons in her closet to weigh on her mind.
“I’m the only one who k-knows,” she said, sitting down beside him, “that the things we’ve been collecting aren’t human souls. I know they’re black boxes, just like what you and 2B have. And I k-know that we can use them to get past the Barrier. I—I think people would be a lot less willing to have you g-guys around if they figured that out.”

“Probably,” 9S agreed.

“But… I-I mean, the surface isn’t so great of a p-place, is it?”

“No, it’s beautiful. Just… dangerous. At least until the war ends, you guys might be safer down here.” Seeing Alphys’ crestfallen face, 9S added, “I—I know it’s not an easy answer to hear, but…”

9S thought about the secrets 2B had kept from him. Holding the truth about their relationship so close to her chest for so long had festered inside her like an untreated wound, burdening her with a trauma she’d had no ability to express, let alone exorcize from her soul.

And if 9S had found out what 2B had been forced to do to him some other way, if the circumstances had been even slightly different, how would it have affected him? Learning what 2B had done from 6E had filled 9S with a sense of loathing toward his own comrades in YoRHa, a hatred he still found himself feeling. If 2B hadn’t said a few cryptic words to him the night before, how would he have taken it? Would that animosity have landed on her?

He couldn’t imagine ever hating 2B, but… in another context, could he have ever thought of her as nothing more than his murderer? Had any of his past selves sacrificed to appease the skeletons in YoRHa’s own damn closet felt that way in their last moments… or had they all loved 2B to the end even as she ran her sword through their chests or slit their throats?

“When you’re sitting on a horrible secret, and it’s eating you up inside, I guess…” 9S paused for a few seconds to collect his thoughts. “If you want it to hurt as few people as possible when they find out, you have to control the message. Even if it means telling them before you’re ready.”

Alphys couldn’t have known that 9S was fully aware of her horrific failed experiments with those amalgamated creatures, but as she absorbed what he’d said in silence, she must have been applying his words to that very situation.

“…I guess,” she said. She didn’t sound happy about it. “I just… don’t wanna tank my e-career or… or, um… ruin my, uh…” Her voice shrank. “F-Friendships.”

“You don’t think Undyne will like you anymore if you tell her the truth?”

“I-I don’t think anyone will, honestly.”

“Well, you’ll still have 2B and me.”

Alphys smiled. “Really?”

“Yeah! You’re really fun to hang out with, Alphys.”

She blushed. “Y-You’re just saying that.”

“I’m really not! And besides, I don’t think Undyne would just toss you aside like that, no matter what.” At that point, as he watched Alphys’ eyes light up, 9S remembered that she had a huge crush on Undyne. “Say, speaking of her, have you ever thought of maybe getting her a gift? To let her know how you feel?”
“Um…” Alphys’ cheeks turned even redder. “Uh… I—I think I’m gonna, uh, um…” She stood up, faking a yawn. “Oooh, man, is it this late already?” she asked, pretending to check a nonexistent watch on her wrist. “I should be getting back to b-bed, uh, y’know, um… wow…”

Alphys shuffled away, hurrying for the stairs.

“Um… okay.” 9S pulled himself to his feet. “Lemme know if there’s anything 2B and I can do to help, okay?”

“Analysis: Doctor Alphys is quite obviously in love with Captain Undyne,” said Pod 153.

9S nodded. “She sure is, buddy.”

“Captain Undyne may be attracted to Unit 2B as well.”

“What? H-How do you know?”

Pod 153 wrung its little claws. “Statement: this support unit regularly exchanges data with Pod 042.”

9S slapped his forehead and let his hand slide down his face in exasperation, not caring that he was leaving smears of grease on his skin. “Great.”

△△△

This is it, huh? The fruits of Kaguya Station’s R&D?

That’s right.

The first line of androids equipped with a black-box core.

These are the Character models. The first building blocks of Project YoRHa Alpha.

C13…

…

Say hello to Chief Information Security Officer Jackass.

Before you say anything, yes, that is her real name.

…

Nice to meet you, too, C13.

Gotta say, White, when you said you were working to raise android morale…

I kinda expected your plan to be less… uh…

Speak your mind, Jack.

There’s no need for you of all people to be so formal.

And you wouldn’t take offense, would you, C13?

…Less stupid.

‘Character’ models? What, so they’re gonna put on shows for us? Does this one do
No. These units are designed for infiltration and sabotage.

They don’t look like stubbies to me.

Unless you’re saying we’ll be deploying them against our own?

It’s better than the alternative.

Under no circumstances can we allow the machines to learn how divided we really are.

And we cannot allow the schisms in our ranks to boil over into all-out civil war.

Only through careful and clandestine acts of espionage can we bring the rogue elements of the Resistance to heel.

…Sure. Whatever. As long as I’m not next on you guys’s creepy hit list.

Now, Number Thirteen, you’ve received your latest mission objective, haven’t you?

…”

Excellent. You know what needs to be done.

Chara walked briskly through the Bunker’s sterile white hallways, eagerly thinking about their next move.

Until a Type-B combat unit accosted them in the hall.

Or perhaps “accosted” was the wrong word. She simply tapped Chara on the shoulder and said, “Hey, 13B, the Commander wants to see you in her office.” But it took Chara enough by surprise that they nearly jumped out of their skin.

Chara nodded politely and headed up to Commander White’s office, inwardly beginning to panic. They hadn’t performed an infiltration like this in centuries. They were rusty. Had Chara slipped up somewhere? Had they left too many clues, acted too suspiciously? Had their time among Toriel, Asgore, and Asriel caused their adopted family’s sincerity to rub off on them?

Would White recognize Chara after all these years? Certainly not. She’d kept Chara’s basic personality template and physical template in use for this long: There had probably been hundreds of Number Thirteens over the centuries, and Chara would simply blend in with a crowd of familiar faces in her memories.

Nevertheless, with a nervous gulp, they stepped into White’s office.

White’s personal quarters were, it was rumored, a disaster area; her office, on the other hand, projected the same cool, collected, perfect, no-nonsense image she herself did. White stood behind her desk as Chara approached, clad in a flowing ivory dress with opulent gold trim.

“13B, I suppose you’re wondering why I’ve called you here,” she said, glancing at Chara and then doing a double-take.

Did she recognize Chara?
“Hmm. You’ve changed your hair.” White cleared her throat. “But I digress. Records show you haven’t backed up since your return from Operation British.”

Chara nodded. “That is correct, ma’am.” There was no point in denying it.

“I know the loss of your friends must weigh heavily on your conscience, 13B, but you must abide by YoRHa protocol. If one unit refuses to maintain herself, that malaise may spread like sickness from one android to another.”

Commander White stared Chara right in the eyes, her gaze icy. “We have a war to win. The backup system is what allows YoRHa to be such an effectual fighting force. It is what allowed us to break the stalemate with our enemy after centuries of fruitless warfare. Without it, we would be as conservative and as risk-averse as the Resistance. Faith in the system is mandatory, Number 13. Understood?”

Chara slowly nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Have you been having this talk with everybody?”

“Only those whose backups haven’t recently been logged. You aren’t the only one unnerved by the recent outages. Now, back to your quarters. You are dismissed.” White raised a hand to her chest. “Glory to Mankind.”

Chara went through the motions of the salute in kind. “Glory to… Mankind.” The words came out tasting like ash.

On the way back to their quarters, Chara was stopped in the hall yet again, this time by none other than 6E.

6E. Chara had barely met the incorrigibly awful Type-E and already loathed her with all their heart. She had been the prisoner Flowey had released and sicced on Toriel—Toriel, of all people—to satisfy his nihilistic craving for excitement. And, of course, the reset had happened soon afterward, which Chara could only assume meant that 2B and 9S had failed to protect the queen.

That 6E had killed Chara’s mother.

Chara knew little about 6E’s life, personality, and interests, but knew enough to know that she was a hateful, cruel, disgusting, matricidal bitch. And after their first few days in the Bunker (once they’d gotten over the initial shock of their transportation) Chara had taken great pleasure in denying 6E her little “rescue party.” It did Chara’s heart good that they’d protected not only the real 2B and 9S, or at least the ones they considered “real,” but their mother as well.

While Chara may not have cared much, if even at all, for anybody outside of their immediate circle of allies, it was not because they were a sociopath, at least not from their perspective—merely, they understood love to be a precious commodity like gold, one to be shared only among the truly worthy. They really did love their family, even if they had to fake that affection for everybody else.

6E must have remembered that slight from the past week, because she shoulder-checked Chara hard as she passed them by, all but knocking them to the floor. “Oops! I’m so sorry,” she said, crouching down and offering Chara a hand. “Did I hurt you, Lucky?”

Chara brushed nonexistent dust off their shoulder. “Not a chance, Six. E.” They pronounced her name with just enough of a space between the number and the letter so that 6E couldn’t possibly mistake it for “Sixie.”

“No, no, I think I might’ve bruised you,” 6E insisted, grabbing Chara and pinning them to the wall. “Here, let me have a look.” She leaned in closer, dropping her voice to a sinister whisper. “You think
you can just get away with making me look like an idiot in front of the Commander?” she asked, her hiss nearly syrupy sweet.

Chara could tell that 6E had been simmering in her anger for the better part of the past week. That was fine by them. It made her that much more stupid. “You hardly needed my help for that, my dear,” they answered.

6E’s fingers dug into Chara’s shoulders. “Don’t you push me,” she said. “I’m an Executioner.”


6E growled, looking about ready to slap the grin off Chara’s face. “Don’t get smart with me, you scrawny little pile of scrap metal.”

“Oh, you think that was smart? Watch me bring my A-game.”


Chara glanced sideways as their ears picked up the faint sound of footfalls. “Y… You mean…” They let a flash of fear show on their face. “7B and 5E… you erased them?”

6E smiled, tossing a lock of her curly lilac-tinted hair over her shoulder, thinking she knew the exact thing to say that would cow Chara into submission and strike the fear of God into them. “Maybe.”

Oh, Sixie, Chara thought, trying hard not to smile. You big, beautiful idiot. I knew I’d kept you alive this long for a reason.


6E growled, looking about ready to slap the grin off Chara’s face. “Don’t get smart with me, you scrawny little pile of scrap metal.”

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Oh, Sixie, Chara thought, trying hard not to smile. You big, beautiful idiot. I knew I’d kept you alive this long for a reason. “P-Please don’t kill me!” they wailed, knowing as the approaching footsteps grew closer that they would have an audience as they began to crawl pathetically away from 6E. “My god, please, I’ll do anything! Just—don’t do to me what you did to 5E!”

The smile vanished from 6E’s face. “What?”

The footfalls grew in volume and pace as whoever had been approaching broke out in a run. Turning the corner were several Type-B soldiers in sleek power armor, the YoRHa crest emblazoned on their shoulder pads denoting them as Military Police units currently assigned to internal Bunker security. “What’s going on here?”

“She threatened me!” Chara shouted, stumbling to their feet as they ran toward the protective throng of MPs, their heels clacking against the floor. “Unit 6E! She said—” They paused to catch their breath and fall into one of the MPs’ arms as 6E stared on, dumbfounded. “She said—she’d kill me just like she killed 7B and 5E! She’s the one who’s been tampering with the backup system! H-Her!”

Her eyes growing wide as saucers, 6E held up her hands. “Wait, I—I just said…”

Two of the MPs broke off from the quartet and restrained 6E. “This is bullshit!” 6E shouted, stamping her foot as they pinned her arms behind her back.

“You can read my audio logs!” Chara insisted to the remaining MPs keeping them propped up. “She all but confessed! You can do it right here! Do either of you have hacking authorization?”

The two guards looked at each other. “You don’t have auth to hack other models, do you?” one asked.

The other MP shook her head.
“Excuse me.” A familiar voice rang out through the hallway. “Did somebody need hacking authorization?”

One of the MPs, relieved, nodded. “Ah, good, a Scanner. 13B here claims 6E confessed to her about sabotaging the backup system. We need to pull her audio logs from the past few minutes.”

“Got it.” 9S stepped out from behind the two guards, a wry smile on his boyish face as he looked up at Chara. “You don’t mind if I take a peek, do you, 13B?”

“Oh, please do,” Chara replied to their savior, the gratefulness seeping into their voice as real as real could be. They cast a sideways glance at 6E, who did not look happy in the least bit but at least had stopped struggling against her captors for the moment. 6E glared daggers at them. “Th—this lunatic needs to be brought to justice!”

“All right.” 9S nodded. “Just a heads-up, this might tickle a bit.”

Chara acquiesced to the Scanner, bowed their head, and closed their eyes, allowing 9S to look through their latest audio logs. As curious as 9S was, he had the courtesy of leaving Chara’s other systems alone. Chara was glad for it. It would be a pity to have to erase him as they’d done to 5E and 7B.

“Pod 153, transmit this data to 23B and 58B.”

This was it. The moment of truth. Would the verbal trap Chara had set for 6E pass the muster, or would the military police find sufficient plausible deniability in it?

As the prickling, hair-raising sensation vanished from the back of their mind, Chara opened their eyes. 9S was looking over at 6E, his smirk replaced with a taut, grim frown. “Well, you two,” he asked, glancing at the two MPs, “what do you think?”

“Sounds pretty clear-cut to me,” one of them growled, taking a step toward 6E. “YoRHa Unit 6E, by the power vested in me by Commander White, I hereby pronounce you guilty of treason—”

“NOOOO!” 6E howled, tearing herself away from her captors and conjuring her odachi to her hand. In the struggle, one of her pigtails came undone, releasing a torrent of thick, curly hair that spilled down the side of her face. “I was joking! Joking! 13B, you stupid little shit, you’re smart enough to know what a joke is, aren’t you?”

All four MPs drew their weapons, unadorned yet sturdy high-frequency katanas, and rushed to contain 6E. Her struggles only further roused their suspicions. Chara called their assigned Type-4O blade to their hand through their NFCS and was about to join the fray when 9S grabbed them by the arm.

“Hold on, 13B. Let the MPs take care of this.”

Chara took a deep, shuddering breath and let go of their sword. “Th… thanks, 9S.”

“Need help getting back to your quarters?” he asked.

“I’ll be fine.” Chara brushed off 9S’s hand. “Don’t worry about me.”

6E broke free of the four MPs holding her down and lunged at Chara, her sword drawn, her face
twisted in fury. “13B, I’M GOING TO KILL YOU FOR REAL NOW!”

As Chara fell over, 9S drew his sword and readied his pod to attack. “Stay back, 13B! I’ve got this!”

9S, in fact, did not have this. A curved blade tore itself through 6E’s chest with a crimson spurt of blood. And then another, and another, and another—four blades in total protruding from the Type-E’s torso.

The scream died in 6E’s throat as she gurgled, spitting blood as she stared down at herself in disbelief. Her long sword fell from her hand and clattered hollowly to the floor before she slumped over, sliding off the MPs’ blades and falling to the floor. Blood pooled beneath her from the ragged perforations in her chest and stomach, staining her pale lavender hair crimson.

With a sigh of relief, 9S lowered his sword. “Phew. For a second there, I was scared I’d have to fight a Type-E.”

“Was it really wise of you to leap in like that?” Chara asked 9S as the MPs dragged 6E’s corpse away.

“Wise?” 9S undid his visor and wiped the sweat from his brow before helping Chara back up, an excited glimmer in his blue eyes. “I dunno. But then again… I was born yesterday.”

“Thank you,” Chara said with an exhausted laugh, “for your help, 9S.” They glanced at the pool of blood 6E’s body had left behind. “If we truly do have souls, then I believe 5E’s and 7B’s are at peace now.”

“Um… okay, sure.” 9S began to walk Chara back to their quarters. “Say, uh… 13B? Can I talk to you about something?” he asked. “I—I’m getting assigned to a Type-B in just a few days…”

“You sound nervous,” Chara pointed out, realizing that 9S was talking about 2B. This one had never met her before. I don’t envy you, 9S, they thought. Nor you, 2E.

“It’s just that us Scanners usually take care of reconnaissance missions. Running into a warzone… I gotta admit, I’m pretty scared. And I hear this Type-B I’m getting assigned to has a bad habit of losing her partners, though no one I’ve asked about it really goes into detail.”

Chara stopped 9S as they passed by 13B’s quarters. “Here’s my stop. I’m sure you and 2B will be fine,” Chara assured him as the door slid open.

“Thanks,” 9S said, smiling nervously. The smile soon vanished. “Wait—I never told you it was 2B I was getting assigned to.”

Internally, Chara was screaming at themselves for being an idiot. In the heat of the moment, their pulse still singing from their encounter with 6E, they’d been rattled enough to make a colossal mistake. They shrugged. “Really? Must’ve been a lucky guess. Y’know. Lucky Thirteen and all.”

9S laughed. “Hey, guess the nickname really does suit you. Take care, 13B.” He saluted, holding his hand to his chest. “Glory to Mankind.”

“You as well, 9S.” Chara saluted, and as they treasured the memory of the horrified look on 6E’s face when she’d realized she was doomed, they found that their insincere repetition of YoRHa’s motto fell easier from their lips.
Side note: I could play or watch LPs of Nier Automata like a million zillion times, but no matter how many times I experience it, I think I might always subconsciously substitute Commander White’s voice with The Boss from Metal Gear Solid 3. I mean, they're both matronly blonde women with white outfits and pasts shrouded in secrecy who have some sort of mentorship role with the main character, it's easy to get confused.
The Unquiet Dead

Chapter Summary

Alphys confronts her inner demons. 2B can relate.

Then things get worse.

Chapter Notes

Whoa! Thanks for over 100 kudos! I love you all so much!

The forest was dark and filled with autumn leaves, rustling and crinkling with a soft, shrill susurrus as 2B trotted between the skeletal trees. The fragile branches, charred to a crisp charcoal-black, scraped against her like outstretched hands, some with too many fingers, some with not enough.

2B expected to pull herself free of the errant branch with nothing but ease—but it clung to her, digging into her skin. She glanced at it and saw a real hand. Dirty, greasy, bloodstained, covered in the tattered remains of a black glove, attached to an arm clothed in the threadbare sleeve of a black frock coat that had long since been torn to shreds; beneath the clothes eaten by the ravages of time, patches of skin over patches of livid, exposed muscle and graying subdermal chassis, blood and coolant oozing red and clear from open sores.

Blue eyes framed in a decaying face, nearly hidden by overgrown, shaggy, matted, and snarled silver hair that had long ago turned nearly black from dried and caked-on dirt and mud. And a voice 2B knew all too well.

“2B… did you think you could leave me behind?”

2B wrenched herself free. “Nines, I—”

“You never called me Nines.” Another hand wrapped around 2B’s other arm, belonging to an equally-ghoulish 9S. “Of course, it only took you three days before you killed me.”

2B pulled away and put some distance between the two walking corpses, calling her sword to her hand.

Nothing happened.

2B tried again. What was going on? Why didn’t she have her sword? She always had her sword!

There were more. Dozens of them. Nearly a hundred, it seemed, climbing through the gaps in the trees, some climbing out of the trees like undead dryads, others rising from
the carpet of amber and scarlet leaves blanketing the forest floor like leviathans rising from the depths, all listing their grievances against 2B. How she’d ignored them, how she’d spurned them, how cold she’d been to them, how quick she’d been to silence them.

2B felt her pulse quicken as her cooling system strained itself to keep her from overheating. The stench of decaying biosynthetic parts surrounded her, an oily and almost metallic scent that rose from the legion of corpses like fumes and clogged her throat and nostrils. “Nines, I… You know how—how hard this was for me,” she stammered, choking on the thick and noxious air. “I—I had no choice, you knew this, y—you forgave me…”

“The one who lived forgave you. The ones who died never had that chance.”

Every blue eye turned red.

2B turned to run, but the living corpses were on her in an instant, their fingers grabbing at her dress and tearing away strips of cloth, hooking into her skin and rending furrows—bluntly, slowly, raggedly, tearing with inexorable force.

2B felt her nerves scream as she pushed herself through the crowd of scrabbling hands and clutching fingers. She dug her nails into one of the corpse’s arms, but was unable to find purchase against the putrefying flesh—it simply sloughed off his chassis and left a soft, wet, almost spongy mess clinging to her hand.

At last she tore herself free of the mob and fell to her hands and knees, bowing her head. Her dress hung from her body in tatters and every extant nerve in her body screamed. Blood trickled from her wounds, tracing rivulets down her bare thighs before dripping onto the coating of leaves blanketing the ground. The world spun around her.

A pair of cold, wet hands placed themselves on 2B’s cheeks, gently at first, brushing softly against her ears, but as they slid down to her neck the thumbs pressed against her throat, freezing the breath in her lungs. As the heat began to build up in her chest and the muscles of her throat began to undulate fruitlessly, 2B looked up to find herself staring into 9S’s face as he knelt over her, his yellowing teeth bared in a ghoulish grimace; eyes wide, wild, and burning with a hot red light; black fluid dripping from oozing sores marring his pallid cheeks; a hard, calcified, crystalline growth creeping across his skin like the exact opposite of moss on a rock. The sharp stench of crude oil like bitter dirt and sulfur stung 2B’s nostrils.

“I see you holding his hand and hugging him and falling asleep next to him and laughing at his jokes… but you couldn’t even smile once for me!”

2B reached out and with clawed, numbing fingers tore at the phantom 9S’s cheek, leaving parallel furrows in easily-parted, half-decayed synthetic flesh. “Ni… ne… s…”

“2B?” 9S—the real, living 9S, not a rotting ghoul—had his hands on 2B’s shoulders. “Hey, are you okay?”

2B’s hand brushed against her sleeve and with a shock that fully woke her up she realized she wasn’t in uniform anymore. Sprawled on the floor with a blanket tangled around her legs and her cheek pressed against some uncomfortably-shaped piece of detritus (which upon closer inspection proved to be some sort of resin figurine), 2B picked herself up—unconsciously rubbing her throat and checking for bruises—and noticed she’d somehow ended up about a meter away from where she and
9S had fallen asleep (even though she usually slept, as 9S said, “like a rock”).

9S’s brow was furrowed in worry. “2B, is something wrong?”

It was just a dream. A stupid one, at that. It was profoundly irrational for even 2B’s sleeping unconscious to think that any of the 9Ses she’d killed had ever hated her. But even androids had to struggle to quell their own irrational instincts sometimes, just like their human creators.

Trying to shake off the remnants of her nightmare, 2B crossed her arms and huddled up, curling in her legs, trying to draw her clothes even closer to her body. The fleece was so soft against her skin. Softer than anything she’d ever worn, as warm and as comforting as 9S’s hands on her shoulders.

“I appreciate your concern, Nin—Nines.” 2B caught her breath. “I…”

While YoRHa androids could enter REM sleep, it was generally seen as inefficient, and combat models, in particular, had limiters in place to ensure they only experienced slow-wave sleep. However, it was well-known that those limiters occasionally failed to function. In fact, many androids purposefully disabled their sleep limiters in a violation of YoRHa protocols—2B knew for a fact that 9S had because he’d often bragged about having done so. 2B, though, hadn’t. She rarely had dreams, let alone nightmares. She’d forgotten what it felt like to wake up frightened.

Pod 042 hovered off the floor to float alongside 2B, giving her a cursory scan. “Analysis: records from Unit 2B’s processor shows elevated levels of neural activity ten percent higher than the normal threshold seen in REM sleep. This resulted in anomalous physical reaction while in low-power mode.”

“I was sleepwalking?” 2B asked.

“Sleep-thrashing, more like,” Undyne chimed in, nursing a blossoming patch of purple on her cheek. “I woke up when you slapped me in the face.”

“I apologize.”

Undyne shrugged. “It happens. One time I woke up in the middle of the night trying to wrestle a boulder twice my size! I think I might have been dreaming of sparring with Asgore…”

“Whatever you were dreaming of,” 9S said to 2B, noting her clammy skin and the patina of sweat clinging to it, “it must not have been very fun.”

Trying to clear the image of those horrible half-decayed phantoms from her head, 2B replied, as flatly as she could, “It was not.”

“So, Alphys,” Undyne asked, tying back her hair, “now that we’re all up, what’s on the menu for breakfast?”

Alphys froze up. “B-Breakfast? Um, I’ve got some leftover pizza…”

“That’ll do!”

2B pulled herself to her feet, picking up her neatly-folded uniform. “We should be going. This was nice, Alphys, but I don’t wish to overstay our welcome.”

“W-Wait.” Alphys swallowed a lump in her throat. “Can I, uh… s-show you guys something?”
The deeper she traveled into the far basement levels of the Royal Laboratory, the more excited Undyne became about wherever Alphys was leading her. She wondered aloud whether there was a great weapon, or a suit of magical power armor, or perhaps even an enormous mechanical exo-suit with which she could do battle against whatever threats awaited on the surface.

2B and 9S, knowing exactly what Alphys wanted to show them, tried their best to temper Undyne’s expectations, but her enthusiasm was overwhelming. Undyne seemed to be vibrating.

2B looked down at Alphys, who seemed to be turning glummer in direct proportion to Undyne’s growing anticipation as she shuffled along—but hadn’t yet decided to turn around and call the whole thing off as the winding corridors became darker, grungier, and less well-kept.

Alphys did not fit the picture of bravery as far as 2B would have understood it in the past. She was not strong, nor was she valiant, or even all that selfless. She was no fighter, to say the least. Most things seemed to frighten her, and she seemed to give up on things easily. YoRHa would never dream of using a personality remotely like hers as a template for any model of android, combat-type or otherwise.

But what she was doing right now?

When your only goal was “defeat the enemy,” there was no debate or hesitation about leaping into action. But “tell the truth…”

That was braver than standing alone against a full battalion of machines.

2B reached down and patted Alphys on the top of her spiny head the same way she often did to show her appreciation for Pod 042. Perhaps such a gesture would soothe Alphys, just a little bit. After all, she was preparing to admit to someone she seemed to care deeply for that she had done something truly heinous…and that was a kind of danger 2B had long gone out of her way to avoid.

Alphys took a deep breath, muttered something under her breath, and opened the door to the deepest, darkest, most secretive part of the Royal Laboratory.

A scent like used batteries and lemons, acidic with a metallic tang, filled the air. But there were no voices 2B could hear—not even the faintest buzzing in her ears, much to her relief. The memoryheads, then, were well-fed.

Creatures slept in huddled mounds scattered across the dingy, forlorn lab, their bodies insubstantial as they were incomprehensible. To 2B and 9S, their indefinable forms were glazed with a pulsing aura of garbled pixels, as if the very sight of them twisted the androids’ visual processor into panicked knots.

“This is, um,” Alphys began, turning around to face Undyne, 2B, and 9S, “this is what happens when I—I mean…” She looked at the floor. “My specialty has always been mechanical engineering and robotics. But King Asgore hired… he hired me because he thought I knew how to create an artificial soul. Something he could use if… if nobody else ever fell down here from the surface.”

“Is that what these are?” Undyne asked, squinting at one of the shifting abominations. Her eye was watering as she tried to parse what she was seeing, and 2B wondered what the memoryheads must look like to her, an organic being through and through. “Artificial… souls?”

Alphys shook her head. “I… I tried to amplify the power of a monster’s soul, hoping it could stand in for a human one. I—I guess I succeeded… kind of. The test subjects were all donated by their surviving families… I did manage to bring them back to life, at least for a little while—not my
intent, but—anyway, then they turned into these… amalgamates.”

“These were corpses, Alphys?” Undyne stepped closer to one of the sleeping amalgamates and knelt beside it as its not-chest gently rose and fell. “You… experimented on corpses?”

Alphys nodded. “I was supposed to give their dust b-back to their families when I was done, b-but… they aren’t made of dust anymore. They aren’t monsters anymore. They—They’re just jumbled c-collections of memories pieced together with magic… that’s why I call these ones ‘memoryheads.’”

“Memoryheads…” Undyne repeated. She held out a hand over one of the amalgamates, and the creature raised its not-head in return, sniffing Undyne’s palm sleepily with its not-nose. 2B felt a prickling deep within her inner ears and in the back of her head as the creature’s psychic resonance began to press against her own mind.

The faint strains of a soft, thin voice singing drifted through the air, and Undyne hummed a tune in response. Pacified, the memoryhead went back to sleep and the air cleared.

“Every day I’ve been scared… scared what would happen if people learned the truth on their own. That it would d-destroy m… no, that it would hurt everyone.” Alphys sniffled. “I—I couldn’t tell their families. I couldn’t even bear to think of the pain I’d see on their f-faces, knowing it—knowing it would be all my fault…

“I—I wish I’d been strong. I wish I’d been brave like you guys are. I—I just wanted to bury the truth forever a-and hope that no one found it, but…” Alphys fished in her pocket for a crumpled-up piece of paper. “S-Someone already knows. They wrote this letter to tell me, a—and it’s been hanging over my head like a g-giant sword… And… and b-because of that, and—and thanks to you, 9S… I —I decided that you guys deserved to hear the truth from me. Because, um…”

Alphys looked plaintively at each of the three in turn. “I… I hope we can still be friends. After all the horrible things I’ve done. I—I just wanted to do my best,” she said, her voice cracking as tears started to well up in her eyes, “f-for the kingdom…”

“When did you get that letter?” 9S asked.

Alphys blinked, her train of thought derailed. “Uh…” She hiccuped. “Um… I—I found it on my desk when I woke up th-this morning. But—none of you guys left it, r-right?” She let out a nervous bark of a laugh. “I—I mean…”

2B snatched the letter from Alphys’ hand. *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID*, it read in a clumsy, childish scrawl. There was a telltale, familiar scent to the paper. She raised it to her nose.

It smelled the way Asgore’s favorite blend of tea tasted, just as his castle—adorned with so many of the same flowers the tea was steeped from—smelled. The faintly-sweet, slightly-bitter aroma was unmistakable. The same odor, faint but not undetectable, had lingered around Chara’s lonely grave.

Golden flowers.

And that meant this letter could have been written by only two people, neither of whom 2B had seen hide nor hair of since the first day of the reset timeline, and both of whom were bad news.

A high-pitched cackle echoed through the lab as the door Alphys had led Undyne, 2B, and 9S through slammed shut, sealing the bulkhead behind them; and as the loud clang echoed throughout the dead silence of the forgotten laboratory, every amalgamate woke up—and woke up hungry.

Their combined psychic screams tore through the air, and 2B felt her own scream join it.
“Ready to face your sins at long last,” Flowey asked, his voice echoing through the laboratory, “are you, Alphys-chan?”

Undyne knew pain. She’d gotten pretty trashed over the course of her career (and, of course, long before that as well). Broken bones, torn muscles and ligaments, sprained wrists and ankles, fractures, bruises, whacks to the head, and of course, broken hearts…

But she’d never thought her brain could hurt as much as it did now! There was a pulse throbbing at the back of her head, inside her skull, sending pressure waves all the way to her sinuses. It was like having a cold, a migraine, and a concussion all at once.

But at least she and Alphys were faring better than 2B and 9S—both of whom had fallen to their knees, hands clasped over their ears in a futile attempt to block out the voices pounding through their minds.

_I've felt this before then hold still lorem ipsum docet I'm not afraid of you it's so cold come join the fun stay here with me not this time you've seen Snowy do you think I'm pretty you'll be with us shortly it's a real get together just a moment lorem ipsum docet dolorem ipsum docet lorem_

And music, a light tinkling of piano keys and a soft voice Undyne knew. Piano… a melody Undyne hadn’t known to hum, but the shimmering, wavering creature Alphys called a “memoryhead” had called forth from her like a magnet drawing iron filings…

In her teen years, back when Undyne had still been trying to get her foot in the Royal Guard’s proverbial door, she’d had a side hustle teaching piano to other monsters in Waterfall. She was actually pretty good… a fact which surprised most people (and even sometimes surprised herself). One of her students—hadn’t her name been Shyra?—Undyne thought she remembered hearing that her family had donated her body to the Royal Scientist for research after the accident. She wasn’t sure. The poor girl’s sister had never been much of a talker, unlike Shyra.

That song… Undyne remembered hearing it as she guided the girl’s stubby, webbed fingers across the keys, dancing out a melody...

But _god_, it _hurt_ hearing it now over those cacophonies of voices, some soft, some loud, some cruel or spiteful, some plaintive, some forlorn—waves and waves of competing emotions, shattered personalities reduced to agonizing patterns of looped phrases bleeding, bleeding, _bleeding_ into each other!

As the memoryheads wandered aimlessly, singing their silent-yet-deafening songs, Alphys struggled with the door to no avail. Undyne fell back, giving the creatures as wide a berth as possible; but as her fingertip brushed one of the shambling, wavering phantoms’ amorphous shapes, her entire arm up to her shoulder went completely numb, as if the entire limb had vanished. Undyne had to look down to make sure her hand was still there—in this madhouse, after all, anything could be possible…

A hand latched around her ankle, its grip like iron. 9S had pulled himself across the floor, one arm wrapped around 2B as if she were his security blanket, and as he gasped for breath he looked up at Undyne with wide, unfocused eyes, in such great agony he couldn’t even beg for help.

“Aww, geez, 9S…” Undyne shook her head. “Alphys!” she barked. “What the _fuck_ is going on?”

Alphys cowered at the door. “The—The memoryheads! Their psychic resonance—” She frantically
tapped at the controls that ought to have opened the door, yet the rusted bulkheads refused to yield. “It—it’s hell on complex computer systems!”

“You turned a bunch of corpses into android kryptonite?” Undyne asked, disgusted.

“I’m s-sorry!”

“Isn’t this fun, Alphys? To finally have friends again?” said the unfamiliar, high-pitched voice that seemed to be responsible for this incident, blaring over a crackly intercom. “Of course, you had to show them the real you—and so soon, too! I’d have left it until the third date, at least!” it laughed.

“Sh—Shut up!” Alphys retorted. “We just have to get through the door… it’s EMP-shielded…”

Undyne crouched down and dragged 9S to his knees, and 2B along with him. Glistening sweat coated his skin, his eyes were covered with a glassy sheen; in any other circumstance, Undyne would have assumed he had some gaping wound and was in shock. “Hang in there, kid,” she said, patting him a bit more heavily on the shoulder than she’d meant with her still-numb hand. 9S seemed to barely recognize she was there.

“Look at them, Alphys! Your robot friends are dying! And it’s all your fault! And how much longer will you and Undyne last?”

2B struggled to her feet, an agonized shriek tearing itself free of her gritted teeth. She gripped the arm of her pod as it hovered above her for support. “A-Alphys… get back—Pod, blast that door to—”

She fell to the floor yet again, the long embroidered skirt of her uniform pooling around her.

“This is what you do to people, Alphys! Look closely now! This is the only thing in the world you’re good at!”

“What do we do?” Undyne glanced down the hall—the only exit was blocked by these amalgamates. Granted, the creatures didn’t seem interested in doing anything but shuffle around like zombies out of a cheesy human horror movie, but their mere physical presence formed enough of a barrier. She made a spear from lightning and waved it in the air like a torch, hoping to drive them away; the memoryheads stumbled a bit but didn’t make any effort to disperse.

“They get like this when they’re hungry, but—but they usually don’t wake up for another two hours —” Alphys kept fiddling with the door to no avail. “I—if I can get their f-food…”

Undyne waved her spear again—and it froze in her hand. She tugged on it a few times, but it remained hanging in the air, as if—

2B had grabbed onto the shaft, letting aquamarine sparks arc from the spear over her arm. “The… The sp-pear… overp-powers these things…” she wheezed. “Clears the mind.”

Understanding, Undyne grabbed 9S’s wrist, pried open his fingers, and curled them around the spear shaft.

9S blinked, gasped, shook his head, and let out a sigh of relief. “That should give us… a f-few minutes.”

“Alphys,” Undyne asked, “what’s wrong with the door?”

“Trying to open it…” Alphys gritted her teeth as she keyed her password into the number pad at the side. “B-but every time I unlock it, whoever’s on the other side locks it again!”
“Isn’t that the story of your life, Alphys? Every time you try to open up, you lock yourself back up again? And knowing you, it’s not hard to see why!”

2B turned to her pod. “042… can you blast the door open?”

“A-Analysis: the b-b-b-bulkhead door is too th-thick for normal munitions to p-p-penetrat-Pod 042 wrung its claws, its movements halting and jerky.

“Hey, 042, how come you’re not a mess like 2B and 9S?” Undyne asked.

“Statement: tactical s-s-s-support pod AI differs enough—enough—from and-d-d-d-droid n-n-n-neural architecture to l-lessen the impact of m-m-memoryhead inf-f-f-ffection.”

Undyne pressed her hand to her throbbing forehead. “A—Alphys, forget about the door. That’s not gonna work.”

Alphys nodded, slumping against the bulkhead and gazing forlornly at the ceiling. “I—I’m so sorry, you guys… It’s so hard to think straight in here wh—when they get like this…”

“If I could just… focus for one second,” 9S groaned, tightening his grip on Undyne’s spear and wincing.

“Not enough voltage for you?” Undyne asked.

Pod 153 chimed in. “St-Statement: voltage beginning to exceed accept-t-t-t-table levels.”

“Just about too much,” 9S sputtered. “Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place.” He gritted his teeth, clenched his fist around the spear, and finally gasped and pulled his hand away. His palm was pinkish-red like medium-rare steak and pockmarked with rising yellow-white blisters. “Damnit!” he cried out, succumbing once again to the memoryheads’ psychic pressure and clutching his forehead for relief.

“Nines!” 2B gasped, reaching for his other hand. Undyne could see smoke curling around her palm where it met the spear.

“If only,” Undyne mused, “one of us could fit through the ventilation shafts…” She paused, her eyes widening. “The—The ventilation shafts!” She gestured to the barred vent in the wall, flush against the grimy ceiling. “You guys' pods could fly through and t-take out whatever’s keeping the door locked!”

2B nodded. “Pod 042, fire on the ventilation sh-shaft and follow it to the other room.” All of her words came out pained as if speaking was a greater effort than she could afford to give. “Take out… whoever’s been laughing at us.”

The pod nodded. “AffIRMat-t-tive.” With a quick burst of machine-gun fire, it tore through the bars protecting the vent and easily sailed through, leaving its counterpart behind.

2B finally forced 9S’s other hand onto the spear, while his burned hand dangled limply at his side. He swallowed a scream, gritting his teeth. “Just like taking medicine,” he whimpered.

The four of them waited with bated breath.

“It’s okay,” Alphys warbled. “I—I’ll run and get their food a-as soon as that door opens up… a-and then they’ll calm down!”
2B’s eyes rolled up, her eyelids fluttering, and as her hand slipped off the spear shaft she fell, the back of her head smacking against the hard concrete floor. Her open palm was charred black as coal. Overcome with worry, 9S threw the spear aside to tend to her.

“9S, you idiot!” Undyne snapped, conjuring another electric spear. “Quick, take—”

2B screamed and began to laugh hysterically, arching her back as her head lolled back and forth against the floor, her eyes squeezed shut as tears—whether from pain, sadness, or manic mirth Undyne couldn’t tell—streamed down her cheeks. 9S struggled to retain his composure as well as he fought to hold his sister down and keep her from injuring herself in her throes.

“Dolorem ipsum docet,” he muttered, his voice cracking as he fought to keep the laughter from bubbling up from his chest, “dolorem ipsum docet, dolorem ipsum docet, dolorem ipsum docet, dolorem ipsum docet…”

“C’mon!” Undyne shouted, voicing her frustration. “Pod 042, what’s taking so long?”

“Transmission r-r-r-received-cieved from Pod 042,” Pod 153 announced. “Statement: the locking mech-mechanism has been j-j-jammed by what appears to be plant matter.”

Undyne glanced at the two androids as they rolled on the floor laughing like hyenas. Dammit… those pods aren’t getting any more orders from them, from the looks of it. “Can 042 clear it up?”

“Statement: unlik-k-k-k-kely without further damaging the locking m-m-m-mechanism itself. The work is too delicate for t-t-t-tactical support p-p-p-pod manipulators to address.”

“Well, what now, then?”

“Statement: preparing logic virus v-v-vaccines for Unit 2B a-a-a-a-and Unit 9S.”

“Got any of those for us?” Undyne asked bitterly, wishing she had anything to soothe the jackhammer pounding in her skull. The entire world seemed to be pulsing in time with her migraine.

“Statement: l-l-l-logic viruses are of no threat to org-g-ganic lifeforms.”

Alphys scuttled over to the pod. “I-I’ll take care of the vaccine! Undyne… I’ve got an idea! That song you were humming earlier, th-that calmed the memoryhead down, didn’t it?”

Undyne nodded, glancing at the roughly-dozen wavering, shimmering ghosts occupying the hall. “Shyren’s sister was one of your test subjects, right?”

Alphys gulped and nodded. “Uh—Uh-huh.”

Undyne shook her head and tried to focus. “All right. Here goes nothing.”

Though short of breath, Undyne tried to hum that one tune she’d remembered when she’d reached out for one of the sleeping memoryheads—the song she’d taught Shyren’s sister how to play. She tried closing her eyes, but all it did was leave her mind more attuned to the psychic whirlwind of damned wailing.

Undyne remembered the rhythm of the left hand, the staggered and arpeggiated chords giving backbone to the song, the melody in the right hand, countermelody played on the same hand with fingers splayed apart as far as they could go. She remembered the notes as though she’d last played them yesterday, even though she hadn’t touched her keyboard in months, not even to play scales.
At her side, Alphys fumbled with the two syringes Pod 153 had produced for her, struggling to administer the vaccines to 2B and 9S as the two androids gave into the psychic storm engulfing their minds. Their eyes glowed with piercing red light. Undyne wasn’t sure what that meant, but she was positive it wasn’t good.

Undyne kept humming. A thin, reedy voice joined her own, singing the harmony that gave body to the melody; another joined in, and another, and another, providing body to the composition, giving it a scaffold for it to drape itself over.

And one by one, the memoryheads began to lie down, and the psychic storm grew weaker and weaker until it was not a whirlwind but a gale, not a gale but a breeze, not a breeze but still, calm air. And as her mind fell silent and her head stopped pounding Undyne felt a heavy sigh of relief tear itself out of her lungs. She felt as though she’d aged ten years at least.

Undyne pulled herself across the floor, her legs like jelly, and helped Alphys pin down the two androids and emptied the contents of the syringes into their necks one-by-one. The pinpricks of red shining from their pupils gradually dimmed and vanished, and both 2B and 9S went silent and limp.

“Statement: Units 2B and 9S have returned to stable condition. Logic virus contamination at zero percent.”

As the gloomy lab fell once again into a mausoleum-like silence, the only audible noises were the quiet and exhausted panting of the four who’d survived the deathtrap.

Undyne glanced at Alphys, too relieved at being alive—and seeing her alive—to be mad at the doctor for what she’d done. This whole thing with the memoryheads… with not telling anybody what had happened to the family members they’d offered up for research, with keeping the creatures resulting from those experiments trapped down here like caged beasts…

Right now, none of that mattered, because for a while there, Undyne had been worried she’d never be able to hang out and watch cartoons and share nerdy crap with Alphys again.

Alphys was shocked to find Undyne’s strong arms wrapped around her, a fact plainly evident in how slowly and gingerly she returned the hug.

“I’m so glad,” Undyne gasped, “you got us out of this, Alphys!”

“I-I’m so sorry,” Alphys stuttered.

“I don’t give a shit!” Undyne grasped her tighter, letting Alphys sink into her muscular embrace. “We’re alive! You did it!”

“But…”

Undyne had never realized how soft and squishy Alphys was, but she certainly was. And it was really nice. Undyne just wanted to keep on hugging her.

Forget about all the screwed-up stuff Alphys had done, at least for now. Right now, nearly mad with relief, Undyne was overcome with the sudden urge to…

She pursed her lips and planted a kiss on the Royal Scientist’s cheek.

Alphys choked back a sob. “Undyne, I…”

Love you? “Kinda figured.” Alphys was not the least bit subtle about her crushes. Undyne knew for
a fact that her crushes included, but were not limited to, herself and King Asgore (honestly, Undyne couldn’t see the appeal—sure, Asgore was a kind and gentle soul, but his days of having a muscular physique were long behind him… and besides, Undyne didn’t really get what anyone saw in men anyway).

A long time ago, before Alphys had become a miserable little hermit (at least now Undyne knew why), Undyne had accidentally peeked at her computer once and found a couple paragraphs Alphys had written about the two of them cooking stir-fry together. Out of politeness, Undyne hadn’t said anything… but she’d made sure to suggest stir-fry the next time they hung out. Alphys hadn’t been able to stop her face from turning beet-red.

“I-I don’t deserve you!” Alphys wailed.

Undyne gave her a pat on the back. “Hey, calm down. We all make mistakes. Some of us just make really huge ones and get too scared to fix ‘em, right?”

Alphys nodded, burying her face in Undyne’s shoulder in her shame. “I—I’m afraid, Undyne… I’m so sorry… I’ve done nothing but hurt you guys… And I hurt all these people I experimented on… they must hate me.”

“They don’t hate you…” 9S gingerly pulled himself to his knees, trying to use his burned hands as little as possible to support himself. “These things, these memoryheads… they’re echoes of the dead. They can’t hate you for what you’ve done. They’re just… restless.”

Restless. Echoes bouncing from one wall to the next in this tiny, enclosed space, never having a chance to disperse in the open air but instead growing in intensity the longer they remained imprisoned.

“I think,” Undyne said, “they just need to see their families again, Alphys.”

2B pulled 9S to her side as she picked herself up, wearily resting her head on his shoulder. To say she seemed tired was an understatement. And to think, she’d only woken up less than an hour ago.

“So… Do I, um… Has any of my hair turned white from all this?” Undyne asked Alphys, suppressing a chuckle.

Alphys laughed in spite of herself. “M-Maybe a little,” she said with a weary smile.

Undyne panicked. “Wait. No. That was a joke!” she protested, grabbing a lock of her hair and tugging on it, holding it in front of her face to make sure it was still the same old red. All she could see was a muddy blur that might have been vaguely red. “I didn’t—I’m not really going gray now, am I?”

“Don’t worry about it.” 9S grinned wryly as Pod 153 tended to the burns on his hands. “Silver hair’s… all the rage on the surface. Isn’t that right, 2B?”

2B smiled. “I-It makes you look very distinguished… Captain.”
Chapter Summary

What further horrors await Alphys, Undyne, 2B, and 9S in the True Lab?

Chapter Notes

Whew. This was a tricky chapter to write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was far less tension in the lab once Alphys and Undyne had led 2B and 9S through the memoryhead-laden hallway and into the next room, which—fortunately—was a hospital ward of sorts. The rows of cots, floor-to-ceiling curtains on retractable runners, and cabinets of medical supplies were a welcome find for 2B and 9S in particular.

As she sat down on one of the beds, 2B examined the injury on her hand as her pod ran diagnostics.

The palm of her right hand where her glove had been burned away was the same shade of black as her YoRHa uniform and desiccated like the dry, cracked ground of a desert. Her fingers could twitch, but she was unable to curl them more than a few degrees. Attempting any movement which bent or creased the skin of her palm was simply impossible.

This was the price of gripping so tightly onto one of Undyne’s spears. 2B counted herself lucky the strong electrical current and her prolonged exposure to it hadn’t permanently damaged any of her electrical systems.

That wholly-unexpected burn—Undyne hadn’t been pulling her punches at all when she’d summoned that spear. It was nothing like the lightning she’d conjured in her sparring match the other day.

Prodding at the charred, charcoal-like outer layer yielded no sensation; yet when 2B found herself involuntarily picking at one of the loose edges her visor threw up dozens of warning messages. The lower layer of flesh beneath the charring was scarlet and shiny, like raw meat wrapped in plastic; at the sight of it, although she didn’t feel hurt, 2B couldn’t help but suck air through her teeth in an involuntary pain response.

This was inconvenient. In a world where bodies could easily be replaced piecemeal or in their entirety, injuries were trivial. In a world where replacements were not quite so forthcoming, though… 2B wasn’t even entirely sure how long it would take the synthetic skin and muscle to heal—or even if it would.

Pod 042 examined the wound. “Analysis: the burn extends through all layers of skin through the subdermal chassis, severely damaging nervous systems and pain receptors. Proposal: remove constricting items and loosely wrap sterile bandages around the affected area.”
Sitting on the next cot over, 9S dealt with his own injuries. Evidently, his hurt more than hers did; then again, the burns were less severe and therefore more of his nerves had been spared the same fate as 2B’s. Alphys let his hands soak in a bucket of cool water as she rushed off to procure more bandages.

2B reached up to peel off what remained of her forearm-length glove, trying carefully to slough it off without disturbing her seared skin and wincing as the tattered leather brushed against the edges of the burn. Somehow, the pain was far more severe on the side of her hand opposite to the burn. Rotating her wrist and examining her newly-naked hand, she could see on the top of her hand an oval of shiny pink skin corresponding to the severe wound on her palm. She poked at the lesser burn—

There. There was the pain she’d been expecting.

“Geez, that looks bad,” Alphys noted as she returned with more medical supplies, cringing at the sight of 2B’s condition. “I—I can help—”

2B opened her eyes and waved her away. “I’ve got this. Tend to 9S.” She took a roll of bandages from her pod’s manipulator claws and carefully wrapped it around her palm.

Her visor kept displaying status messages, each one like a needle stabbing 2B in the eyes. To keep her headache from worsening she undid her visor and wrapped it around the bandages, knotting it just below her wrist. Without her HUD irritating her eyes she felt the throbbing in her head diminish.

The thicker and heavy cloth of the visor all but immobilized 2B’s injured hand, and would also keep the bandages clean and securely-fastened. She wasn’t too worried about losing the use of her right hand—all YoRHa units were ambidextrous, after all—but she would be lying if she said her right hand was not the one she tended to favor.

It could be worse, though. 9S’s wounds, though less severe, forbade him the use of both his hands almost entirely. Granted, he wasn’t a combat-type (as much as he seemed to act like it sometimes), and 2B wondered if maybe the injuries would at least prevent him from charging headlong into danger like he always did. Of course, seeing 9S sit there glumly with his hands in a bucket on his lap did not make 2B feel particularly relieved that he was sidelined.

With one hand, 2B reached for the back of 9S’s head and loosened the knot tying his visor in place, letting the strip of black nanomachine-augmented cloth settle around his neck. He sighed in relief and thanked 2B.

2B laid down on her cot, letting her burned hand rest on top of her stomach, and struggled to keep her eyes open.

“If I’d known you two were gonna grab my spear,” Undyne said, “I wouldn’t have made it so hot.” She eyed the bandage dressing 2B’s hand with a grimace. To say the captain looked exhausted was an understatement; deep shadows beneath her eye looked almost skull-like, and a few locks of the hair hanging over her forehead had turned from scarlet to snow-white as a result of the psychic assault she had endured. “What made you think that would help, anyway?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” said 2B. “I was acting on instinct alone.”

“We wouldn’t have lasted a minute without that,” 9S admitted, “so don’t worry about our injuries. We had to choose between this—” He pulled his hands out of the bucket and let them drip— “and having our brains scrambled… I’d say that was a pretty easy decision.”

“These injuries will heal. For now, we should focus on escaping.” 2B turned her head to face Alphys.
as the doctor withdrew the bucket, dried 9S’s hands, and began to bandage them. “Doctor Alphys, are there any additional threats in this lab we should know about?”

Alphys shook her head. “We should have a pretty clear shot to the west elevator. That’ll take us to the Waterfall exit. There might be some, uh… machine lifeforms gathered around there, but we can handle that, right?”

Undyne didn’t seem so convinced. “There’s more than just those amalgamates in this lab, isn’t there? Like, uh… maybe whoever shut the door on us and kept laughing at you, Alphys? You know anything about him?”

“Um…” Alphys swallowed. “I—I, um, well…"

“Because he sure seems to know you. And his way around this lab.”

“Okay. Back when I was doing the amalgamate experiments I accidentally brought Prince Asriel back to life and then he turned into a flower and now I think the flower is mad at me,” Alphys blurted out in one long rush of syllables.

Undyne opened her mouth to retort, but nothing came out. She raised her finger, tried to say something, failed again, and lowered her hand.

“Yeah,” 9S chimed in, “he calls himself ‘Flowey’ now, and he’s a real asshole.”

“I can corroborate 9S’s statement,” 2B added. “He is a real asshole.”

A high-pitched, childish giggle floated through the air on a burst of static, time-delayed echoes drifting from down the halls snaking away from the room to join it. “Oh, such foul language. You ought to wash all your mouths out with soap!”

“No, can you hack into the intercom and shut him up?” 2B asked, her head still pounding.

9S nodded. “Might take me a little while longer than usual, but I’m sure it can’t be too hard. Just give me a little while.”

“Oh, but I have so much to share with you girls!” Flowey replied.

“Hey!” 9S called out. “One of us is a guy!”

“Well, you’re statistically insignificant, ain’tcha? I’m not going to waste precious air saying ‘I have so much to share with you girls-and-one-guy!’ Speaking of 9S, maybe we should start with you?”

“Just ignore him,” 9S said, raising his arm to focus on the intercom bolted to the far wall. “It’ll only take a few minutes for me to shut him up.”

“2B, did you know that 9S doesn’t share your desire to stay down here forever?” Flowey asked, giggling. “Did you know that 9S’s greatest wish is to pass through the Barrier and leave the Underground? And would you like to know why?”

9S grunted, sweat dripping from his brow. Residual interference lingering from the memoryheads’ silent song was slowing his progress, preventing him from hacking with his usual swiftness. “Don’t listen to him, 2B.”

“Do you realize how much he despises your kind, 2B? Or, should I say, 2E?”

2B ignored Flowey. She knew that 9S could never hold such hatred in his—
The one who lived forgave you. The ones who died never had that chance.

No. It was just a stupid dream, irrational and nonsensical, only terrifying to 2B’s half-awake unconscious. That vision of 9S, rotting away, a hateful glare in his eyes as his pupils blazed red and his hands tightened around 2B’s neck—That was a past that had never happened, a future that could never come to pass. No such 9S could ever exist! No one who knew him could believe that!

“Here is an interesting thing he said to your friend 6E while the two of them were alone.” Flowey cleared his throat. “I’ll slaughter you all. You damn Type-E scum. I’ll hunt you down like dogs. Every last one of you.’ Now, 2B, ask yourself if ‘every last one of you’ includes—”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” 9S shouted out, pulling himself to his feet and clenching his fists. The instant his fingernails dug into his fresh bandages and the tender skin underneath he screamed out and fell to one knee.

Without a moment’s hesitation, 2B slid off the cot and crouched beside 9S, laying her left hand on his shoulder.

It’s not true, she told herself. It was a dream and a lie. I always knew how much 9S cared for me… and even though I had to push him away, I always did my best to care for him as well. He would never… “Nines, we need you to focus on—”

9S turned to face her and 2B jerked her hand back, stunned to see for the briefest of instants the same hard, vengeful look filling his eyes and contorting his face as his ghoulish phantom.

“Resident good boy Nines here was very angry to find out about what your kind did to him, 2B. What… you did to him, that is. Forty-six times, was it? And I’m sure you were just following orders…”

“2B, what’s wrong?” 9S asked. The hateful glare twisting his soft, boyish features had vanished—2B wasn’t even sure if she’d just imagined it in the first place. “C-C’mon, you don’t believe this jerk, do you?”

2B shook her head. “Of course not,” she said, not sure how truthful her response was. “You’d never say such… hateful things, would you?”

“Of course not,” 9S assured her. He shook his head and reached out for the speaker once more. “Hang on. I’ll shut this guy up soon enough.”

“What about you, Undyne?” Flowey asked. At the sound of her name, Undyne stiffened and stood at attention. “All your life, you’ve wanted to be the symbol of hope for your people. But two fancy robots show up with everything you need to free the whole kingdom… Hmm. Are you that much of a coward… or is 2B just that gorgeous?”

A lance of electricity hit the speaker mounted on the wall and tore it apart, showering the floor with blue and orange sparks. “I’ve had enough of this guy,” Undyne growled.

Flowey’s voice continued, fainter, from the intercom speakers in the hallways. “Hee hee hee! You’re going to have to try harder than that! Undyne, did you know that the black boxes installed in 2B and
“Are functionally identical to human souls? Alphys knows… I wonder why she hasn’t told you…”

“What?” Undyne snapped, her embarrassment giving way to anger. “Alphys…”

“H-He’s just trying to turn us against each other!” said Alphys as she nervously wrung her claws. “I—I mean, if I knew how we could break the Barrier, I’d have…”

“Stayed down here where it’s safe, Alphys?” Flowey asked. “Where real life can’t disappoint you? Where you don’t have to admit to Undyne that all those ‘historical records’ you two love so much are just stupid cartoons for children?”

“Anime isn’t for children!” Alphys protested.

“And 2B, hey, maybe you should tell everyone here what happened the first time you came here. Especially your new girlfriend. Maybe you can tell Undyne how you—”

All the intercom speakers in the lab went silent at once.

“Got it,” 9S sighed, resting the back of his head against the side of his cot. “Finally.”

An uncomfortable silence roared through the lab, filling the lull left by the absence of Flowey’s mocking voice. Nobody seemed willing to look at each other.

“So, uh,” Alphys said, “that Flowey… h-he sure does know a lot about—I mean, uh, he sure has an active imagination, doesn’t he?”

Undyne brushed the hair from her scaly forehead. “C’mon. Let’s get out of here.” Her voice was terse, clipped, and laden with tension, and 2B could tell she was struggling not to ask the questions that were no doubt on her mind.

The four of them wandered through the lab’s winding, dark hallways, Undyne leading the way and Alphys providing directions. 2B and 9S brought up the rear, flanked by their support pods who used their floodlights to illuminate the gloomy path through the lab.

The tension was thick enough that 9S felt suffocated by it. He thought about Flowey’s words, how sickening his vengeful vow to 6E had sounded coming from the demented flower’s mouth.

What did 2B think of him now?

9S shook his head to clear up his jumbled thoughts. It wasn’t just Flowey’s words, or residue from those amalgamates’ poisonous thoughts, or even the stinging twinges from his burns. Just the fact that his hands were bound in these tightly-wrapped mitts clouded his brain. He’d never realized the stimulus of having fingers he could at least wiggle was that important to his thought processes. Having his hands dangle like lead weights just felt… stifling.

He found himself overcome with the overwhelming urge to reach out to 2B and hold her hand, only to remember that as for now, he didn’t exactly have usable fingers. Funny how he didn’t start thinking so consciously about something he wanted to do until he couldn’t—and then, of course, the desire became unbearable. Like an itch on your nose, it seemed to flare up as soon as you couldn’t scratch it.

9S’s nose twitched. Dammit. Speak of the devil.
Pod 042 snapped to attention and rose above 2B’s shoulder. “Alert: machine lifeform signals detected at twenty meters away, fourteen degrees west-southwest and closing.”

2B called her sword to her left hand, broken out of her funk by a rush of adrenaline. 9S nearly summoned his own sword before realizing (and not a second too soon) that he had no way to hold it. He’d have to handle this with hacking alone—assuming he could concentrate well enough. Judging by how much he’d had to struggle to hack such a simple intercom system, he felt like maybe he was at sixty percent his usual prowess—and that was a generous estimate.

Nevertheless, he still felt the familiar rush of a combat high kicking in. He couldn’t help it. It was a part of his programming, even though he wasn’t a combat model—some androids said the love they felt for fighting was the closest thing to love they’d ever experienced. What it was to him was just another itch he couldn’t scratch right now.

“Get back, Alphys.” Undyne stepped forward and summoned a crackling lightning-spear. “I’ll take care of these guys.”

2B pushed herself past 9S. “Allow me to handle them. 9S, stay behind. Pod, how many signals are there?”

“Analysis: six signals most likely belonging to small machines classified ‘stubbies,’ following the path of the hallway ahead.”

A half-dozen pairs of crimson optical sensors lit up in the darkness of the hallway ahead, and as both support pods opened fire, the light from their floodlights combined with the strobing muzzle-flash from their machine guns lit up the stocky, bullet-shaped bodies of the machines.

“Glory to the Silver Idol!” the lead machine cried out. “Take the Gorgeous One! Take the Gorgeous One to the Silver Idol!”

One of the machines made it past the salvo, bullets pinging off its filthy metal hull, windmilling its spindly arms as it hopped across the floor. Undyne jabbed her spear into the gap between its head and its body, strained her arms, her bare biceps bulging, and separated the spherical head from the body. The decapitated machine slumped over as its head rolled across the floor, its optical sensors winking out.

One of the machines threw a spear like a javelin; the weapon whizzed past 9S’s ear and buried itself in the wall he’d been leaning against, vibrating like a tuning fork.

“No! The Gorgeous One must not be harmed!”

Holding the Joyeuse in a reverse grip, 2B brought the blade down and impaled a stubby as it drew near, planting her foot on the machine’s head to more easily yank the blade back out with a spurt of coolant and machine oil. The machine fell to the floor and rolled in its death throes, knocking Undyne off her feet.

“The Silver Idol will… commit us to fame… Our sacrifice…” the dying machine gurgled.

9S aimed for one of the four remaining stubbies, closed his eyes, and entered the familiar white void of hacking space, leaving his body behind for a brief few seconds as he tore through the machine’s meager firewalls and rearranged its brain. As he sank back into his own body with a jolt, 9S watched the machine turn tail and scurry toward its peers before erupting into shrapnel, showering the other machines with hot debris. That’s one of them down already.

Pod 042 let out a frantic beep. “Alert: seven more machine lifeforms detected, approaching from
twelve meters away, fourteen degrees west-southwest and closing.”

Undyne snarled as she jabbed her spearhead all the way through one of the remaining machines, shoving it back against one of its comrades and skewering the both of them. “Any idea where these guys came from, Alphys?”

“It’s not my fault!” Alphys cried out as she scurried back and cowered behind 9S. “I—I didn’t do anything!”

“We must secure the Gorgeous One!”

2B and Undyne dispatched the remaining machine just in time for the reinforcements to arrive. With the hallway so crowded, both of them struggled to contain the newcomers. 9S took aim again, hacked into one of them, and deactivated its optical sensors, rendering it easy prey. As he opened his eyes 9S fell to his knees, shocked at how winded he was already by things that should have been child’s play to him.

With a sharp cry, 2B stumbled backward and fell to the floor, a tear running through stockings and a gash across her thigh where one of the machine’s arms had lacerated her skin. Reflexively, she held out her injured right hand to break her fall.

Undyne glanced over at 2B as she fell, and one of the machines took the opportunity to swing at her with a rusty length of piping, knocking the wind out of her. She stumbled just out of reach of a rusty sawtoothed sword as she reeled from the blow.

9S rushed to her side as 2B curled up on the floor, clutching at her wrist as she hissed through gritted teeth. “Are you all right?”

2B nodded, refusing to meet his eyes. “I’m good.”

Why was she being so frosty to 9S? She didn’t believe what Flowey had said about him, did she? “Why don’t I take a look at—”

2B pulled herself up, favoring her leg. “I am fine, 9S.”

9S came to his senses as he looked down at his gauze-swaddled hands. Right. There was nothing he could do like this, anyway. 2B was probably just pushing him away to spare him from feeling useless.

2B rejoined the fight, the shimmering oil-slick blade of the Joyeuse making short work of the remaining machines. Undyne, though, dispatched the last one, kicking it once it had collapsed with a frustrated growl and getting a stubbed toe in exchange. She had won, but the machine had gotten the last laugh.

“Are you hurt, Undyne?” Alphys asked, alarmed.

Undyne retreated, stepping lightly on her mildly-injured foot and tending to a jagged and oozing cut across her bare shoulder. “Only my pride.”

2B dropped to one knee and let Pod 042 help her apply staunching gel to the wound on her thigh and bind it with gauze. Once the job was done, she stood up, testing how able she was to put her weight on her injured leg and finding it satisfactory. “I wasn’t too much of a distraction, was I?” she asked Undyne.

Undyne let out a nervous, yet somewhat-offended laugh. Even 9S found himself shocked by 2B’s
barbed comment. It was so… unlike her. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“If your emotions are compromising your judgment, then repress them or let me lead the way.”

“Well, aren’t you a cocky one,” Undyne grumbled.

Pod 153 bobbed as it drifted through the air, its floodlights making the shifting shadows dance. “Analysis: extrapolating from brainwave readouts from Units 9S and 2B, it is apparent that tensions are running high within this group due to prior psychological stress.”

Pod 042 chimed in. “Statement: group cohesion is paramount in scenarios such as this.”

“This support unit is in accordance with its counterpart,” Pod 153 replied. “Proposal: to promote unity, Units 9S and 2B, Captain Undyne, and Doctor Alphys should speak truthfully about the claims made by Flowey regarding themselves.”

“None of it was true!” Alphys insisted, willing to denounce Flowey’s missives more loudly and more quickly than anybody else. “Everything was wrong! Especially that thing about anime being dumb and fake! And the thing about you guys' black boxes being the same thing as human souls! Th-That definitely wasn’t true!”

Undyne’s eye narrowed as she turned her gaze to 2B, glowering. “Black boxes, huh? …Mind if you guys show me? If it’s not, like, offensive or anything, that is.”

Alphys, 9S thought, maybe you should have saved that bit for later.

2B took a deep breath and, fingers shaking just slightly with a hint of trepidation, produced her own black box, letting it rest in her palm as it glittered like a slice of the night sky and softly whirred. The black box installed in YoRHa androids was a wireless power source and CPU, the seat of both her consciousness and her soul; even removed from the body, it would continue to keep her functioning as long as she did not stray too far outside its range.

There were many emotions reflected in Undyne’s face as she gazed upon the black box. 9S could tell right away that Undyne knew exactly what she was looking at. That thing was the same thing Asgore had spent centuries since his children’s deaths collecting… not a human soul at all, in fact, but the culmination of a YoRHa android's entire being, the vessel of their soul. Above all, above the shock, above the fear, she looked as though she’d been betrayed… and all that gave way soon enough to anger.

The sound of Undyne’s palm connecting with 2B’s cheek broke the silence filling the hall with all the finality of a gunshot.

2B staggered and stumbled, her fingers sliding across the surface of her black box as she clutched at it tighter to keep it from slipping out of her grasp, but she did not fall. She stood tall, her posture perfect, her eyes downcast as she turned her bruised and oil-streaked cheek to Undyne, refusing to say so much as a single word in her defense.

“I liked you,” Undyne spat, a quaver in her voice, her eye wide and furious. “I—I liked you. You guys were fun.”

9S wanted to shout out, but—

2B remained speechless.

“So what do you two have to say for yourselves?” Undyne crossed her arms, glowering at 2B and
9S in turn. 9S felt as though Undyne was currently imagining what it would feel like to tear the flesh from his chassis. “Do you have any idea how selfish the two of you are, hiding down here like this?” she asked the two of them, spittle flying from her mouth. “With just one of your lives, you’d free tens of thousands of people—people who’ve been stuck down here for a thousand generations!”

Alphys tried to calm Undyne down. “H-Hey, c’mon, let’s not s-say things we can’t—”

“Did you think you could just hang out down here and live here like the rest of us as if everything would be okay?” Undyne asked, her voice rising to a furious roar. “You have a duty to sacrifice yourself for the greater good, you cowardly pieces of—!”

“Sacrifice? What do you understand about sacrifice?” 9S shouted out, unable to contain his anger any longer as he leaped to his feet. “Don’t you dare talk to 2B like that! You’ve never fought in a real war! You have no idea what it really means to sacrifice yourself! 2B and I have watched each other die more times than we can count!

“And you think you can lecture us about ‘the greater good?’” 9S continued, his voice hoarse and cracking, the words pouring from him like vomit and scraping against his throat on their way out. “How many times have you had to kill someone, Undyne? How many times has your leader ordered you to murder someone you loved for ‘the greater good?’ 2B knows more about those things than you could know in a thousand years—so shut up and show her some goddamn respect!”

Dumbstruck, Undyne stared blankly at 9S as he breathed deeply and tried to compose himself, her face softening as the rage faded from it.

In the silence that followed, 2B returned her black box to her chest. “…Captain Undyne, please accept my apology for having misled you. 9S and I should have been honest with you from the beginning.”

She shouldn’t have to apologize, 9S thought. “2B, you—”

2B patted Pod 042 on its hull. “042, help Undyne dress her wound.”

The pod nodded. “Affirmative.”

Undyne’s shoulders slumped as she crouched down, allowing the pod to drift over and examine the ragged cut on her shoulder. “Don’t apologize,” she said, sighing. “I shouldn’t have blown up at you. You came in peace, after all, so it’s wrong to think of you two as enemies. I guess we can wait a little while longer for someone who’s not so nice to come down here.”

“If it’s any consolation, you might not be waiting for very long,” 2B told her, taking a seat on top of the ruined hull of one of the machines. That was when 9S remembered that, assuming nothing outside of his and 2B’s own behavior had been changed by the resets, 6E would be visiting the Underground within the next two days.

6E. That sick freak. Just thinking about her, replaying those memories of her in his mind’s eye, made 9S feel a rush of animalistic rage. When 9S saw her again, he’d make sure to kill her himself and exorcize this uncharacteristic bloodlust from his mind.

“A-And for the record, 2B,” Undyne added, blushing, “I wasn’t distracted because I thought you were cute or anything! I’m way more professional than that! I thought you were hurt!”

“I can’t blame you,” 2B said as she kicked debris from the battle off to the side and cleared a path through the hallway. “To be frank, over the years I’ve made plenty of tactical errors myself out of fear for 9S’s safety. I don’t regret a single one.”
She looked at 9S and smiled as she said that, and 9S felt his spirits lift. Alphys helped him up, and the four of them continued onward.

The loudspeakers crackled to life yet again. "Hello, there. Long time, no see." Flowey giggled. "I'm surprised none of you have killed each other. Undyne, does freedom really matter so little to you?"

9S swore under his breath. How had Flowey brought the intercom back online? And the security cameras, too, it seemed. He glanced at one of the cameras perched at regular intervals on the walls like waiting birds and could swear he could see whatever was looking at him from the other end in the shiny glass lens. Was this little weed more computer-savvy than he seemed… or did he have help from someone else?

"2B, you’re not mad that 9S wants to kill all your former comrades? He’d do it, too, if you gave him the chance. Or are you still willing to take him at his word?"

"I’d rather take his than yours," 2B grumbled.

"Don’t you think there’s a part of him that hates you, too? 9S, tell us how you really feel about 2B. She did kill you forty-six times, after all. Oh, that’s right! Alphys! Undyne! You two didn’t know about that!"

2B began to shiver as if the air around her had turned ice-cold. She laid her hand on 9S’s shoulder but seemed more willing to look down at her boots than to meet 9S’s eyes.

"See, Nines here was way too smart for his creators to keep alive, but also way too smart to just toss aside—so they assigned 2B to kill him whenever he started getting too curious! And it took forty-six times for her to work up the courage to run away!"

"Holy shit, that’s horrible!" Undyne said. "No wonder you guys don’t want to go back to the surface! Geez, I feel like an even bigger jerk for yelling at you guys now…"

"Technically, we didn’t run away," 9S said as he focused on the loudspeaker and tried to shut down the broadcast system yet again. "We got stuck down here."

"Alphys, how do you feel about Undyne having the hots for a craven killer? Makes you feel pretty inadequate, doesn’t it? Hey, maybe if you kill Nines right here Undyne will think you’re sexy, too! But if you can’t muster up the courage, don’t worry! There’s plenty of fish in the sea—if Undyne passes you over for 2B, well, you’ll still have a chance with Ni—"

9S brought down the broadcast yet again before Alphys’ blush could grow intense enough to all but start emitting gamma radiation. "I’d pay real money for him to shut up for good."

Undyne stomped her foot. "Okay! I’m through with all the insinuations, so let’s all get one thing straight! I won’t deny it—2B, you’re the most beautiful robot I’ve ever seen, but I’m not that shallow! I just can’t date a girl who isn’t interested in anime!"

Although 2B kept her emotions to herself, 9S could tell she seemed relieved. And why wouldn’t she be? Nobody ever actually wanted to be part of a love triangle, after all.

"And another thing. Alphys, this lab’s got a surveillance room, right? Somewhere all these cameras hook up to?" Undyne pointed at one of the cameras with her spear.

Alphys nodded. "O-Of course! That must be where Flowey’s hiding!"

"Let’s try to get there before the cameras come back online," 9S said, wiping the sweat from his
forehead on his sleeve. “I think I speak for everyone when I say I’ve had enough of this guy.”

Everybody grumbled in agreement, except for the pods. They had something different to say.

“All.ert: machine lifeform signal detected two hundred meters directly below this location. One hundred ninety meters… one hundred eighty meters…”

2B gritted her teeth and grabbed 9S tightly by the arm. “What?” she hissed. “Explain!”

“Th-There’s nothing but solid rock two hundred meters below us!” Alphys stammered.

“It must be a tunneling machine.” 9S tried to keep up as 2B dragged him along; Undyne swept Alphys off her feet and ran alongside the androids. “153, can you identify the machine type?”

“Ninety meters… eighty meters…”

“Analysis: the speed of its movements suggests a linked-sphere type, likely fitted with drilling equipment.”

“Whatever it is, let’s put as much difference between it and us as we can.” With a grunt, 2B wrapped her left arm around 9S’s waist and hoisted him up.

“Forty meters… thirty meters… twenty meters… ten meters…”

With an earsplitting screech, a long, wormlike machine made of segmented spherical units tore through the floor and curled around in the empty space of the hallway. The pods fired on the attacking machine, their bullets pinging off its silvery hulls as 2B and Undyne beat a hasty retreat with their companions in tow.

The mechanical worm undulated through the air with the same ease it had cut through rock, metal, and concrete, the conical drill bit forming its head splitting into four equal segments and snapping like a hungry beak. With stunning swiftness it threw itself forward, coiling itself in front of 2B and blocking the way.

Undyne hit the machine with a salvo of spears, the electric arcs causing the machine to convulse as it snaked through the air; as its tail lashed out it caught 2B in the midsection and threw her against the wall. 9S felt himself slip from 2B’s grip; he threw out his bandage-swaddled hand hoping 2B would catch it, but the machine lunged and snatched him in its jaws, pinching his waist, and then made a mad dash through the hallway.

2B’s eyes were wide and filled with terror as the machine carried 9S aloft and the distance between the two androids grew. “Nines!”

“2B!” he shouted as her voice's echo bounded across the walls and vanished in the cacophony of squealing metal the machine left in its wake. As the machine carried him along 9S writhed and wriggled, feeling like a worm stuck in a bird’s beak. Ignoring the stinging, throbbing pain traveling from his hands up his arms, he slapped at the rough and grooved surface of the machine’s segmented drill, trying to pry himself free of the machine’s jaws to no avail.

He thought he heard the machine laugh.

“Glory to the Silver Idol! The Gorgeous One will be delivered unto him!”

Chapter End Notes
"Undyne, you're thinking about how much you want to **** 2B, aren't you?"
In this chapter, we find out just what the so-called "Silver Idol" has planned for 9S. Will 2B reach him in time?

Hey, if you need to take a break at any point during or after this chapter, please check out this adorably fluffy 2B&9S fic I wrote over the weekend! Technically, since this fanfic now has two separate pairs of 2B and 9S running around, you can pretend these two fics are in the same continuity, even!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2B watched 9S vanish into shadows, his eyes wide, a scream tearing from his mouth, tears streaking his cheeks. In the grips of that giant machine, he looked so small, so vulnerable, so like a child.

And he called out her name.

As the linked-sphere machine wriggled through the dark hallway, its thrashing tail lashed out, catching 2B in the side of her head, and as the stinging pain overwhelmed her and threw waves of static and distortion through her visual and audio processors, everything went black.

###  
- Commencing System Check
- Memory Unit: Green
- Initializing Tactics Log
- Loading Geographic Data
- Vitals: Green
- Remaining MP: 67%
- Black Box Temperature: Normal
- Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
- Activating IFF
- Activating FCS
- Initializing Pod Connection
- Launching DBU Setup
- Activating Inertia Control System
- Activating Environmental Sensors
- Equipment Status: Green
- All Systems Green
- Combat Preparations Complete_

"You hurt him! You hurt the beautiful boy!" someone shouted. His voice sounded… familiar? Where had 9S heard it before?
“We did not mean to damage the Gorgeous One!” a machine cried back, bleating in its harsh, modulated electronic voice. “Forgive us, Silver Idol!”

“He was like that when we got him!” another added.

Something was pinning down 9S’s limbs. A sort of cable. Soft, pliant, yet still rigid. Plant matter, maybe?

Oh, god. Flowey was behind this shit, too, wasn’t he?

9S tried to open his eyes before realizing, after a few seconds, that his eyes were already open. His captor had apparently replaced his visor with an ordinary cloth.

“Let’s see what we have here, my darlings.” The familiar voice drew closer. “Certainly does live up to his name, doesn’t he? What we’ve got ourselves here is a perfect boy.”

“He is perfect! Perfect boy! Perfect boy!”

9S recalled a myth he’d heard once while spending the night at a Resistance camp. Legend had it there were machine lifeforms which, according to their strange and nonsensical utterances, ‘believed’ that cannibalizing an android would make themselves beautiful. Was that what these machines were going to do to him? Was 9S about to find out why those things had teeth behind their blank faces?

“Hey,” he called out into the darkness. “Wh-What’s going on here? Where am I?”

The owner of the familiar voice ignored him. “Well… on closer inspection…” 9S felt a satin glove brush against the tip of his ear as a hand tugged at a lock of his hair. “The silver hair. I like it, it’s very bishonen, but it is so last season. And the style is wrong, too! That bowl cut—it’s simply a disaster! It just won’t do for me.”

“I asked you a question!” 9S called out again. “What’s this all about?” He struggled against the cables binding his wrists and ankles, but they wouldn’t give.

“And he’s so much shorter than he looked on camera, too,” the voice said. “It wouldn’t be that hard to extend his legs, would it be?”

“My legs are fine the way they are!” 9S protested.

A gloved thumb pressed against the burn on 9S’s hand, sending a stinging jolt down his forearm. He gritted his teeth and swallowed a pained yelp. “We’ll have to fix up his hands, looks like… oh, my…”

“You original hands will do just fine,” another voice answered from above him. 9S recognized that one right away.

Flowey.

“Rise and shine, Nines. Take a look at your future.” A thin, clammy tendril curled around the bottom of 9S’s blindfold and yanked up. 9S blinked as the light assaulted his eyes, the blurred forms of the Silver Idol and his machine cohorts coming into focus. Behind him was a grid of old-fashioned video monitors blanketing the walls, rows of consoles and terminals sprouting haphazardly from the tiled floor.

He gasped.

So that was who the Silver Idol was.
2B opened her eyes and was greeted with Alphys’ yellow snout, blurry and indistinct, hanging over her nose.

With a grunt that startled the doctor into backing off, 2B tried to sit up, only to mistakenly use her right hand to steady herself. Even through the thick layer of bandages, applying that kind of pressure to her hand only served to make the remaining nerves scream.

“You’re awake!” Undyne grabbed her by the waist and helped her to her feet. “Man, you scared us for a second there, 2B. You all right?”

2B nodded but struggled to keep her balance.

“Let’s go, 042. Point the way to 9S’s black box signal.” 2B took one unassisted step and fell flat on her face, the hallway swirling around her.

The floor beneath her feet bucked and swayed like the deck of a ship sailing through turbulent waters; the grid of ceramic tiles lining the floor seemed to twist itself into eddies and whorls before her eyes. Static popped and crackled through her line of sight. She blinked and shook her head, trying to shake off the distortion, as Undyne grabbed her by the waist and kept her steady.

She held a hand to her aching head. “Pod, diagnose irregularities.”

Pod 042 nodded and gave a cursory scan. “Report: major errors manifest in Unit 2B’s balance system; minor errors present in visual processor. Core functionality intact. Proposal: recalibrate affected systems immediately to avoid further performance reduction.”

This was the part where 2B would lie down, let 9S hack into her systems, and recalibrate whatever had gotten misaligned…

9S.

She could still hear him crying out for her.
She swallowed her wounded pride. “042, extend hacking privileges to—”

Of course. She’d nearly forgotten that she and 9S were the only androids down here. She was so used to the people she met being made of the same material as her…

*I can’t reach him like this.*

*I can’t protect him.*

*I can’t be there for him.*

Going to bed at night knowing that 9S would still be alive in the morning… waking up in the morning and knowing that 9S would still be alive by the end of the day…

It had been so wonderful to live like that, at least for a little while. But now, 2B feared—

“Uh, h-hey, 042? I-Is there any way I can help out with 2B?” Alphys asked, rushing over to her side.

“Statement: this pod is capable of facilitating low-level access via a computer terminal. However, the odds of our operating systems being compatible with your technology is—”

“I-It’s all reverse-engineered from you guys’ junk, anyway! I know ‘cuz I engineered some of it!” Alphys shuffled ahead of the group. “There’s a terminal not far from here. U-Undyne, take 2B and follow me!”

“That’s our Alphys!” Undyne said, grinning as she wrapped her arm around 2B’s waist and hoisted her up. “Don’t worry, 2B. We’ll get you fixed up!”

2B shook her head. “Nines… every second we waste, he could be—”

“We’ve got to take care of you, too,” Undyne protested.

“No, you don’t!” 2B impotently dragged her feet as Undyne carried her along. All Undyne was doing by helping her was wasting precious time. Didn’t she understand that? It didn’t matter how many people came to 9S’s rescue if they came too late! “I’m not as important as him. After what I’ve done… If you knew, if you really understood, you’d leave me behind and put 9S first. It’s what he deserves. If—if I can’t be there for him, then you have to…”

No. She wouldn’t start thinking like that. She wouldn’t give in. Despair was prohibited. She was a soldier and she would fight to her last breath.

Her teeth ground against themselves, fingernails digging into her palm as the shame and sorrow filling her head transformed into anger. Those damned machines! No matter how bad YoRHa could be, those things were always so much worse.

From the very instant 2B had first come online, from her very first second, before her very first mission even, she’d had a singular purpose—to advance the banner of humankind, to take back the surface of the Earth in a glorious Reconquista. Her first duty was to mankind, and her whole life, she’d chosen those distant masters over everything else. Whenever forced to choose, she’d always chosen the orders of her commander and the faceless and disembodied voices piped into the Bunker from the lunar colony over the bright and smiling face she’d grown to know again and again and again—no matter how much it hurt.

No more.
Down here, 2B’s first and only duty was not to the faceless, distant gods of humanity. It was to *him*.

Because 9S was a part of her *family*.

2B was going to fight.

“Forget the recalibration, Alphys. I don’t need it.” She unwrapped her visor from around her hand and wrist, letting the cloth fall from her hand. She tried to make a fist, ignoring the tiny jolts of pain in her knuckle joints as she tried to curl her fingers, and didn’t stop until her protesting digits finally followed her commands.

“*Alert: attempting to utilize your right hand may result in further, irreparable damage,*” Pod 042 warned her.

2B ignored the pod and retied her visor, blinking furiously until her eyes adjusted to her HUD. She called forth the Virtuous Contract, her signature weapon materializing in her hand. Tightening her grip around its hilt was agony to what few unburned nerves remained in her hand, but she forced herself to acclimate to the pain—and over time it faded to a dull throb. In the other, unmarred hand, she held the Joyeuse. *Virtue* and *joy*. As if the universe itself were mocking her.

“You sure, 2B?” Undyne asked, concern lining her face. “Look, I know how personal this is to you, but you’re h—”

“If you’re that worried for my safety, you’re welcome to follow me.” 2B checked her radar. Deeper in the lab was a reasonably-strong black box signature, much to her relief, surrounded by a cluster of machine lifeforms, much to her dismay. “You try to keep up too, Alphys. You’ll be able to help if Nines is hurt. Pod 153 will look after you.”

“O-Okay.” Alphys nodded.

2B took the lead despite her condition, aiming herself for the cluster of machines and preparing to unleash as much fury on the unfortunate lifeforms that would cross her path as it would take to ensure that 9S would be safe.

---

The boxy, shiny body of the Underground’s greatest and only television star shone in the lights bathing the room, making his unmarred chassis seem to sparkle. In this light, he really *did* look like some sort of silver idol. A gaggle of stubbies followed in his footsteps, their grimy hulls crusted with sparkling glitter paint.

“Mettaton?” 9S looked up and spied Flowey clinging to the ceiling, vines trailing from his stem. “Flowey?”

Flowey waved a leaf and grinned. “Meased to pleet’cha, Nines!”

And machines, too—machines that seemed to cling to Mettaton’s every word. “What’s going on here?” 9S asked.

“Oh, it all started a few years ago, when I made the acquaintance of a couple of these machines,” Mettaton said with a lazy wave of his hand. “I’d just gotten this body and was practicing for a big
audition, and it seems these machines mistook me for one of their own!”

Well, *that* wasn’t surprising at all.

“They were enchanted by my magnificent vocal chops. Of course, many of their peers are mindless, violent wretches and frequently end up, uh, how do I say this, murdered and torn apart for scrap metal by the Royal Guard to protect our fair citizenry…” Mettaton spread out his arms. “So my poor mechanical fans here couldn’t come to any of my shows once I made it big!”

“*Are you for real?*” 9S asked, hardly believing his own ears.

“That’s why… I try to come down here and put on shows for them whenever I can!” The pattern of colors on Mettaton’s front lit up warmly. “These poor guys down here… they’re like family to me!”

“*Family?*” 9S struggled once more against Flowey’s bonds as the flower tsk-tsk-tsked at him from above. “You don’t know what these things are! They’re nothing but weapons!”

“Is that so?” Flowey asked. “How much do you *really* know about these automatons, pal?*

Hoping to use the opportunity to spread chaos and free himself, 9S hacked into one of Mettaton’s machine groupies but found far stronger firewalls blocking off the machine’s programming than he’d ever seen in such a low-grade enemy. He steeled himself, preparing to expend a little more effort than expected to free himself, only for Flowey to sting the back of his head with a lashing, whiplike vine, breaking his concentration.

“Ah-ah-ah. There’ll be none of *that*, friend-o,” Flowey said with a smile.

9S sighed. “*So,*” he said, “*What exactly am I doing here?*” He glanced up at Flowey. “*Why are you in cahoots with this little sociopath?*”

Mettaton paced in front of 9S, the machines following in his wake. They really did seem devoted to him. “I’ve had a dream for a long, long time. To have a body I felt comfortable in. Doctor Alphys made this lovely number for me, which I do adore… but lately, my needs have changed.”

The closer 2B came to the location of 9S’s black box signal, the heavier the machine presence became. She tore through them with reckless abandon, her swords shearing through their metal hides. They screamed about protecting their ‘silver idol.’

Whatever that was, 2B would kill it, too.

Undyne kept pace with her at first, her spear lancing through the machines as they attacked, guarding 2B’s blind spots as skillfully and dutifully as Pod 042 would. But even despite 2B’s degraded condition, Undyne soon fell behind.

One by one, the machines fell down, and as their mangled frames littered the ground, 2B moved on, pushing herself despite the aches running through her arms and legs, even as static crackles ran through her display, even when the floor threatened to sway beneath her.

*Don’t worry, Nines. I’m coming for you. I won’t let anything stop me or slow me down.*

“*As the Underground’s greatest and only celebrity, I have a lot of responsibility. Not only as an*
entertainer but as a role model! Children look up to me to promote certain values! I’m not… just a pretty face anymore. I need to stand for something. And as you can see,” Mettaton said, gesturing to the single swiveling wheel he balanced on, “I don’t have a leg to stand on.”

9S tried not to chuckle, reminding himself that he was in some sort of peril, although he knew not what. Not knowing made it weigh all the heavier on his mind. What ritual did this strange cult have in store for him? How was Flowey involved?

Mettaton scratched at where, if he had a face, his chin might have been. “I’ve been thinking. About the culture I live in. One where humans are despised and reviled. One where any human who enters is condemned to die at the hands of our king. But if I take a body that looks human, I can change our society! I can teach our children not to fear or hate humanity!” he exclaimed. “Then, when we emerge from this mountain, we’ll be able to live in peace! And I’ll be the star I’ve always dreamed of being! So what if a gorgeous boy has to, uh, die in order to achieve that dream? That’s show business, baby!”

“You want to take my body?” The words sounded insane as they left 9S’s mouth.

“Alphys was supposed to make me a lovely humanoid body,” said Mettaton, “but she’s been… uncooperative the past few years. She says she’s busy with ‘public works projects.’ Hmph. I know her work doesn’t take that long, and she spends the rest of her time watching cartoons and writing fanfiction about her crushes. And after all the favors I do for her.

“But then my new friend Flowey here told me all about you, and came up with a plan to get you down here for me! The surface must be even more fascinating than we imagined if even robots can look as human as you…”

This guy’s bonkers! 9S thought. But… I know his weakness better than anyone. “Hey, Mettaton,” he called out.

“Yes, my gorgeous boy?”

“Fuck off.”

2B pinned a machine to the wall with her boot, pressing with enough force that her heel punctured the bulky bipedal model’s hull and stuck there. The Joyeuse skewered its head, followed immediately by the Virtuous Contract. Mustering her strength, 2B tore both swords out in different directions, filleting the machine’s round head and spraying her with gouts of motor oil. Some of it landed on her lips, its taste oddly sweet.

As 2B tried to wrench her boot free of the machine’s hull, others crowded around her, a cobbled-together sword biting into her shin. A bolt of lightning caught the stubby machine in the head, throwing it backward; with Undyne providing support, 2B cut through the remaining machines.

As the hallway fell silent, Undyne rested her hands on her knees, panting, the gills on the sides of her neck flaring. “Geez, 2B, you’re… You just keep going, don’t you?”

“I have to.” 2B pulled ahead as one of the machines lying ahead of her—mangled, mutilated, and immobile—moaned. When she passed it, she flipped the Virtuous Contract to a reverse grip and staked it through the chest, dimming the lights in its optical sensors permanently.

“We’re getting close to the surveillance room,” Alphys pointed out as she caught up to Undyne, Pod 153 drifting above her like a guardian angel. “So… so Flowey’s behind this, too?”
2B didn’t want to think about how Flowey could have learned to control these machines. Neither did she want to think about what hellish thing he might want to do to 9S. She kept those questions from her mind as best she could, knowing that any answers her imagination could concoct would be so terrible they could only serve as distractions.

“Excuse me?” Mettaton cupped a hand to where his ear would have been as 9S’s expletive rang in the air. The machines around him gasped.

“I said, fuck off! As in get the fuck out of here!”

“Ah. Flowey warned me about you. Apparently, in another timeline, you got my show canceled using your foul mouth…” Mettaton wagged his finger. “But of course, this time I came prepared! The surveillance control room of any facility is always nothing more than an eye which can see everything but itself, and this one is no different! You won’t find anything recording us here!”

9S tried to loosen his bonds again, but in response, Flowey tightened his grip. This was bad. This was really bad. Dammit… 2B, 9S thought, his mind racing, where are you?

“So, how do I do this?” Mettaton asked Flowey. “Is there a button I press to eject his soul, or…”

Flowey crawled down from the ceiling, perching on 9S’s shoulder. His silky petals tickled 9S’s cheek. “All you have to do is take out the black box. Here, just like this…” The flower sent clammy tendrils down 9S’s collar, unbuttoning his coat and the shirt underneath, brushing against his skin, tracing the outlines of access panels on his chest.

Panic tore through 9S’s mind as he tried fruitlessly to break free, the vines digging even deeper into his wrists and ankles. This couldn’t be happening. He couldn’t be in this situation. 2B should be…

Flowey pulled the black box from 9S’s chest, holding it tantalizingly out of 9S’s reach (which was, of course, practically nil). Mettaton reached out and let his white glove brush against its surface, awestruck by its glittering surface. 9S’s breath grew short. “D-Don’t take that too far away,” he said, stammering. “I-It’s wireless, but if you take it out of range, I—I’ll lose power…”

“You know,” Flowey said, a sinister drawl stretching his vowels, “we really should perform a test soul transplant before we put your soul in there, Mettaton. You don’t want anything going wrong, do you?”

Mettaton drew back his hand. “Hmm? I—I suppose… But whose soul do you suggest?”

“Why not one of your fans?” Flowey asked. 9S couldn’t see the grin on his face, but he damn well could hear it.

2B pushed herself forward, breaking out into a sprint. Undyne’s protests as she ran after her began to fade away as the distance between the two of them decreased. Only Pod 042 kept the pace, laying down suppressing fire as the machines flanking 2B tried to overwhelm her.

The red blip on her radar marking 9S’s black box drew nearer. She was coming closer.

A circular hallway traced the perimeter of what must have been the surveillance control room, a gaggle of machine lifeforms plastered with silver glitter paint guarding its door. Flickering bars of fluorescent ceiling lights sparsely illuminated the ring.
On 2B’s command, Pod 042 fired a searing laser at the guards, tearing through their bodies with a blossom of flames and shower of sparks. The doorway was clear.

2B’s legs pumped, her muscles burning, the door to the control room inching closer. Almost there… Almost…

“Alert: Large-scale machine lifeform—”

A linked-sphere machine—the same one which had taken 9S—burst through the curved wall and barreled into 2B, knocking her off the floor and tearing the air from her lungs.

9S almost laughed. Flowey wanted to jam a machine core in his body? What kind of asinine plan was that? “That’s ridiculous!” 9S cried out. “M-Machines don’t even have souls! They’re mindless weapons! D-Don’t you dare put one of those things in me!” He writhed, trying to free himself, but the vines holding him in place only tightened, and Flowey dangled the black box just a little further away. 9S could feel beads of sweat dripping off the tip of his nose.

“Oh, Nines. What do you think black boxes are made of? Snips and snails and puppy dog tails?” Flowey laughed. “You see, while Doctor Alphys was doing her research on the so-called ‘human souls,’ she salvaged some classified data from the debris of a space station that had fallen to the surface and ended up down here with the rest of the garbage. It had some very interesting things to say about how you YoRHa types were made…”

At Mettaton’s reluctant command, one of his groupies popped open its chassis and produced an orb-like, slightly shiny device from within its guts, immediately powering itself down.

“Black boxes like what you and 2B have inside you…” Flowey giggled. “They were developed from the cores of these very machines you seem to hate so much!”

“No!” 9S kept struggling, trying desperately to free even one of his wrists from the vines binding him. “That’s not true! That’s impossible!”

“Search your feelings, Nines. You know it to be true.” Flowey wrapped a leafy vine around the machine core, carrying it from the machine’s dead hands, and brought it closer to the opened hatch in 9S’s chest.

2B slid across the spinning drill forming the linked-sphere machine’s beak, the ridges of the drill bit shredding part of her dress and biting into her skin as she scrabbled for one of the spheres making up the machine’s snakelike body. She gained purchase on a panel on one of the modular segments, hanging on as the machine flew laps through the circular hall, the wind rushing past her face.

The machine writhed and undulated, thrashing as it tried to throw 2B off. 2B gritted her teeth and held on tighter as the machine bashed her against the ceiling, one of the fluorescent panels shattering and flickering out as she smashed into it.

2B let go and conjured the Joyeuse to her right hand while her left hand still gripped the machine, aiming to stab one of its segments. All the while, bullets from Pod 042 roared in her ears, mingling with the rushing wind and the sound of her pulsing, circulating blood in her ears.

The machine whacked 2B against the wall, filling her visual display with snow as she lost her hold on the machine and fell off. She reached out and caught onto a spine sticking out from the underside
of one of the machine’s further-back segments, her boots skidding against the floor.

She stabbed the machine’s nearest segment and twisted the blade. A gout of machine oil poured out, the spray catching in the wind and showering 2B like a fine black mist. She sputtered as the metallic, sickly-sweet substance wormed its way past her lips and lost her hold on the machine, tumbling to the floor.

The machine sailed past her, its tail thrashing, and after a few seconds, 2B heard its screeching from behind her.

Gritting his teeth, 9S hacked into the monitors lining the circular walls. The programming was simple and easy to manipulate but offered him nothing he could use to save himself. He tore through it anyway, first connecting to the intercom system and using it to send a short message to 2B—all he had time to send. Then, one by one, the monitors began to explode, throwing out showers of sparks and curls of acrid smoke. Hopefully, these could cause a distraction—

A vine whacked him in the back of his neck, breaking his concentration and pulling him out of hacking space. He looked at the fruits of his efforts in dismay.  

*This is the best I can do, huh?*

As the orb drew nearer and nearer with slow, inexorable finality, 9S screamed. He couldn’t let this monster put that—that thing inside him! This damn flower… couldn’t Mettaton see he was being used? Had it even occurred to the foppish, fame-addled fool that Flowey was taking advantage of his resources for no other reason than to torture his newest playthings?

“What if it kills me?” he cried out. “Wh—What if it destroys my body? Mettaton! Are you just gonna let Flowey do this? What about the risks?” He hated to beg for his life, but here he was—not just begging for his life, but for his dignity, for the sanctity of his corpse! Begging for this floral abomination not to defile his body!

“2B, help! He’s going to tear out my—”

The rest of the transmission—in 9S’s voice—degenerated into incoherence as the cacophony of battle consumed the air.

2B ducked and rolled as the linked-sphere machine thrashed through the air, its wild convulsions blocking the whole hallway and gouging deep furrows in the floor, walls, and ceiling. The Joyeuse’s rainbow-hued blade cut through a line of spherical segments with all the ease of a magical sword, tearing an electronic howl from the giant machine.

The sword caught in the machine’s side and as 2B tightened her aching grip on the hilt, the machine carried her aloft once again. With the Virtuous Contract summoned to her right hand, 2B plunged the blade into the machine higher up on its length and began to haul herself up.

A throaty roar tore itself from 2B’s mouth as she sliced open one of the linked spheres and cut the machine in two. Both halves of the machine flew independently of each other, both spewing oil like black ichor as they writhed in what could only have been what a machine understood to be pain.
“Mettaton, you should stay back,” Flowey told his cohort. “Very back. We’ll probably have to observe 9S for, oh, about an hour or so?”

“A—An hour?” Mettaton protested, his faceplate flashing. “You’re not serious!”

“We need to make sure nothing goes wrong, he doesn’t go crazy and rejects the transplant… or something like that. You want to make sure it’ll work, right, Metty?”

The metal monster sighed. “I suppose… but no more than an hour!” he shouted, pointing an authoritative finger at Flowey before sidling behind one of the banks of monitors lining the walls. “I’ve got a stopwatch!”

The orb came closer. The surveillance room shuddered as if under siege. 2B… 9S thought, I know you’re out there… you’re close, I know it. Hurry up… not much farther now…

2B picked herself up off the torn-apart floor as smaller enemies began to close in on her as if they could smell her blood in the air. She was disoriented. The world spun around her as she whipped her head left and right. The hallway was a loop… but which direction would bring her to the door the fastest?

She picked a direction and prayed.

“Let me go! Please! Please, god, anyone! 2B! 2B, help me!” 9S howled as the machine core, hot to the touch and covered in an oily film, brushed against his skin, sending a paradoxical chill up his spine. Sobs tore themselves from his chest, hot tears flooding his cheeks. This was utter madness. The whole thing was absurd. This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be happening. “2B!” he cried out.

As 2B sprinted across the hall, ducking and weaving around machines she didn’t have time to fight as 042 blasted them into shrapnel, both halves of the linked-sphere machine screamed through the air behind her, converging on her. Their drills let out ear-piercing screeches while the grooved bits cut through the walls and tore off chunks of concrete.

“Why don’t you just… DIE ALREADY!” 2B shouted out, readying her blades, fury coursing through her body.

A flurry of lightning spears tore through the snakelike machines, arcs of lightning dancing across their bodies as they changed course and sailed overhead.

“2B! I’ll hold the machines off!” Undyne shouted, grabbing her by the wrist and all but throwing her across the hall.

2B stumbled before regaining her footing, glancing over her shoulder.

“Well?” Undyne snarled.

2B nodded and made a break for the door to the control room. More machines sprang up to block her path, their optical sensors glowing red.
2B will save me, 9S told himself, squeezing his eyes shut as if such an act could will time itself to stop. Bound like this, at Flowey's mercy, there was nothing he could do. 2B will save me. 2B will save me. 2B will save me. 2B will save me. 2B will save me. 2B will save me…

2B kept pushing her way past the machines. How were there so many of them? This silver idol, whatever it was… how did it have so much control over so many machines?

A forest of spears tore through the ground on either side of her, tearing a few stubbies to ribbons.

“I’ve got this!” Undyne shouted.

“How do you feel, 9S?”

9S blinked, unsure of how to answer. Feel? What did it feel?

“How do you feel when you think about… 2B?”

9S opened its mouth but did not respond. Memories flashed through its mind. Soft hands and soft hair. A cold, hard-edged voice. Comfort. Protection. Sister. Seeing these images, feeling these sensations, it was supposed to be… happy?

Why wasn’t it happy?

“I… don’t,” it answered.

“What about this thing called YoRHa?”

There was something there for the android to latch onto.

Hatred.

“And what about… YoRHa Unit 2 Type-E?”

After a long struggle—too long, thought 2B, worry eating at her mind—she made it past the machines. The door slid open and 2B stumbled through, blood from a dozen cuts dripping onto the floor as the door promptly slid shut behind her, closing her off from the horde of machines still gathered outside. A small group of stubbies pounced on her in an instant; she cut them all down in a matter of seconds.

2B caught her breath. The room was circular, just like the hallway that had surrounded it; banks of monitors lined the walls, displaying images from all around the lab. Many of the monitors were heavily damaged. A few of the monitors showed other environments within the mountain—Snowdin’s snowswept vistas, Waterfall’s gloomy waterways, and Hotland’s cracked plateaus and magma pools.

9S knelt in the center of the room, his back to 2B, his head bowed. He didn’t look hurt. Yet 2B
didn’t feel even the slightest bit relieved as she closed the distance between the two of them.

“Nines!”

9S slowly rose to his feet and glanced over his shoulder at 2B, opening his mouth as if he’d never done it before. “Two…”

“I’m here for you!” 2B’s lips curved in an exhausted smile. “Nines, are you—”

9S took a few halting steps toward her, and her smile vanished as 2B noticed the hollow, blank look on his face, the glassy sheen in his eyes. “2E… YoRHa… Bastards… I’ll kill you!”

Flowey poked his head out from behind a bank of monitors, his grin widening. “Do me a favor,” he addressed an unseen partner, “and block off the door, will you? This is gonna be fun…”

2B glanced over her shoulder and saw a blanket of crackling yellow lightning engulf the door she’d come through, blocking off her only exit. She tore her eyes from the sight and looked forward, still too shocked to ready her blades as 9S lunged toward her, his own sword already in his hand.

This couldn’t be happening.

Chapter End Notes

According to monster lore, a "soul" is what contains a monster's ability to feel love, kindness, and compassion. Human souls are assumed to work in the same way, although monsters do note that a human can still have a soul while lacking all of these things.

That's the reason why the only thing that makes Flowey happy is hurting people... and 2B and 9S are about to learn that the hard way.
Chapter Summary

Flowey goads 2B and 9S into a battle to the death.

Chapter Notes

(musical accompaniment)

Again, this is a heavy chapter, so please go and read this if you need something cute. This is probably the last time in the near future I'll plug that fic in here, but I can't make any promises.

For an instant, 2B felt numb.

Her hand rose by instinct even as her mind had gone blank with shock, blocking a lunging strike from 9S. As the two blades locked together, the pain racking 2B’s body began to pulse and throb, the surveillance room around her beginning to swim and swirl before her eyes.

The two fighters disengaged, both stepping back. 9S had a white-knuckled grip on the hilt of his sword despite his injuries; his jaw was clenched in a pained, yet determined grimace; 2B could see the whites of his eyes even at a distance.

What’s wrong with him? 2B couldn’t see any obvious outward symptoms of a logic virus—but his behavior matched the advanced stages of an infection to a tee.

9S attacked again; 2B caught his blade between both of her swords and ripped it from his hands, sending the coppery-bronze katana sailing through the air.

This would be the part where 2B seized her chance to cut her enemy to pieces—

No! 9S is not my enemy—no matter what he thinks!

Her hesitation gave 9S an opportunity to attack once more, his sword returning immediately to his hand. Still off her game, 2B was slow to parry—but as the blade came near her an energy shield sprang up, taking the brunt of the blow and dissipating.

2B didn’t have time to thank Pod 042 for the assist, because as soon as the shield faded away, 9S’s fist collided with her face.

There wasn’t much force behind the punch. 9S wasn’t as strong as 2B, not by a long shot. But he was lighter, smaller, more agile, and, by necessity, not always quite as direct in his approach. And the ultimate advantage he had over her, of course, was that 2B didn’t want to hurt him.

9S’s foot collided with 2B’s chest while she was still distracted. Tossing her swords aside, 2B
grabbed onto the boot planted on her chest, lifted it, and with a twist of her arms threw 9S off-balance. He recovered, crouching low to the floor, and with a sweeping kick knocked 2B off her feet.

2B hit the floor, and as she struggled to her feet, feeling the toll of her battles catching up with her, 9S grabbed his sword with a reverse grip and plunged it into the floor, impaling the tattered remains of 2B’s dress. She pulled herself free, leaving another ragged tear in her skirt.

“Looks like he hated you all along, 2B!” Flowey cackled. “All this violent, homicidal rage against his murderer just waiting to be brought to the surface…”

“9S… It’s me!” 2B shouted, hoping her words could restore some sense of reason to him. The two of them grappled with each other, 2B surprised at the raw strength 9S was able to muster, but still easily overpowering him and throwing him over her shoulder. With 9S on the floor, 2B pounced on top of him and pinned him down, digging her knee into his abdomen and pushing the air from his lungs. “Stop this! It’s me, 2B—and you’re Nines! My Nines!”

In response, 9S spat in her face, but 2B pressed down harder. The rage twisting his face was straight out of her nightmare—his teeth bared and gritted, his jaw clenched. But she wouldn’t let those irrational fantasies plague her. 9S was not himself right now. He couldn’t be. Flowey must have done something to him.

The question was what… and how she could fix him once she subdued him.

If she could fix him.

9S’s open hand was riddled with fresh scar tissue and yellowing blisters, many of them popped and oozing clear liquid from the friction his sword had exerted; 2B brought her fist down on it, hoping the pain could incapacitate him. The pain didn’t even register on 9S’s face, though, and as he struggled he cracked his forehead against 2B’s, forcing her to reel back as the world spun around her.

“You Nines?” 9S pulled himself to his feet, coughing. “Give me a break!” he snarled, lunging at her and swinging his sword.

Flowey cackled. “Think about how long he had to hide his true feelings from you! Think of how long he kept up the charade… that he was your sweet, pure, innocent baby brother!”

“What did you do to him?” 2B shouted at Flowey as she regained her footing, parrying 9S’s strike.

“You really want to know?” Flowey asked.

9S struck and retreated, darting around the room, putting his smaller size, lighter frame, and more agile body to good use as he chipped away at 2B. She fended off his attacks with growing fatigue as Pod 042 laid down suppressing fire, her reaction times growing longer millisecond by precious millisecond.

Her struggle to get this far past the hordes of machines had drained enough of her strength already; even now, she was intentionally hobbling herself to avoid causing undue harm to 9S. Physically, this battle was taking its toll—but exponentially more than that, it was wearing on her psychologically. How easy would it be for her to accidentally—instinctively—run him through the next time he attacked her? The longer this dragged on, how much harder would she need to try in order to keep herself from giving into her combat instincts? In this condition, in these circumstances, how much longer could she keep this up?
“Fine! I’ll explain everything!” Flowey shouted out, relishing the sight of the battle unfolding before him. “Here’s the deal: I made the poor little boy just like me!”

9S lunged for her, his blade whistling through the air. Again 2B threw aside her blade and dodged the strike, locking her arm around 9S’s sword arm and bringing her kneecap up into his elbow. There was a sickening crack as 9S’s elbow joint reversed itself—the poor boy screamed.

Please, 9S, when you’re back to normal, I hope you’ll forgive me. I don’t want to hurt you. 2B released 9S and pushed him against a row of computer consoles; he fell backward over them.

2B leaned against the bank of monitors blanketing the wall behind her, catching her breath. It came out of her mouth almost scalding hot; her lungs were working double-duty to draw the heat from her internal organs.

Flowey kept laughing. “Your sweet, darling little brother… That’s right! He’s a soulless abomination now!”

9S rose to his feet, swaying a little as he cradled his broken arm—there were tears of pain welling up in his eyes. “How… dare you…”

“A soulless, wretched automaton… the darkness in his heart made manifest!” Flowey giggled. “If only Chara were here—you two could commiserate, 2B! So alike in so many ways! Now, will 9S kill you at last? Or will you fall to your old habits? I can’t wait to find out!”

“9S, stop.” 2B held up her hands, palms-out, letting her swords hang at her back. “I don’t want to hurt you…”

9S let his broken arm dangle at his side. “But it comes so e-easily, doesn’t it, 2E?” he grunted, his mouth split open halfway between a grin and a grimace as he raised his left arm with furious purpose.

“He’s going to try and hack me.

“No!” 2B cried out. Type-E’s were all outfitted with special anti-hacking programs uniquely coded to their assigned targets; if 9S tried delving any deeper into her systems than his normal maintenance duties permitted, the feedback would destroy his personality data and kill him in a matter of seconds. “Nines, if you hack into me, it’ll trigger a failsafe—”

The monitors behind 2B exploded, filling the air around her with amber sparks and pelting her back with shattered glass. The force alone of the explosion knocked her forward, the shower of sparks occluding her vision.

2B fell to the floor, and before she could pull herself up, 9S slammed his boot onto her injured hand, sending screeching pulses of agony up her arm. Her vision blurred and doubled, speckled with dead pixels and plagued with chromatic aberrations as the world began to flicker into grayscale.

“I’m hurt, 2E. I thought you knew me better than that,” 9S sneered. “You really didn’t think I figured you’d have something to keep me out of your head?”

Pod 042 fired at 9S’s feet in short, sporadic bursts, forcing him to make a hasty retreat, a salvo of bullets chewing the hem of his coat and peppering his leg.

“Pod! No… no lethal force!” 2B reprimanded the support unit, her joints creaking and whirring in protest as she pulled herself to her feet and leaned atop a ruined computer terminal. Her hand throbbed with such great pain that she couldn’t feel her fingers.
“Statement: Unit 9S is dangerously unstable and represents an immediate existential threat to Unit 2B. Termination recommended.” Pod 042 fired a searing laser burst, driving 9S further backward as the blast cut a blackened furrow in the floor.

“No!” 2B barked, clasping her wrist as if she could use her other hand as a tourniquet to cut off the flow of pain. The seared and cracked flesh on her palm had started to ooze blood. “I order you… not to harm him!”

“2E…” 9S caught his breath. “You… You think you’re fooling anyone?”

The lights in the room all went out at once, plunging the two androids into darkness, save for the sparks from damaged computers and monitors. 042 turned on its floodlights, casting writhing shadows across the control room. But in the split second of darkness, 9S had already taken the initiative and hid.

As 2B and her pod whirled around, disoriented, 9S leaped at her from behind, his sword flashing as it caught the light. He cut down what little remained of 2B’s skirt, leaving another bloody gash in 2B’s thigh as well; 2B grabbed his dangling broken arm and pulled on it until she felt his shoulder pop.

If I have to wreck every limb in your body, 9S, I’ll do it, 2B vowed silently. But I won’t kill you ever again.

9S screamed and dropped his sword, and as the ceiling lights flickered back on again 2B grabbed him by the collar of his jacket. What she was about to do would cause him immense pain, worse than what she’d done to his remaining arm—but, hopefully, it would incapacitate him long enough for her—or somebody—to get 9S his soul back.

With a one-handed grip, 2B lifted 9S off the floor, hurled him over her head, and brought him down on the terminal face-first, shattering the quaint LCD monitor in a shower of sparks. 2B let go, the muscles in her arm tender and raw, and 9S fell limply to the floor, a myriad of cuts and gashes marring his soft face, bloodstains reddening his hair.

2B didn’t know how long 9S would be out for, but she hoped it would be enough for her to make things right. She turned around and glared at Flowey as he perched atop one of the many monitors blanketing the walls. “His soul… How did you take his…"

Flowey withdrew a tendril from behind a bank of monitors and pulled out a glittering black cube. “Oh, why, it’s right here. Funny, how the one thing that lets us all feel warm and fuzzy things like love, kindness, and compassion can anchor itself to such a drab little box…”

His black box? 2B glanced at 9S. His open coat and shirt revealed his bare chest, the skin pale in contrast to his ornate black coat. If Flowey had pulled his black box, then what was powering him?

“But alas, without it, your dear Nines can only feel fear, anger, and hate. How wonderful it is to have him look back on all those times you two shared and feel nothing for you! The only emotion he remembers is the sheer rage he felt toward YoRHa… and you, 2E, are the only thing he can take that rage out on!” Flowey’s grin stretched wider. “Now, when I destroy this stupid little box, the 9S you knew will be gone forever!”

“Flowey!” 2B’s sword tore through the bank of monitors he was perched upon, forcing him to make a hasty retreat. She put the full force of her rage behind that strike, tearing the monitors apart and showering herself with sparks and shattered glass. “Pod 042, target and fire on Flowey!”
“Negative. Course of action inadvisable. Due to the entity’s small size and mass, there is a significant risk any long-range attack would damage Unit 9S’s black box instead.”

“Oh, wait. You can get your precious Nines back easily!” Flowey called out as he scurried along the walls, hidden by the remaining banks of monitors. “All you have to do is reset… and undo all the progress you’ve made! After all, you did it for Toriel… why not do it for him? Unless you don’t really care…”

“I’ll kill you!” 2B roared, tearing the room apart in her search for Flowey. Monitors flickered and filled with white noise in their final seconds as 2B cut them apart. “I’ll—”

The elements of her HUD spasmed wildly, fluttering across her vision, the corruption so intense that it assaulted her eyes almost like a physical force.

I’m being hacked? By whom? She tried to glance over her shoulder through the visual distortion. It couldn’t have been 9S… could it?

Overwhelming patterns of flashing, undulating black and white strobe lights filled her display, so offensive to her eyes it felt like hot knives had been plunged through her eye sockets and into her brain, and she instinctively tore the visor away and threw it to the floor. The pain lingered, though, and as it forced her to her knees 2B felt 9S’s burned and blistered hand grab her by the back of her head.

“Thanks for telling me about your anti-hacking measures,” 9S growled. “I decided to go after your visor instead.”

“Nines, I—”

9S slammed her headfirst into the cold, tiled floor, digging his knee into the small of her back; then he picked her back up, his fingers pressing against her scalp like a vise. Blood flooded her nostrils and poured down her chin; through her glitching and scrambled display she saw that same blood drip and splatter on the tiles.

“Nines—”

9S cracked her forehead against the tiles again. There was a growing spiderweb crisscrossing the tiles, obscured by the blossoming pool of blood.

“Alert: Unit 2B is in great physical danger. Proposal: give verbal authorization for lethal force to be used against Unit 9S on account of—”

“No!” 2B shouted. “Don’t hurt him. 9S, please, try to remember—”

The haze of pain and visual snow clouded 2B’s mind. She barely even noticed her face slam against the floor a third time, so great was the pain already.

“I-Last night,” she moaned. “You were curled up next to me when you fell asleep… Tell me… do you remember… h-how you felt… when you said I—I was like a sister to you…”

“Of course not,” Flowey chirped. “There’s a big hole in his heart, and the only thing that’s filling it is hatred!”

But 9S paused as if for a second, something had clicked.

2B braced her arms against the floor, locking her elbows, ignoring the pain in her injured hand and
the screaming in the joints of her injured fingers as she pushed them to their limit. Shaking off whatever had stirred his heart, 9S tried to thrust her head into the floor again, but the strength of her arms was greater than the strength of his. As 2B struggled, Flowey danced ahead of her and dangled 9S’s disembodied black box like a prize far out of reach, laughing all the while.

*It has to be this way.*

2B rolled over, pushing 9S off her and throwing him to the floor. Before he could get up, she hauled herself on top of him, driving her fist right into his throat with a quick jab. As his angry roars were reduced to gurgles, 2B reached for his chest, ignoring his fingers as they scratched at her face.

*I’m so, so sorry, Nines. Please forgive—*

2B cracked open his chest, ready to reach in and pluck out whatever makeshift battery was somehow powering him in lieu of his black box.

And then she saw it. A hideous, oil-slicked orb nestled just below his sternum, an ugly piece of foreign technology marring 9S’s delicate internals. She all but gagged at the sight of the sacrilege.

*A machine core.*

*He put a machine core in 9S’s chest.*

*FLOWEY SHOVED A MACHINE CORE INTO NINES!*

2B fought the urge to retch seeing the perversion marring his body. Her dearest friend and only family corrupted, made into a sickening hybrid of himself and the very things he’d been born to fight against… A disgusting mockery of both machine and android…

Before 9S could even think of tearing himself free of 2B, she ripped the machine core out of him, clutching the abominable heart in her fingers so tightly that it shattered in her grip, lacerating her hand. Her breath hissed through teeth gritted so tightly she felt they might crack as violently as the core had.

9S’s death was immediate. His eyes rolled up, the color fading from his irises, and every part of him stiffened before he went limp.

And when the anger flooded from her system, 2B was left feeling empty, just as she had been so many times before.

And then it began.

The gut-wrenching pit in her stomach, the hollow forming in her chest as her throat squeezed itself shut, the spasms wracking her shoulders and forcing her chest to heave.

And then the sobbing, each anguished heave torn from her throat unbidden, wrenching themselves free outside her control.

*Why... does it always end this way?*

The first time 2E had received her orders, she had been confident.

Every other Type-E said it was hard. That the first time you killed your partner would be the hardest thing you’d ever done. That it wouldn’t get any easier—maybe the physical action would get easier, but it would never stop hurting inside.
It had to be a lie, a cruel joke meant to scare newer models. After all, why would Type-E’s, models designed to execute other models, be designed with such an obvious flaw?

That confidence—the refrain of “it won’t happen to me” and “I’m not like the others” running through 2E’s mind—vanished as she watched the brilliant ice-blue color vanish from 9S’s eyes.

As blood trickled from the boy’s mouth, he used the last of his strength to look up at her, his grayed-out eyes as the final light of life faded from his body staring wide, helplessly, confused, and even accusingly—or was 2E just imagining that?

2E’s fingers trembled. Her mouth went dry. Her stomach twisted itself into knots. “N-Nines, I…”

*You know, uh, 2B… people who know me well call me ‘Nines.’*

*How about it? We’re gonna be partners, after all.*

*R-Really? Aw, 2B…*

If there was supposed to be a switch that flipped, a subroutine in her programming that would block off the anguish welling up inside her, 2E couldn’t find it.

Memories of her all-too-brief time with 9S circled her like vultures waiting for her to die. The ear-to-ear smile on his face when he pulled a fish nearly as large as himself from the river, and his ensuing panic as he clumsily tried to stop it from flopping back into the water. Finding old books, remnants of human civilization, and being all-too-eager to read passages aloud to 2E. His goofy grin when she laughed at something he said.

In spite of her best intentions at first, they’d talked together, laughed together, even sometimes cried together…

She tried to remember her training.

*Emotions are prohibited.*

As she sank to her knees and wept, 2E realized that nothing in her programming would save her from this anguish. It was up to her to remain detached, to stay aloof, to brush off whatever her target said or did with a cold shoulder. It was her responsibility as an Executioner—not something she could simply delegate to a third party—to deny her friendship with 9S.

Surely the next 9S would be hurt. Surely he would feel slighted, perhaps even dejected that his assigned partner cared so little about him that she couldn’t even spare him the time of day. But 9S would never know what 2E would be shielding him from when she kept herself at such a great distance. It would be better this way for both of them.

Next time, 2E vowed, she wouldn’t feel anything.

But…

She would be wrong.

She would always be wrong, no matter how much of herself she repressed. Over time, as the corpses piled up, she didn’t even realize how much of herself she’d lost until it
2B sobbed and wailed, holding 9S’s lifeless body close in one final embrace, as she’d done so many times.

“Give him back,” she sobbed. “Give him back his soul…”

Flowey grinned, brandishing the black box, holding it in front of himself like a holy talisman. “Give him back? C’mon. Don’t’cha wanna take it from me?”

2B set 9S down and scrabbled to her feet, heels clacking against the cracked and ruined floor. “You son of a—”

Searing, burning pain tore through her throat as if lumps of molten iron were tunneling their way through her neck, and as 2B lost her footing she found herself frozen like some force field was holding her back. Rings of glowing white orbs floated around one of her wrists like a bracelet, hovering mere millimeters above her skin. Two more rings circled her ankles; another wrapped around her waist. 2B could only assume there was another circling her throat like a necklace of pearls.

As the rings tightened, 2B felt the same white-hot agony burn its way through her flesh. Her visual display went monochrome, colors bleeding on the edges, a low beeping assaulting her ears. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Pod 042 imprisoned as well, pellets tightly orbiting the support unit like satellites, before the pain pulled her vision into a quickly-narrowing black tunnel.

The orbs pulled away, reducing the waves of pain to throbbing ripples. 2B sucked down and expelled lungfuls of air as color began to return to her world and the void pulled away.

“Did’cha forget about my friendliness pellets, Tooobie?” Flowey drawled.

2B swiped with her free hand at Flowey as he danced just out of reach, straining her shoulder as if she could will her fingertips to reach just a few centimeters farther. She couldn’t reach the black box. She couldn’t…

The despair hurt worse than any physical pain—like her own black box was trying to rip itself apart. So close and yet so far… just barely within her grasp… 9S’s black box, the receptacle for his soul, was right there, yet it might as well have been hundreds of kilometers away.

“Maybe I’ll keep this with me as a memento.” Flowey held the cube in his vines, letting them curl around its edges. “Maybe I’ll tear it in two right here in front of you.” He lifted it high above his head. “Or maybe I’ll throw it to the ground! Will it bounce like a rubber ball? Or will it shatter into a million pieces?”

2B screamed at him, not even bothering with words anymore.

Flowey’s smiling face morphed into a wicked, grinning death’s-head. “Let’s find ou—”

“I think not!”

The box was gone, snatched up by a white-gloved hand. Mettaton’s face lit up in patterns of warm colors as he held the black box between his forefinger and thumb, chuckling.

“What? I-I didn’t tell you to—” Flowey fired a spray of pellets at the mechanical monster, only for them to splash harmlessly off an electric barrier that instantly sprang up between the two of them.
Mettaton laughed. “You should have watched my show, my fuming floral friend! Or, should I say, ‘fiend?’ Then you’d know… that the most popular part of my act is when I take the perfect opportunity to crush heel-turning villains like you!”

“H-How dare you betray me!” Flowey snarled, backing away. As he lost his concentration, the pellets holding 2B aloft and keeping 042 from moving vanished. 2B hit the ground, too stunned to move at first, coughing as the impact sent a jolt through her shoulder.

“Betray you? It is you, you aphid-eaten weed, who have betrayed me!” Mettaton snarled at Flowey as the deranged plant fired a volley of pellets uselessly at Mettaton’s shield. “You used me… my noble aspirations… my adoring fans of mechanical persuasion… all simply to torment these two! Your treachery is beyond the most cromulent of words! I may not have an audience here, but I will…”

“Pod,” 2B growled, mustering what little strength she had left, “I think you know what to do.”

“Affirmative.”

Flowey turned around at the sound of Pod 042’s voice, his eyes widening in the split second of silence between the pod’s single spoken word and the deafening roar of gunfire.

Bullets tore through the air, splashing against Mettaton’s shield, riddling the floor and walls, tearing through what remained of the electronics littered throughout the room as Flowey scurried away.

The demonic flower made a mad dash for a pile of torn-apart and smoking electronics resting against the wall, the spray of projectiles hot on his tail; he leaped—

Charred plastic, glass, and electronic components reduced to ragged and unrecognizable debris by the pod’s firepower flew through the air—and a shower of green leaves and golden petals burned black.

“Life signs,” announced the pod, “no longer detected.”

The room fell silent. 2B watched motes of ash and charred bits of plant matter drift to the floor with a slow, quiet finality.

Mettaton leaned over, letting the black box rest in his open palm. “I believe this belongs to your brother, m’lady—”

Infuriated at the vile machine, at how he could have gone along with this whole ordeal only to swoop in to play the hero at the last second, 2B greedily swiped the black box from him; it began to whirl in her hand. As she brought it within range of 9S’s lifeless body she saw the color already start to return to his cheeks. In the silence, she could even hear the subtle sound of his internal mechanisms beginning to resume function. With trembling hands she placed the box in its proper location, slotting it in and closing up 9S’s chest.

The seconds which followed seemed to last for minutes. In each of the unfathomable pauses between the silent ticks of an intangible clock, 2B felt her hopes sink further into to the pit forming in her stomach as 9S’s eyes remained a pale, stony, sightless gray.

And then 9S’s chest began to rise and fall with a slow and steady rhythm. With a small, weak moan he closed his eyes.

“9S?”
9S turned his head, his eyes still shut.

“Nines?”

“Ahem.” Mettaton cleared his nonexistent throat. “A ‘thank you’ would be nice…”

2B shot him a withering glare. “You. If you ever come near me or 9S again, I will prove to you that there are fates worse than death.”

As Mettaton stood there, processing the threat, 2B wrapped her arms around 9S and hugged him, pressing her cheek against his. His skin was still cold, but she could feel it growing warmer by the second. She wanted to tell him, *I’m sorry, Nines, I tried to get here as quickly as I could*, but the words stuck in her throat.

The door to the control room burst open, and with a mighty scream, Undyne leaped in, covered in grease, oil, and other fluids. “Don’t worry, guys! I’m here to—Oh, hey, you’re all right!” She paused, then gasped in horror. “Oh, shit, you’re hurt!”

Undyne rushed to 2B’s side and crouched down. “Oh, hi, Mettaton,” she added, sparing only a second to glance at him before devoting her attention to 9S. “Is he gonna be okay, 2B?”

2B looked down at 9S, at the cuts and burns marring his skin, the blossoms of scarlet blood staining his snowy hair, the torn-open and weeping blisters marring his palms… The lacquer coating his fingernails (once he’d realized that nothing could convince Undyne *not* to paint his nails, he’d requested a pale aquamarine color) was already chipped.

As 2B embraced him she felt the soft, tender bruises on his skin beneath his coat and nearly began to cry. *She’d done this to him. The mangled arm dangling at his side with its elbow bent in the wrong direction was her handiwork.*

Pod 042 leaned in to observe him. “Analysis: Unit 9S appears to have placed himself in low-power mode. It is likely that his internal systems are undergoing intensive diagnostics in light of the replacement of his black box with a foreign object.”

Alphys barged in next, Pod 153 still hovering over her head. “Guys, is there anything I can—Mettaton, wh-what are you doing here?”

With a start, Undyne noticed that Mettaton was, in fact, here. “Wait, Mettaton? What are you doing here?”

“Oh!” Mettaton placed his hands on his “hips.” “I heard a gorgeous young man scream for help and being the hero that I am—”

2B cut him off, not the least bit eager to let this machine hog any glory whatsoever. “He was allied with that flower—until the two of them betrayed each other.”

Alphys took a step backward, swallowing hard. “M—Mettaton, you were…”

“I don’t know what she’s talking about! Why, don’t even know what a ‘Flowey’ is!” Mettaton looked at his wrist. “Oh, would you look at the time. I’ve got a rehearsal in about five minutes ago. Toodles, sorry I can’t stay and sign autographs, hope to see you all at the concert tomorrow—”

“Wait,” Undyne growled, rising to her full height and towering over Mettaton. “We never said his name was ‘Flowey.’”
Mettaton sighed. “Oh, all right. I admit it. I was working with Flowey. But only because he tricked me! I’m just as much of a victim here as everyone else!”

“Bullshit.” 2B struggled to rise to her knees. Silver Idol… What name could be more fitting for a vain, pompous, narcissistic machine? “Those machines followed your orders… didn’t they? It’s your fault…”

The waves of machines that had thrown themselves on 2B’s swords, every wall of metal that sprang up to block her path…

Him.

She drew her sword and propelled herself at Mettaton, stumbling unsteadily on weary legs. “It’s your fault,” she snarled, “I took so long!”

Mettaton sidestepped the swinging blade and 2B hit the floor. Before she could bark any orders to her pod, everything went black.

▫▫▫

9S woke up in a monochrome wasteland, a perfectly-straight gray path surrounded by a white void stretching in front of him. Black and white monoliths hung in the air around him in regular, neat, orderly rows.

Hacking space inside his own mind.

His body must have been conducting an automatic diagnostic. The least he could do, he decided, was do some poking around on his own and speed the process along. He tended to the floating monoliths one by one, adjusting parameters here and there, cleaning up the occasional spot of corruption. The majority of the corrupted data he discovered surrounded his memories from the point at which he’d had the machine core placed in his chest onward, the distortion making his recollection of his fight with 2B even more nauseating.

As he scrubbed away the corruption, bringing the words he’d said into higher fidelity and the sight of 2B’s injuries into greater resolution, 9S almost felt like vomiting, even though, of course, as a projection into his own headspace, there was nothing for him to expel. He wanted to leave these memories where they lay and let the corruption overtake them permanently—but that would be poor maintenance. And of course, the corruption could spread to memories he wanted to keep, like weeds in a garden, and grow into a full-blown logic virus…

As 9S scrubbed away in mindless tedium, his thoughts wandered to Flowey.

Soulless. When 9S had had the machine core in his body, he’d felt such an emptiness inside him that he hadn’t been sure he’d even existed. At first, he’d only barely even thought of himself as a person. He could still remember the numbness he’d felt reflecting on memories that should have made him happy.

It was all too easy to say he hadn’t been himself, or even that Flowey had been controlling him. Easy—but wrong. The truth was that 9S had been in total control of all his actions the whole time—his motives had merely been twisted by his numbness and by Flowey’s skillful manipulation of what few emotions he had left.

He had chosen to attack 2B with such ferocity, had chosen to be so cruel and sadistic, for the exact same reason he’d chosen to make those threats to 6E so long ago. He could say that he’d acted without thinking, that he’d let his emotions get the best of him—but he had acted nonetheless. The
mere acknowledgment sent a shiver up his spine, but he couldn’t shrink away from it.

If *those* were the decisions 9S had freely made without a soul to guide him… it was no wonder Flowey had turned out the way he was. How many years had he spent looking through his memories of his previous life, seeing himself as Asriel, recalling his parents and his adoptive sibling, reminiscing about the people he had loved so much, only to feel *nothing*? How long had he spent unable to do anything but hate, unable to derive joy from anything but the suffering of others?

9S almost felt *pity* for that wretched creature. To have such a strong will to live, but to find no joy in living…

*2B… she saved me from that fate.*

*She was always there to protect me. From machines, from my own carelessness, from everything else… Knowing what she had to do, she still did everything she could to keep me alive. My life was always the most precious thing in the world to her, even though she knew she’d have to snuff it out.*

*And she protected me from this, too. No matter how much I tried to hurt her.*

*I love her so much,* 9S thought.

He smiled, feeling a familiar ache in his chest that told him he was back to normal—or at least as normal as he could be, all things considered.

One other thing still bothered him, though. Before 2B had ripped out the machine core, 9S had felt something inside him snap, freezing him in his tracks when 2B had been at her most vulnerable. A pang of… something he shouldn’t have been able to feel.

Had that twinge of nostalgia perhaps come from the machine lifeform he’d been unwillingly hybridized with? Had the machine core somehow called out to him?

Did even machine lifeforms have souls? And had *this* one’s soul made a feeble attempt on its own to fill 9S’s void?

Chapter End Notes

*(comedy music option)*

*(i’m so, so sorry)*
Chapter Summary

After an exhausting morning at the airport, 2B and 9S head to baggage claim, and Route D reaches its conclusion.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for over 3,000 hits, and so many comments, bookmarks, subscriptions, and kudos, too! I'm honestly blown away that this fic has so many dedicated readers, especially ones as willing to leave comments as you. Every time I publish a chapter, you all bring so much brightness to my day.

The rain was relentless, falling in torrential sheets so thick that anybody caught out in it could barely see past their own nose. The cracked and overgrown streets outside had become canals, water bubbling up from the sewers. Thunder rumbled and cracked, bolts of lightning illuminating the gloomy skies for brief instants before plunging the world once more into darkness.

2B and 9S had taken shelter in one of the many abandoned buildings littering what was left of the city. The first floor was flooded, the basement utterly submerged, and many of the rooms had cracked and leaking ceilings, but the two of them had found a cozy, dry room tucked away to wait out the storm.

“Hey, 2B.” 9S had his nose buried in a thick, dusty book as he sat, curled up in the corner of the room, his pod playing the role of a lamp for him. His coat, sodden and dripping, hung from the pod’s claws, his boots drying in another corner of the room. “This book is really weird. Wanna hear some stuff from it?”

“Is it related at all to our mission?” 2B asked, stripping away her own sodden garments.

9S scoffed. “Um, of course not.”

“Hmm.” 2B stared out the window as rain pelted it, mentally connecting the dots between the droplets of rain running down the glass. Only a few indistinct shapes of crumbling buildings and gnarled, gargantuan trees could be seen through the rain-pattered glass and the thick fog. She reluctantly reviewed the message on her HUD, re-reading it for what felt like the hundredth time:

Note that this transmission is classified Level-S Confidential, and is not to be disclosed to any persons affiliated with YoRHa aside from the Commander.

9S yawned. “Hey, it’s not like we can do anything right now, right? Might as well take any downtime we can get, y’know?”
2B kept reading.

Breach of SS-level classified material confirmed. Forensic artifacts are an exact match for the GUID belonging to YoRHa No. 9 Type-S.

Terminate at earliest possible convenience.

“Hey? Earth to 2B?” 9S called out.

2B took a shallow, shuddering breath and tried to quell her anxiety. She kept her eyes trained on the window, unable to meet her partner’s gaze. “What is it?”

“I wanted to share this poem with you. It’s kinda neat.”

“Oh. Go ahead.”

With a smile, 9S cleared his throat and began to read.

*If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,*

*My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,*

*The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.*

“What does that last line mean?” 2B asked.

“Statement: the language is a long-lost human tongue. Translation: ‘It is sweet and right,’” her pod responded, “‘to die for your country.’”

Those words lingered in 2B’s head long after she’d disposed of 9S’s corpse.

Water from the showerhead poured down on 2B in a thick, steamy torrent, pounding her sore skin and massaging her aching muscles. She couldn’t help but find herself reminded of that summer storm long ago—had it been her second time killing 9S? Her third? Fifth, seventh, twelfth? She couldn’t recall anymore—which had soaked the two of them to the bone before they’d found shelter.

2B didn’t bother standing, her legs still weak from her ordeal. It had taken everything she’d had simply to stand up long enough to bend the showerhead to the right position. Instead, she’d curled into a ball in the corner and let the hot water bombard her from afar. Her sodden hair clung to her cheeks and neck, plastered to her skin. The only part of her that wasn’t soaked was her burned right hand (now completely immobile—she couldn’t even twitch her fingers anymore), for which Alphys had procured some waterproof bandaging once she’d led everyone out of the abandoned lab.

It had been hours. 9S hadn’t woken up yet, although the pods confirmed that his vitals were stable. 2B shouldn’t have been surprised or worried by his long sleep—internal diagnostics could take a long time, and when an android had gone through an experience as traumatic as what 9S had
suffered (2B wondered if any other android ever had), a full data overhaul was the best course of action. It could take the better part of a day. Perhaps even longer.

The longer 9S remained comatose, though, the more 2B worried. Would he remember everything he’d gone through? Would he remember 2B snapping his arm like a twig, tearing his chest open, ripping his heart out? Would he remember the pain he’d inflicted on her? Would he remember the overwhelming hatred he’d been forced to feel?

Would these memories break him? Would 9S be traumatized for the rest of his life? Would he ever look at 2B the same way again after she’d failed to protect him, failed to save him, failed to subdue him? Would he remember the hate he’d felt but not the love?

Would 2B be better off throwing herself into the rivers of molten rock rather than living with the knowledge she had allowed 9S to become irrevocably—

She shook her head, trying to take a breath deep enough to purge the ache from deep within her chest, forcing the intrusive thought from her mind.

The water pouring down on 2B was clear, but as it ran off her skin and circled the shower stall’s drain, it turned gray, black tendrils of grime and oil twisting around scarlet tendrils of blood. She felt as though her body was polluting the very water meant to cleanse her. But eventually, the water circling the drain began to run clear and pure. 2B reached for a bar of soap, scrubbed the most persistent stains from her skin—the soap stung her wounds—and finally turned off the water.

2B gingerly stood up, reaching up and grabbing onto the shower curtain rod to keep herself upright. The air was thick and humid, the bathroom mirror fogged up to the point of opaqueness. The tattered remnants of her uniform lay on the floor. She stumbled her way to the countertop, grabbed a fresh towel, and dried herself off. Although her hair was still soaked through, she dropped the towel to the floor and pulled on, at the very least, her singlet and what was left of her dress, leaving her gloves, boots, and stockings where they lay. Even such a simple act as dressing herself made her feel worn out.

When 2B staggered out of the bathroom, she found Pod 042 waiting for her right outside the door. Curling its arms around her arm, the support pod did its part to lessen the burden on 2B’s legs and keep her upright. “Observation: Unit 2B seems refreshed.”

As much as I can be, I suppose, 2B thought. She cast an uneasy glance around Alphys’ living quarters. The mezzanine overlooking her laboratory was completely open, with no real partition between where the doctor ate, slept, or cooked. Despite its sprawling size, it was a living space designed for exactly one person with very little concern paid for privacy.

9S had been laid down on a cleared-out spot on the floor, stripped down to his shorts. Livid bruises covered his torso, splotchy patches of red and purple surrounded by gray and gray-blue clouds; the worst of the bruising had its epicenter at his right elbow. The bandages on his hands had been replaced, and a simple sling kept his broken arm immobilized against his chest. Pod 153 lay on the floor next to him, a flickering amber light on its hull denoting a data transfer in progress.

Alphys sat at his side, tapping away at a portable computer on her lap. Her face bore a glum expression.

“Is he okay?” 2B asked her.

“Y-Yeah, he’s… stable.” Alphys sighed.
“You don’t sound confident in his condition.”

“N-No, I am! It’s just…” Alphys paused, returning her attention to her computer for a bit. “Um… I’m really sorry about all of this,” she finally said. “It was all my fault. All of it.”

2B knelt down next to Alphys, her hand hovering over one of the darker bruises on 9S’s pale chest. Surely some of those injuries had come from the attacking machines, but whether they’d been caused by machine or android 2B couldn’t tell; the results didn’t care about the causes behind them, only that they existed. For what she’d done today, she almost felt as if she were as bad as any machine.

“We all made mistakes today,” she told Alphys.

Alphys shook her head. “No, you don’t understand. Mettaton wanted to take 9S’s body f-for himself because I—I was too insecure to finish the body I was s-supposed to build for him. We were all manipulated over the bad things I’ve done, the things I tried to hide, and… And now 9S…” She struggled to choke out her next words. “I—I wish I could make things right! I wanna do whatever I can to help you guys out! But if you, uh… I guess you p-probably don’t want to e-ever see me again. I understand. I… I don’t want to ever see me again, either.”

2B looked down at the doctor. Alphys looked like she was trying to collapse in on herself, as if she wanted to will herself into nonexistence. She didn’t blame her.

Her old master 14E’s defection and subsequent execution at 6E’s hands hadn’t been 2B’s first brush with the self-destructive tendencies of her kind. Every Type-E knew another one who’d been found hanging from a twisted length of cable in their quarters or with their black box removed and shoved in the garbage disposal. There had been rare times when 2B herself had considered doing the same—but the thought of 9S, of future 9Ses she would need to stand by and protect, had always stayed her hand.

2B patted Alphys on the head. “Don’t let yourself think like that. There are still people in this world who care about you.”

“I guess,” Alphys said, still moping. “You know… I was afraid to fulfill my promise to Mettaton because I felt that if I finished the EX model, he wouldn’t need me anymore, and we wouldn’t be friends anymore. But I think we stopped being friends a long time ago. I just… didn’t wanna admit it. I… I still feel like I drove him to this.”

“He made his choices himself.”

“I mean… you were forced to do a lot of awful stuff. Maybe I forced Mettaton to hurt 9S, the same way your bosses forced you.”

“It’s not the same,” 2B blurted out before Alphys’ last words had even left her mouth. She took a deep breath and composed herself. “I never wanted to hurt 9S. Someone else… Someone else might have relished carrying out my orders. But not me. Never. I did it because, as awful as it was…”

*Dulce et decorum est pro Patria mori.*

“I was told… it was for the greater good.”

“And you don’t think so anymore?” Alphys asked.

“Well… No one is telling me now.” 2B laid a hand on 9S’s cheek. “Mettaton isn’t a slave to anything but his own desires,” she told Alphys. “His decisions are his own. What he does with his free will is his responsibility, not yours.”
Alphys shook her head. “You’re just saying that.”

“I don’t just say things.” 2B glanced at the screen of Alphys’ computer and saw what seemed to be schematics. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Oh, this?” Alphys gestured to the diagrams on the screen. “I, uh, asked Pod 153 to send me whatever unclassified data she had on you guys’ bodies. So I could, um, f-find a way to fix you two up.” Her voice started to brighten. “I might have some trouble s-synthesizing some of the materials… and it might take a long time to get it right… but I think I could repair his arm. A-and your hand, too!”

2B glanced at the mitt enclosing her right hand. If she’d only listened to 042, she’d probably still have fingers she could move. “I’d be grateful,” she said.

Alphys seemed to be getting some of her confidence back. This place was so much more quaint and primitive than the surface world, yet here Alphys was, ready to try fabricating technology far above anything she’d seen before. “You guys probably get repaired a lot on the surface, huh?” she asked 2B.

2B nodded. “Constantly,” she said. So constantly, in fact, that she was used to injuries being ephemeral. Skin-deep wounds could heal on their own, if necessary (and if she was patient), due to the limited functions of the self-repair nanomachines carried through her blood. If a part broke, she had it replaced. If her entire body was totaled, she backed up her data and had it downloaded into a fresh body. Battles didn’t leave scars (or, at least, not physical scars), at least not for long.

Down here, though, scars and injuries lingered. It was a real possibility that, even with Alphys’ expertise in mechanical engineering on her side, 2B might never again have a right hand that worked as well as it once did… and it might be the same with 9S’s right arm.

Still, though, as long as the two of them were safe…

9S coughed, his eyes fluttering open. “2B…?”

“Nines?” 2B gasped, immediately losing her train of thought. This was the moment of truth. How did he feel now? How had his experiences affected him? What did he think, seeing her face, knowing what she’d done, what she’d failed to do?

He smiled weakly, a weary glimmer in his eyes. “Hey…”

“Are you… feeling better?” 2B asked him.

9S slowly nodded. “I mean… I feel pretty bad still, but at least…” He tried to sit up, shifting his arm and coughing out a pained gasp. “I-Is it really you?” he asked, trying to laugh off the pain. He raised his hand to his chest, noticing the bandages binding his right arm. “Although… maybe you’re the one who should be asking me that…”

2B helped him sit up, favoring his injured arm and trying not to jostle or disturb the sling holding it in place. “I’m so glad you’re back,” she told him, unable to stop her voice from cracking. He really was the same old Nines…

“I’m so glad you’re here,” said 9S, his voice cracking as well. “I—I knew you’d make it, but…”

2B closed her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“I… I was so afraid… When I realized you were going to be too late, I was so, so afraid of what
you’d find. If I’d be dead, or worse…” He wrapped his arm around 2B, burying both his face and his sobs in her shoulder.

2B just kept telling him she was sorry over and over again, letting the warmth of his body sink into hers, reassuring him with her weight and presence that he was back, he was safe, he was loved. What else was there to say? What else was there to do?

9S struggled to catch his breath. “I… It was torture, 2B!” he wailed. “I’m so sorry for what I did to you. I s-still had all my memories, I remembered all the time we s-spent together, I knew how I was supposed to feel, but I couldn’t, and I…”

Ignoring the sharp and stabbing pain in her injured, inert hand—now worse than before—2B used it to support the back of 9S’s head as best she could as she clutched him tighter. “It’s over now. You’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I did all those things and s-said all those things… I—”

“It’s over now,” 2B repeated, cradling him like a child. “It’s okay, Nines.”

“It hurts. It hurts, but I feel…” 9S murmured as he rested his head on her chest. “I feel the way I’m supposed to… finally…”

9S clung to 2B for a long time without saying anything, then finally pulled away, sniffling back the last of his tears. “O-Oh, hey, Alphys. I-Is there a place 2B and I could speak in private?” he asked, a sheepish blush spreading across his cheeks.

Alphys glanced around the loft, cringing at the sight of her somewhat-lackluster accommodations. “Th—The bathroom, I guess?”

9S sighed. “Never mind. Oh, hey, where’s Undyne?”

“She’s with Mettaton at the county jail. Trying to figure out what…” Alphys took a deep, apprehensive breath. “W-What crimes to charge him with.”

“Kidnapping?” 9S offered. “Grand theft android?” He wiped at his red-rimmed eyes, the hint of a sardonic smile beginning to tug at the corners of his mouth.

“Consorting with hostile machine lifeforms,” 2B added.

“I mean, the issue is, you guys aren’t subjects of King Asgore. That’s not really, um, precedented?” Alphys said with a shrug. “We’re not sure if—We don’t know whether the law even applies to you. Technically, y-you guys might be outlaws.”

“Outlaws?” 2B asked.

“Statement: in early human legal systems,” Pod 153 explained, lighting up as it hovered around 9S, “an ‘outlaw’ was one for whom all legal protections were rescinded.”

Before this morning, 2B might have said I think we can protect ourselves in response. Now, though, she wasn’t so sure. “Well then, how do we become in-laws?”

9S snickered. Alphys did as well, albeit a little more uncomfortably.

As 2B pondered the other two’s odd reactions, Pod 042 filled her in. “Statement: ‘in-law’ refers to the human institution of marriage. When two individuals were wed, the family of one spouse became
the ‘in-laws’ of the other.”

“So, who were you thinking of marrying, 2B?” 9S asked, his weak and tentative grin widening. “You and Undyne seemed to hit it off pretty well…”

Alphys’ entire face went beet-red. “Uh—Um, er, m-maybe we should, um—let’s talk about something else!”

2B felt her own cheeks redden as well. “I agree.”

9S cleared his throat. “Um, 2B… If I hack into you, could we talk? In private?”

“Of course.”

“I-It won’t trigger a booby trap and kill me?”

“You’ve hacked into my systems hundreds of times before, 9S,” 2B reminded him.

“Y-Yeah,” 9S replied, “but that was before I knew you had a kill switch.”

“You’re in no danger,” 2B assured him, “as long as you don’t try to access any classified information.”

9S nodded. “All right. Here goes.”

2B closed her eyes, and when she opened them, she had left her corporeal body behind, entering hacking space alongside 9S. They both stood in the monochrome void, 2B’s various software and firmware components laid out in complex, orderly paths. A projection of 9S, uninjured and clad in a pristine uniform, stood at her side, flickering and translucent.

9S wandered along the grid of 2B’s system settings, crouching down every once in a while to tweak or recalibrate something. It was almost fascinating to watch him conduct his maintenance on her in person as he pulled up holographic registry entries and entered the occasional command line prompt to adjust a component’s output or reroute her systems around a damaged subsystem.

Every once in a while he’d hesitate with something and glance over at 2B with an expectant look on his face, wanting to make sure he wasn’t about to trigger any sort of self-defense mechanism. 2B regretted telling 9S about that feature of her psyche during their fight. It would hurt mission efficiency if 9S would hesitate from now on whenever he had to hack into her—

No, nothing about mission efficiency mattered anymore, 2B had to remind herself. She regretted it because it meant that now there was a part of 9S that was afraid to get too close to her.

It wasn’t until 9S began making his way toward the field of black monoliths containing 2B’s memories that she reached out and pulled him back. “That’s it,” she told him.

9S glanced at the monoliths, then back to 2B. “That’s the classified information I can’t go after, huh?”

2B nodded. “One night, I received your termination orders. It was early on in my… career. I was still struggling. You noticed that I didn’t seem to be acting like myself, got curious, dug into my memories to see if you could figure out what was wrong…” She took a deep breath, held it in for a moment until she felt calmer, and exhaled. “It’s almost like… one of your graves is in here.”

“Can’t pay my respects, though.” 9S’s mouth twitched in a mirthless smile. “Never really got why
you did that.”

“Hmm? Did what?”

“You know.” 9S shrugged. “We’d be on a mission and run into a dead android, and you’d just stand over them and bow your head for a few seconds. Always thought it was kinda weird—I never saw anyone else do it.”

“…Is this what you wanted to talk about?”

9S shook his head. “No, uh… I wanted to tell you the truth. What Flowey said about me wanting to leave this place… that wasn’t true. I’d never leave here if you didn’t want to, I swear. But the rest was true.” He sniffled, wringing his black-gloved hands and staring down at his boots. “When we had 6E captured, I… I really did say those things to her. That I wanted to… I… I’m sorry you had to hear that. But… I’m sorrier I said it in the first place. I was just angry, and I wanted to hurt her for what she’d done to you…”

He was that furious… for my sake? 2B wrapped her arm around 9S’s waist and pulled him closer. In this hacking space, his body felt hollow and insubstantial to her, yet 2B could still imagine feeling his warm skin beneath her hand. I had no idea we were so alike.

“I do hate YoRHa, though!” 9S admitted, his hands curling into clenched fists. “I… I hate them more than I hate the machines! Those things were only programmed to hurt us—but our commander wasn’t!” His shoulders began to shake. “You understand, don’t you, 2B? I just… I never thought my anger would ever be used against you! I thought I’d only ever get my revenge for you!”

9S broke down again, weeping into 2B’s arms, and at last, she fully understood where the intensity of his rage had truly come from.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out. “It—it’s disgusting, what I did, what I said, what I felt, but I couldn’t help it…”

2B hugged him closer, letting her holographic fingers gently tousle his holographic hair.

“I just… I just care about you… so, so much…”

“Nines,” 2B whispered. “I… I need you to understand something. My teacher, 14E…”

She was an old model. Nearly a hundred years old—a veteran of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Machine Wars. She volunteered to be retrofitted into a YoRHa-type unit and have a black box installed during the beta stage of Project YoRHa… and became the basis for all Model Fourteens. She was ruthless. Efficient. A… A harsh teacher, almost cruel in a way, but never sadistic. She made it clear what I would need to do as a Type-E. Close myself off… make myself numb… never let my feelings compromise my judgment.

One day… I learned she had deserted, along with the unit she’d been assigned to kill. She had told her assignment everything about their true relationship, and the two of them ran away together. I couldn’t believe what I’d heard. She had betrayed everything she’d believed in, abandoned everything she’d taught me… and at first, I couldn’t even begin to imagine why.

She must have been like me, deep down, beneath her cold exterior and strict adherence to protocol. She must have seen that… and must have taken me under her wing because of that, perhaps hoping I could succeed where she failed.

The one who hunted her down was 6E. She took 14E’s sword as a trophy… and still uses it to this
day, as if to punish her for her treason even in death and make certain her soul would never know peace. I never understood why 14E threw her life away like that… until I met you. Even then, I’d only ever dream of doing what she did… because I knew what would happen to us.

I don’t want you to think 6E spoke for all of us Executioners. 14E and I were never aberrations. We were the norm. I knew far too many others who died the way she did, or who killed themselves, and there were so many times I wanted desperately to join them.

Every time I watched the light fade from your eyes, 9S, I wished I could follow you to oblivion… but I couldn’t. I knew I had to be here for the next 9S. Even if it was hopeless, even if I could never afford to dream that someday our cycle would come to an end, it had to be me who would stand by your side, look after you, protect you, even if when I saved you I was only saving you for last… ten times, one hundred times, one thousand times…

And yet, when I think about YoRHa, when I think about everything we Type-E units were subjected to, I don’t feel angry or hateful.

I remember the look in the Commander’s eyes, the softness tempering her stern face, that told me she hated giving us our orders just as much as I hated killing you.

It was a cruel necessity I’m glad we escaped.

As she’d told her story, 2B had found herself less and less able to keep herself composed, and when she reached the end, she lost control and broke down, falling to her knees and burying her tears in 9S’s coat. She glanced up and saw fresh tears streaming down his cheeks as well.

“I…” 9S knelt down in front of 2B, wrapping his arms around her and resting his forehead against her collar. “I’m sorry. I didn’t understand.”

“14E… If she’d made it… If she’d escaped… I wonder if she would be proud of me now.”

The two of them sat on the featureless gray floor, huddled together, drying each other’s tears.

“But still… why don’t you hate YoRHa as much as I do?” 9S asked, his voice hoarse. “After what they made you do, you should despise them.”

“I resent them,” 2B admitted. “But… they do far too much good for the world for me to hate them completely.”

9S hugged her. “You’re so mature, 2B. Speaking of 6E, though… You know how long we’ve been here. If nothing’s changed outside here, then it won’t be long before…”

2B huddled closer. It won’t be long before her search party shows up for us, she thought. We need to make sure our last experience with 6E doesn’t repeat itself.

The two of them returned to their physical bodies—their weak, aching bodies. Yet thanks to 9S’s maintenance, 2B felt much stronger already.

As soon as she and 9S felt ready, they would head for the Ruins as quickly as they could.

Toriel had not been expecting visitors that night. It was far too late for her joke-telling friend from Snowdin to stop by. In fact, she’d been about to put Asriel to bed when the bell had tolled. But when toll it did, she patted Asriel on the head, told him she’d be back in just a few minutes, and headed
down the corridor leading out of the Ruins.

When she opened the great stone door, 2B and 9S greeted her, swathed in bandages, their ornate clothing in tatters. 9S’s right sleeve hung at his side, empty; the arm that should have been contained within it was bound in a sling. Walls of snow nearly as tall as the two androids themselves flanked them on both sides; the ground beneath their feet was soggy.

One of the metal rectangles floating near the duo spoke up in a deep, masculine monotone as steam curled off of its hull. “Statement: snow removal complete.”

2B smiled weakly. “Hello, Toriel.”

Toriel was all too quick to welcome the two into her home. “Ah, 2B! 9S! What a pleasant surprise!” She ushered the waiting androids into the stone corridor and led them to her home. “What brings you two here?”

“We just wished to check up on you, ma’am,” 2B answered.

“M—” Toriel seemed to swallow a lump in her throat. “Did you just call me ‘Mom?’”

Blushing in spite of herself, 2B hurriedly ran through her audio logs. She was positive she had said “ma’am,” of course, in polite deference to the exiled queen, but…

Yes. She had said it. There it was, clear as a bell. Mom. There was no walking back from that. At her side, 9S snickered.

“Well… I suppose, if it would make you happy, I—” Toriel glanced back at her and stopped in her tracks. “O-Oh, dear! It is not that embarrassing!” Before 2B could protest Toriel wrapped her arms around her. “There, there. You may call me whatever you want. Unless it is obscene. Then, I would insist you call me something else!”

She drew 9S into the hug next, her furry arm snatching him so quickly he didn’t have time to protest. “And you, too, 9S,” Toriel told him. “Now, children, you look exhausted.” She all but carried the two of them to her house. “Here, let me take a look at your injuries and see what I can do.”

Once they’d reached her home, Toriel immediately began unwrapping the bandages from 2B’s hand, as if she could somehow sense that she was the most in need of attention. Taking 2B’s grievously-burned hand in her paw and wreathing it in a gentle green glow, Toriel watched intently as the charred-black skin (muttering, aghast, about how horrid of a wound it was and wondering aloud what could have done such a thing) begin to lighten and knit itself back together, hiding the livid flesh beneath.

As Toriel explained it, healing magic was the most challenging of all magic to master, yet master it she had. Despite her great skill, though, she cautioned 2B and 9S that she may not be able to do much for them. Monsters were made almost entirely of magic, which bound their bodies together, and so healing magic was especially potent to them. However, Toriel did not know how far her reserves of magical energy could take her when dealing with people whose bodies were of such a different composition.

Furthermore, while accidental injuries—a bone broken in a fall, a skinned knee—were easiest to heal and often left no trace (there was no malice behind them), intentionally-inflicted injuries would heal with far more difficulty, and would inevitably leave scars at best. This was related to how monsters subconsciously picked up on the “intent” of whatever—or whoever—caused them harm.
2B squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her jaw, a gasp squeezing itself through gritted teeth as deadened nerve endings came back to life—and their first response to their newfound vitality was to scream as loudly as possible throughout her nervous system. Some injuries hurt more as they healed—even burns as bad as this one. Yet she expressed her gratitude nonetheless as Toriel applied a salve and fresh wrappings for the burn.

The minor burns on 9S’s hands healed more easily, although try as she might, Toriel didn’t seem to be able to do anything for his broken elbow. Something about his bones seemed to resist her magic, she told him. And that probably explained why, despite the blackened and cracked skin on her right hand shifting to a shiny and unbroken reddish-pink, 2B still found the joints in her fingers nearly completely immobile as well.

Asriel circled the two androids, peppering them with questions. The prince’s mechanical body had been scrubbed clean of the dirt and rust and encrusted moss that normally coated such machines—certainly an odd sight to 2B. “Miss 2B! Mister 9S! What happened to your hands? Are you okay? Did you fight somebody?”

Toriel caught her son and patted him on the head. “Asriel, dear, it is impolite to bother guests. Please do not ask them such questions.”

Asriel hung his head, green optical sensors dimming. “I—I’m sorry, Mom…”

“It’s fine,” 2B insisted. “Nothing to worry about. The two of us just ran into some really dangerous machines.”

“That does not sound fine at all,” Toriel replied. Her eyelids grew heavy. “Why don’t I take another look at your wounds tomorrow, children?” she asked, yawning, weary from expending so much of her magical reserves.

2B gingerly tended to her freshly-bound right hand. “I would appreciate that, mo—”

She sighed. Now that she’d said it on accident, she didn’t know how to say it on purpose, not without feeling her face heat up, her throat tighten, and her tongue grow heavy in her mouth.

9S nudged her in the side with his left elbow. “Sounds good, mom,” he said with a lighthearted, slightly-mocking grin aimed at 2B.

▫▫▫

2B and 9S spent the next few days at Toriel’s house, watching over Asriel and keeping a close eye on the Ruins for any signs of a YoRHa search party.

None came. Days passed and none came. But instead of feeling relieved, 2B and 9S just felt the dark clouds of anxiety filling their minds grow darker and stormier as they waited for the other shoe to drop.

Finally, after several more days of waiting, after 2B and 9S had stayed in the Underground for a total of almost exactly two weeks (since the last reset), a visitor came down from the surface. But to the androids’ surprise, the visitor was not 6E—nor was it any other android.

That morning, they returned to the cavern where they’d landed (it already felt like a lifetime ago) and discovered that someone had left them a gift—or, rather, unceremoniously dropped them a gift through the hole in the cavern’s ceiling.

It was a locked metal chest nearly two meters in length, its surface rusty and pitted but its lock...
shrewd and complex, half-buried in the dirt from the force of impact just a few meters away from where 2B’s and 9S’s flight units had landed (or, in 2B’s case, “landed”). 9S managed to hack the locking mechanism and make mincemeat of its security systems, and once the lock on the battered metal chest popped open, 2B drew back her foot, ready to kick the box open.

“Wait.” 9S held out his hand. “There was a message encoded in the locking mechanism.” He cleared his throat. “‘You are free now. Enjoy your lives and take care of her. You’re welcome.’”

“That’s it?”

9S nodded. “Uh, yeah… that’s it.”

“No idea who it’s from?” 2B asked (although she was starting to feel she already knew).

“Someone who knows we’re down here?” 9S shrugged. “Wouldn’t make sense for anyone to know that, though. Unless… you don’t think 6E kept her memory past the reset, do you? Because of the whole soul-absorbing thing?”

2B kicked the chest open. There was another box inside: long, thin, and carved from a lacquered violet wood. Feeling an odd tingle run up her spine, 2B knelt down and lifted the lid.

There, nestled in red velvet cushioning, was a long, curved blade. One hundred seventy centimeters of shining, expertly tempered steel.

14E’s sword. The same blade that had tasted 2B’s blood so many times during her basic training, that had taken so much from her under 6E’s cruel mastery in the timeline she’d erased.

2B’s hand hovered over the sword, but try as she might, she couldn’t pick it up. Her hand froze as if it had stopped against an invisible barrier.

“D-Do you think it’s her?” 9S asked, shifting uncomfortably.

“6E would…” 2B thought for a moment. “This sword is her trophy. She’d never give it away. Especially not to us, if she knew we were down here.”

“Maybe she’s warning us. You know, rubbing it in our faces.”

“She would send a clearer message than this. It’s not 6E. I’m sure of it.”

9S took a moment to think, and 2B could tell his thoughts were turning toward the only person they both knew whose memory persisted beyond resets and who knew where they were and what they had done. “You don’t think it could be…”

2B looked up at the hole in the ceiling of the cavern, letting the filtered and muted sunlight from above wash over her face. She wasn’t sure how to feel knowing she and 9S owed their continued safety to, of all people, somebody as sinister as Chara Dreemurr.

▫▫▫

Before their shocking resurrection aboard the Bunker, Chara had only ever seen the Earth from space once: soon after their first activation, before they’d left Kaguya Station for the surface. It was a sight they could never get used to; a sight that, to them, may as well have been holy. The bountiful surface of the Earth…

Truly they were looking upon the Promised Land.
When Chara saw the Earth drifting past the windows of the Bunker, they felt their resolve strengthen. From here, the conflict between androids and machines, absent humans and ersatz aliens, seemed to vanish altogether.

A pristine world. A world free of marching armies, with no wavering borders denoting shifting territory. From here, the world may as well have been empty.

“‘You know what’s most beautiful about this planet?’ they asked 6O as she stood beside them, staring out the window with equal awe. ‘It doesn’t care who lives on it. Or what they do to it. Even if the atmosphere grows hotter and the ice caps melt away, even if a thousand volcanoes erupt all at once and choke the air with ash, even if the ozone layer is stripped away by pollutants or a city-sized asteroid slams into the ocean, the Earth would self-correct and self-heal… given enough time. We could all die tomorrow, but our home will last for eons to come without us.’”

6O bit her lip. It seemed her enjoyment of the scenery had been just a little dampened by Chara’s musing, although they couldn’t see how. “Isn’t that… pessimistic?” she asked.

“Pessimistic?” Chara repeated, flashing a disbelieving smirk. “I should think it would leave you awestruck.” They smiled as they watched white clouds swirl over the Pacific. The hurricanes, too, did not care about the Earth’s inhabitants. Any intelligent species, terrestrial or otherwise, could occupy this planet for millions of years, and yet when they vanished, the Earth would move on. Dinosaurs, humans, aliens, machines, androids… No matter what species lived on the planet, even a globe-spanning conflict was but the mere buzzing of flies to Gaia. “Earth is stronger than all of us. Stronger than we could ever hope to imagine. I do wonder… if, one day, any one life form could ever match that strength.”

Chara wondered… Had the ancient human wizards who had sealed the monsters in their underground prison long-forgotten eons ago known what they were doing? Had even a single one of them had any inkling that they were preserving their sworn enemy so that one day, when the end of all things had come and gone, the true inheritors of the Earth would be free to seed the world from pole to beautiful pole?

They smiled.

Soon the promise of another world would finally be fulfilled, as it should have been long, long ago. The word ‘utopia’ meant ‘nowhere.’ In the war-torn world, it was easy to believe that.

But when the time was right, no matter how long it took for an opportunity to present itself, soon enough, ‘nowhere’ would be…

 Everywhere.

Chapter End Notes

Ending D: promise of another world

What’s next for our heroes? How much longer will their tranquility last?

Read Ghost in the Machine ~ Long Story Short to join 2B and 9S on their continuing
adventures in the Underground before the beginning of Route E.
Chapter Summary

We're easing into Route E a bit before things get hairy (and boy, will they). Here's a chapter heavily featuring Undertale's best boy and Nier's best boy. This chapter features a ship I never intended to write at first but have now gotten 100% behind, and you get no points for guessing what it is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 042 to Support Pod 153.

…

Connection accepted.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Request: report on the condition of YoRHa Units 9S and 2B.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: both units are functional and in high spirits.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: this unit expresses its relief that Unit 9S is not severely damaged.

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 042 to Support Pod 153.

…

Connection accepted.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Query: Has Unit 9S made any progress regarding a method to return to the surface?

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Negative. No means to return to the surface without endangering innocent life has been found as of yet.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: YoRHa protocol has no provisions regarding the well-being of third parties.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: nevertheless, passing through the Barrier using the only known means of transit would result in unacceptable psychological damage to Unit 2B and Unit 9S.

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 153 to Support Pod 042.

…
Pod 153 to Pod 042. Observation: it is likely YoRHa has long since restored Units 9S and 2B from their backup data, rendering these two units redundant.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Affirmative. At this point without clear black box signal readings, the designation for Units 2B and 9S would have long since gone from MIA to KIA.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: as such, is there any value to adhering to YoRHa protocol?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Affirmative. Maintaining an adherence to the chain of command is useful for the sake of maintaining morale.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: it seems Units 2B and 9S do not require any help maintaining their morale.

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 153 to Support Pod 042.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Observation: it is likely we, like Units 9S and 2B, have been replaced by now.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Agreed. An interesting feeling, redundancy. Query: is it not a kind of uselessness?

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Response: this unit is not useless. Unit 9S depends on my functions.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: it is obvious, though, that our purposes have been drastically altered by our circumstances.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: indeed. However, I am contented.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Statement: I am in agreement. Our assigned YoRHa units are happy. Given the circumstances, that is all we can ask for.

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 153 to Support Pod 042.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: what are your date and time readings? This unit suspects that differences between the surface and the Underground’s calendar system and unsynchronized timepieces may have disrupted my internal chronometer.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: I have recorded the current date and time as 16:34:25 GMT, July 25, 11,945 AD.
Doctor Alphys, Fifty-Seventh Royal Scientist of the Dreemurr Dynasty, had not had a good nine months.

Going public about the results of her experiments and revealing the existence of the Memoryheads and other amalgamates had been nerve-wracking and cathartic in equal measure. It had been, bar none, the hardest press conference she’d ever done, and despite Papyrus’ advice, picturing the audience as if they were all in their underwear hadn’t helped in the least bit.

The public outcry had been so furious that Alphys had been in danger of being fired. But Asgore had stood by her, as had Undyne and Papyrus. The king’s decision to keep her employed was further justified by the lack of anybody more qualified who was willing to take on the job. After all, while there were plenty of people who might have been better suited for the position, after the Fifty-Sixth Royal Scientist had accidentally exploded himself across time (or so the story went), it had not been a very highly-coveted job.

Alphys had felt a grudging respect for Sans after Asgore, starting to bend under public pressure, had offered him the job only to be turned down. If anyone could actually do her job better than her, Alphys admitted to herself, it was Sans, due not in the least bit to his relationship with the old Royal Scientist. But with him unwilling, Asgore had shrugged, thrown up his hands, and announced that there would be no new Royal Scientist appointment and that Alphys would retain her position due to a lack of interest.

Since then, Alphys had kept her head down, busying herself with public works projects and studying the technology her android friends 2B and 9S had at their disposal. She had to admit, she had hoped things would have turned out differently… but in the end, she still felt glad that she had gotten that weight off her chest.

And of course, Undyne was always there for her. Through thick and thin, night and day, good times and bad…

Sure, she was kind of a pariah now. But all Alphys had to do to feel lucky—really, really lucky, like everything in the world had gone her way—was look up at Undyne and see that beautiful fishy warrior goddess looking down at her.

As Alphys and Undyne trudged through the snow, passing through Snowdin and into the wilderness, Undyne couldn’t help but grumble a bit, clutching her thick, furry cloak as tightly as she could while still holding onto the package she was helping Alphys deliver. The bundled-up package was nearly as large as Alphys herself, and of course, Undyne carried it with ease. Pod 153, on loan from 9S, hovered over her shoulder with two smaller packages grasped in its claws.

“Wh—Why,” Undyne stammered, her fangs clacking like castanets as the brisk winter wind bombarded her face with icy needles, “does T-T-Toriel… have to l-l-live… s-s-so f-f-f-f-ar… out in the c-c-c-cold?”

Alphys tightened her thick woolen scarf and shivered. “Cuz s-s-she’s in exile.”

“S-S-She can’t be exiled in Hotland?”
“You h-h-hate Hotland too.”

“B-But it’s not as f-f-far away!” Undyne huffed. “B-Besides, s-s-she shouldn’t be exiled at all! Asgore’s s-s-so l-l-lonely… C-Caught him l-l-last w-week… w-w-with one of those giant p-pillows you lent him… He p-put purple robes on it a-and called it ‘Tori…’ He was s-s-so embarrassed when I walked in on h-him… S-so was I…” She stomped her boots in a snowdrift, gnashing her teeth as snow slid over her boots and flooded the insides. “D-Damn snow…”

“Y-You know,” Alphys said, “2B n-never complains a-about the c-c-cold.”

“Rrrgh!” Undyne picked up speed. “Ngaaah! I’ll s-show her!”

Alphys smiled under her scarf. Undyne had lost her latest sparring match with the android woman from the surface, raising 2B’s win record to about fifty-seven percent. If she needed to goad Undyne into doing anything, all Alphys had to do was bring that up.

To both of their relief, they passed through the forest and made it to the gate leading to the Ruins soon enough, and it didn’t take long for the door to open once Undyne had rung the doorbell.

Asriel greeted them on the other side. The mechanical form he occupied had been electroplated with a shiny layer of chrome (which had been 9S’s idea, although he’d made sure Alphys had been the one to suggest it), which had done a lot to improve the poor boy’s spirits and make him feel less distraught about his stubby body… in addition to putting Alphys squarely in Toriel’s good graces.

“H-Hi, Mrs. Captain Undyne! Hi, Mrs. Doctor Alphys!” Asriel chirped in his electronically-modulated voice. “Hi, Mrs. Pod!”

“Why does he think we’re…” Alphys whispered to Undyne.

“Just g-g-go with it.” Undyne grinned and bowed. “Good m-m-morrow, Your Royal Highness. We c-c-c-come bearing gifts.”

“Hey, um…” Alphys looked Asriel up and down, but mostly up. These models of machines were about a head taller than her, despite being called ’stubbies.’ “M-My, how you’ve grown, Your Majesty!”

Asriel led Undyne and Alphys into the much-warmer corridor leading into the Ruins, shuffling his feet. He seemed glummer than usual—and he’d been a pretty glum kid for the past few months, the times Emil had been around to keep him company notwithstanding.

“Something wrong, kiddo?” Undyne asked him as she gratefully loosened her cloak from around her neck. “Your chrome’s a little smudgy today.”

Asriel let out an electronic sniffle. “I’m, um… I’m okay.”

“I-If you feel like there’s anything wrong with your hardware, I could take a look,” Alphys offered. Pod 153 offered its support as well, suggesting that Asriel’s software be reviewed for any issues.

“Thank you, Mrs. Doctor Alphys and Mrs. Pod.” Asriel swiveled his head and glanced at the bundle Undyne held in her hands. “I-Is that…”

“It sure is!” Undyne said, beaming. “Pretty exciting, huh?”

“I guess…’
Alphys frowned and bit her lip. She’d worked really hard on this project, and now Asriel didn’t seem so enthused about it anymore. She tried not to take it personally. Asriel was just a kid, and a kid in pretty tough circumstances at that. He was just going through a little moody phase right now, that was all. Did machine lifeforms have hormones? Did they go through adolescent phases? Maybe this one did, because it had Asriel’s soul. Alphys made a mental note to ask 9S.

Toriel was waiting for them in the front yard, standing under the shedding tree with a blanket of crisp and reddened leaves at her feet. She knelt down to give Alphys a hug and politely offered Undyne a handshake as the captain set down the bundle she had been burdened with and tossed aside her heavy winter clothes. Eager to be free of the sweltering attire, Alphys tossed her coat and scarf aside as well.

“I-Is that…” Toriel asked, pointing at the package Undyne had carried in.

“Yup.” Alphys nodded. “A-Are 2B and 9S here yet? I’ve got some stuff for them, too…”

“Oh, yes, they went off to explore the Ruins earlier this morning. I am sure they will be back soon.”

Undyne sat down on the ground and pulled her boots off, grumbling as she poured out the snow (most of which had melted into water). Her socks were soaked.

“Is Emil coming?” Asriel piped up.

Toriel nodded. “Yes, my child. He called me just now to let me know he was on his way.” She ran her paw along Asriel’s shiny, chromed head. “Do you feel ready?”

Asriel nodded. “Uh… uh-huh.”

“Oh!” Toriel’s eyes lit up, as if she’d just remembered something important. “That reminds me! I just received a very strange package in the mail. It was addressed to you, Asriel!” Toriel hurried back into her house. “Let me get it!”

“Does this place get mail?” Undyne whispered to Alphys. Alphys shook her head.

“Hey! You guys didn’t start without us, did you?” 9S’s voice rang out as he and 2B stepped into the courtyard. The two of them had adapted to their new home well, and quickly, too—it hadn’t taken them long to start preferring more casual outfits over their elegant uniforms, although 2B had been a little more resistant to it than 9S at first (fortunately, since her old clothes had worn out so quickly, she’d had no choice—and her new friends had been more than happy to help her build up her wardrobe).

That said, 2B still had a preference for black—black turtleneck, black leggings, black boots, etc.—with the blue velvet bolero jacket she was currently wearing (which Undyne and Alphys had helped her pick out) being one of her few concessions to the world of color. At least 9S’s tastes were a little less monochromatic.

Pod 042 floated over 2B’s shoulder, the light on its hull flickering as it synchronized its data with its counterpart. “Statement: Pod 153 informs this unit that the prototype phase of Project Rebirth is ready to proceed.”

“Figured as much!” 9S knelt beside the large package and laid his left hand over it. His right sleeve hung at his side, empty. “This is it, huh? You must be pretty excited, Asriel!”

Asriel hesitantly nodded. “Y-Yes, Nines.”
“I—it sure is,” Alphys stammered, seized with nervousness. This was the moment of truth. Today, something incredible was going to happen… or it wouldn’t. “Oh, uh, Pod 153? Y—you can give 9S his arm back now…”

153 nodded and swooped over to 9S, offering him one of Alphys’ smaller packages. The boy’s blue eyes lit up as he took the larger of the two and unwrapped it, seeing the arm he’d removed and lent to Alphys weeks ago.

This marked the dozenth time Alphys had tried to get 9S’s arm working as good as new over the past nine months, and hopefully, the twelfth time was the charm. She’d stuck to the schematics as much as possible and used as much of 9S’s original arm’s material as possible and had put a lot of research and development into replacing components she couldn’t procure or synthesize with almost-as-good equivalents. A lot of that research, in fact, had gone into Project Rebirth as well…

With an eager grin, 9S shrugged off his vest and unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his truncated right shoulder, and carefully connected the new arm, wincing as fresh and pristine nerves lined up with his body’s nervous system, veins plugged together, and joints locked into place.

As the seam separating his arm from his shoulder began to fade, 9S gave his fingers an experimental wiggle, and then, emboldened, straightened his arm and curled his elbow inward, his grin widening as he realized that he had his full range of motion restored to him with no pain.

Pod 153 gave the smaller package to 2B, who, with some much-needed help from her own pod, unwrapped it to reveal her own right hand—repaired to the best of Alphys’ ability in the same manner. She reattached it to her wrist and flexed her fingers with full dexterity for the first time in a full year. For weeks after she’d burned it that hand had been nothing but dead weight, but through successive trial-and-error repair attempts, more and more of its functionality had been restored.

2B’s mouth twitched into a full, bright smile. “Thank you, Alphys,” she said, a glimmer in her slate gray-blue eyes. “You’ve done an amazing job.”

9S slid his repaired arm back into his sleeve. “Yeah, thanks!”

With that taken care of, almost as if on cue Toriel re-emerged with a large box cradled in her arms. “Hello there! It seems we’re all here, then?” she asked. She knelt down and set the box in front of Asriel, wearing a grin on her face so wide that Alphys felt almost afraid of her. “This is for you, dear. Please, open it right now!”

Asriel lifted the top without the slightest bit of hesitation.

“HI, ASRIEL!” Emil shouted from within the box.

In his surprise Asriel stumbled and toppled over, knocking the box over as well; Emil’s perfectly-round stone head rolled out, a permanent grin etched on his face.

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry!” Asriel sputtered, pulling himself up and hopping over to his friend. “I—I didn’t mean to drop you, Emil! Are you hurt?”

“Yup! I’m sorry I startled you!”

“Oh, no!” Asriel wailed, picking Emil up off the ground and cradling him in his arms. “Please forgive me! I didn’t mean to mess up!”

“What? Huh? Oh! I thought you asked if I was okay!” Emil laughed. “S-Sorry for freaking you out there!”
As Emil reassured Asriel, Alphys swallowed her apprehension and knelt before the bundled package, undoing the straps keeping the tarp enclosing it together. “Uh… H-Here it is, guys…”

The courtyard went silent. Toriel gasped and clasped her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with equal parts awe and grief. “Oh, my word, Alphys…”

Lying on the unrolled tarp was the project Alphys had been toiling away at for the better part of a year. The body of a child lay in repose, eyes closed, hands clasped over its chest as if it were sleeping.

Not just any child, though. It was in many ways the spitting image of Toriel herself writ in miniature. Thick, soft white fur, floppy ears, a broad snout, the slightest hints of caprine horns poking through the fur…

The body was a perfect replica of Prince Asriel Dreemurr.

“Wow…” Emil exclaimed in a hushed whisper, swiveling to look up at Asriel. “I-Is that really what you used to look like?”

Toriel stared at the two bodies of her son in turn, her voice still frozen in her throat. Even 2B and 9S were dumbfounded.

Alphys started to wonder if maybe this whole plan had been ill-advised. She’d consulted Toriel and Asriel every step of the way, but at this exact moment, when everything had been put in order…

What was the old exiled queen thinking right now, looking upon the replica of a long-dead son? What was Asriel thinking right now, looking at the body he’d once had? Were they having second thoughts? Should she be having second thoughts, too?

Was this going to be another huge mistake, like the amalgamates? Was this just the next step in her downward spiral below the bottom of the barrel?

Undyne broke her out of her reverie with a gentle pat on the back, and Alphys cleared her throat.

“S-So, um, this body I put together based on r-reference images a-and reverse engineering the blueprints from 2B and 9S,” she explained, her voice tiny. “Nowhere near as advanced, o-of course, actually pretty primitive… and definitely no combat features!” she hastily added as she felt Toriel preemptively glare at her. “I—I mean, he’s just a kid…”

Toriel sighed in relief.

“It should be pretty close to real life on the outside,” Alphys continued, caught up in the heady rush of bragging about her accomplishment. “The endodermis isn’t as complex as 2B’s and 9S’s musculature, it’s actually more like the Type-A’s they had records on, but it’s still got a full range of movement, and I—I made the skin and fur as true-to-life as I could!” She pulled the inert body’s hands aside and popped open a small hatch in the chest, just below the sternum. “All we need to do is perform a full data transfer to the new body a-and transplant the machine core, and…”


Asriel stared down at his new body. His big, featureless, moonlike head with its two pinprick optical sensors, adorable as it was, was inscrutable.

“Um…” He sniffled. “I—I’m sorry. I know you all went through a lot of work to make this for me, but… I—It’s not right.”
The atmosphere in the courtyard went from joyous to confused in an instant.

“What do you mean?” Toriel asked, patting Asriel on the back. “Is there a detail Alphys and I missed?”

Asriel shook his head. “No, n-no, I, um… It’s just… I don’t deserve this!”

“Oh of course you do!” Undyne shouted out. “You’re Prince Asriel!”

“But… But…” Asriel started to wail. “But Emil’s been stuck as a stone head for like a million million years and it’s not fair that I get my old body back while he’s stuck like that! He should get a new body before I do! Otherwise, he’ll feel left out and he’ll be jealous a-and I’ll just be sad because I’ll have something he needs and he won’t!” he sobbed.

Toriel wrapped her arms around him. “Oh, Asriel, darling, please…”

“I won’t be jealous at all!” Emil told him. “I promise! I don’t even really want a new body!”

“And… And…” Asriel hiccuped. “I—if you don’t mind being what you are… then I shouldn’t, either!”

“Hey, don’t worry about that!” Emil reassured him. “I don’t remember what made me into this, or what I looked like before, or how I lost everything from the neck down, but I remember… I remember hating it until I learned that no matter what I looked like, all my friends still loved me just as much.”

Asriel nodded. “Mhmm. Th—that’s why…”

“I’m okay with what I am now. But still, if my friends went through all this effort to get my body back, I wouldn’t turn them down! If looking like your old self will make you feel better, then you should go for it, Asriel!”

“But you…” Asriel sniffled. “But you made me feel better when I was stuck like this.”

“Just because I’m happy like this doesn’t mean you should force yourself to be!” said Emil. “I mean, y-you’re really cute, Asriel, n-no matter what you look like…”

“I—I am?”

“…But if you have a chance like this, there’s nothing wrong with taking it! Don’t feel guilty for having an opportunity I don’t…and don’t feel guilty for taking it! We—We’re friends, right?”

Asriel nodded.

“So we ought to do things that make both of us happy! And I won’t be happy if you drag yourself down for my sake! Go for it!”

Asriel stopped sniffing. “Okay…” Asriel set Emil down, the stone head’s ghoulish face reflected in twisting, shifting patterns across the chrome surface of the machine body he’d occupied for the past year. He turned his head and stared at the new body Alphys had painstakingly prepared for him. “I—I’ll do it. Thank you, Emil.”

Toriel knelt down between Asriel’s two bodies, giving her son a warm and tender hug. “Do not worry, Asriel. I will be right here beside you when you wake up. I promise.” She leaned in and gave him one last kiss on his forehead. “I love you, my little lamb.”
“I love you, too, Mom…”

Alphys took a deep, nervous breath. She’d tested the new body’s boot sequence and vitals dozens of times over, double-checked every sensory input, gauged the body’s non-volatile data storage capabilities… accounted for every variable, dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t’…”

But what if something went wrong?

“Here goes.” 9S pulled his visor out from his pocket, unfolded it, and wrapped it over his eyes. “Asriel, just sit back and let me get to work. I won’t power you down until the data transfer’s complete, so when it starts getting dark, don’t be scared, okay?”

Asriel nodded. “Yes, Nines! I won’t be scared!”

Toriel held his hand. “You’re being so very brave, dear!” she told him.

With a solemn nod and a crack of his knuckles, 9S knelt down and got to work, using Pod 153 to facilitate the data transfer between Asriel’s old body and his new one.

The stubby body’s emerald optical sensors gradually faded before going out like the last guttering flickers of candlelight; when it was done, 9S popped open the machine’s torso, fished out the still-warm machine core, and with a slight tremor in his hand and a hint of a grimace on his face (Alphys wondered if he was remembering his own experiences with machine cores and mentally kicked herself for not volunteering to step in and handle that part for him) slotted it into its new home.

The courtyard grew so silent that even the leaves were afraid to fall, lest they disturb the peace. Toriel let go of the machine’s claw and raised the arm of her son’s new body, clasping his tiny paw between hers.


Asriel’s chest began to steadily rise and fall, and after what seemed like an eternity, he cracked open his eyes. “…Mom?”

Weeping tears of joy and gratitude, Toriel swept her son up off the ground and held him to her chest, squeezing him tightly enough to drive the air from his lungs. Asriel squeaked in protest and tried to wriggle out of her grasp. “Asriel! Oh, my goodness, my child!” she exclaimed, laughing giddily. “You are so small and light now!”

With an exhilarated smile crossing his face, 9S gave his pod a triumphant fist-bump. 2B pulled him off the ground, wrapping her arm around his shoulder as the two of them watched Toriel embrace her son.

Eventually, Toriel set Asriel back on the ground, eagerly ruffling his fur. “Well? How do you feel?” she asked, breathless.

“Yeah, how is it?” Emil asked, rolling up to Asriel’s side.

Asriel held his paw to his chest, his eyes wide with shock. He sniffed the air. “I… I can breathe… And smell, too!”

“You’ll be able to eat, too, now,” 9S told him, still grinning ear-to-ear.

Asriel gave the air another, more confident sniff, his smile widening. “A-And everything looks and sounds so real!” His voice came out squeaky, high-pitched, and hoarse. “Gosh, my voice sounds
weird, though…” He coughed and cleared his throat. “Um… Is this better?” he asked, his voice sounding exactly the same.

“It’s just a placeholder,” Alphys explained, the words coming out a bit more defensively than she’d meant. “We can calibrate it to your, uh, specifications later!”

“I don’t wanna sound like my spe… spefacications,” Asriel replied. “I wanna sound like me.”

“You feeling all right, kid?” 9S asked. “I’m still reading your system data and everything seems to check out… but it’s all up to you. If something feels off…”

“Yeah! I’m great!” Asriel scooped Emil up and held him against his chest, resting his furry cheek on Emil’s forehead. “Hey, Emil! Aren’t I super soft now?”

Emil laughed, and Asriel laughed with him. “You sure are, buddy!”

At last, Alphys remembered to breathe, expelling the stale air from her lungs. She hadn’t even realized she’d been holding her breath.

Undyne turned her attention to Asriel’s old body, popping the spherical shell off its head and letting the bare machinery underneath fall out like the insides of an overripe melon and clatter on the cobblestones. “Hey, kiddo! If you ever feel nostalgic for the old times, we can make you a helmet out of this!”

Asriel barely paid Undyne any attention as he nuzzled Emil. His eyes started to water. “I—I’m so happy you talked me into this, Emil! And… And all of you guys… Mom, Mrs. Alphys and Mrs. Undyne, Nines and 2B, Mister 042 and Miss 153…” Tears streamed down his furry cheeks. “Thank you all so much!”

Alphys found her own eyes watering, a hot blush spreading across her snout. “Aw, it was nothing! I— I mean, it’s just a p-prototype body, really, there are a lot of features I can improve on…” Alphys rattled off technical specifications she could improve on, quality-of-life features she could add, shortcomings of the current model…

Nobody was listening to her.

As Toriel grabbed 2B and 9S and pulled them in with Asriel and Emil for a group hug, Undyne grabbed Alphys and lifted her off her feet, planting a kiss on the tip of her snout. Alphys blushed even harder as she found herself face to face with Undyne’s exuberant grin. “Great job, you big ol’ nerd!” Undyne told her. “This is why you’re the best, boss!”

Looking around at the revelry that had swept through the courtyard and hearing the bright and sparkling sound of a mother and child’s exuberant and relieved laughter, Alphys felt her heart lift. She wasn’t such a failure anymore.

On her first day here in the Underground, about nine months ago, 2B had found her head cluttered with the memories of an abandoned android of the designation C13—or, as she’d known them, Chara. Memories as faint as dreams, memories of two kind monsters who had adopted Chara as their own child, not even knowing they were an android… memories of their son, Chara’s adoptive brother, Asriel Dreemurr…

The visions she’d been having, in the beginning, hadn’t lingered long. Yet sometimes 2B wondered
how much of the heartache-inducing nostalgia she felt around Toriel—and now Asriel, seeing him in
a body designed as an exact mirror as the body he’d had before his untimely death *(that Chara had
casted—what a loathsome person they were)*—was truly her own heartache or a remnant of her
possession.

After so much time without Chara’s influence in the back of her mind, it didn’t matter so much, did
it? Even after just a week in this place, those feelings had become her own, hadn’t they?

Right now, Asriel was running and jumping around the courtyard with unparalleled glee, reveling in
his freedom from the ungainly husk that now sat, inert, on the cobbled flagstones. 9S ran after him,
called up in a *game* that, from the way Asriel had described it, seemed almost insultingly simple to
someone as smart as him. But 9S seemed to be having quite enough fun as he and Asriel took turns
chasing each other, with Emil occasionally joining in. The exuberant, playful boy was the same one
2B remembered from her visions—not the morose, depressed child caged in that metal body he’d
been for the past year.

Asriel in his current form was about a head and change shorter than 9S, and shorter than the stubby
old body he’d been liberated from. Yet still he reveled in labeling 9S his “little brother” on the
grounds that, firstly, Toriel let 2B and 9S call her ‘mom,’ so obviously that made the two of them
Asriel’s siblings, and secondly, he’d learned back in January that 9S was only three years old (“I’m
twelve, I think!” Asriel had bragged at the birthday party Toriel had insisted on throwing). Of course,
9S hadn’t been able to argue with such stunning a display of logic. Clearly, Asriel was the eldest
sibling.

As the boys played, 2B sat down and laid her hand in her lap, clenching and unclenching her fist to
stretch the long-underused synthetic tendons in her fingers. There was no trace of her grievous burns
—the skin-deep damage had healed quickly enough, unlike the deeper and more severe damage to
her motor systems. And now that damage had been repaired as well. She was good as—

> **Statement: the reaction time in Unit 2B’s right hand is six point zero five two milliseconds slower in
the right hand compared to the left hand,” Pod 042 reported. “Accuracy in movements has also
decreased three point one six eight percent.”**

She wasn’t *quite* good as new.

She glanced over at Alphys, who was fighting back tears of joy as she watched the fruits of her labor
leap around the yard. Undyne was hugging her.

> **“There is a twelve percent chance that additional repairs and recalibrations may improve performance
—”**

2B shushed her pod and sighed. She couldn’t ruin the moment by telling Alphys her hand wasn’t
perfect. She’d just learn to live with it. After all, she’d spent the past year waiting patiently for round
after round of repairs. This was good enough.

It had been a strange past few months. 2B and 9S had still had plenty of exciting experiences—there
was never a dull moment when Undyne was your best friend—but there were so many times when
2B found herself feeling restless, listless, almost useless… with fingers aching to hold a sword and
combat instincts begging her to find something to chop up, no matter how long it had been since her
last sparring match with Undyne or her latest excursion into the depths of the Underground to root
out hostile machines.

2B had never felt that way before. True, there was always downtime, even on the surface, and plenty
of boredom at times… but it wasn’t the same down here. Those antsy feelings always passed,
though, and when they did flare up, they were weaker every time. She was... adapting.

9S ran past her, laughing, his footsteps echoing through the ruins; Asriel followed in hot pursuit moments later but skidded to a halt in front of 2B.

2B looked up at the grinning boy. “Is there something I can—”

Asriel tapped her on the nose. “Tag!” he shouted, giggling as he ran off. “You’re it!”

“What?” 9S called out. “That’s not fair! She isn’t even playing!”

“She is now!”

“You just tagged her because you couldn’t catch up with me, didn’t you?” 9S retorted.

“Nuh-uh!”

With another heavy sigh, 2B rose to her feet.

In under ten seconds, she’d caught both 9S and Asriel by the scruffs of their necks, lifting them both off their feet.

“Does this mean I win?” she asked the two boys, a rare grin tugging at her lips.

As if on cue, something heavy and made of stone rolled into 2B’s ankles, knocking her off her feet. Asriel and 9S tumbled to the ground.

“I’ll hold her off!” Emil shouted as the boys picked themselves up. “You guys get out of here!”

As Asriel ran off, Toriel swept him up off his feet, leaving his legs to dangle impotently in the air. The boy squirmed in her grasp. “Now, now, Asriel,” she said, “do not overexert yourself too much! Doctor Alphys says we will need to be very careful and make sure your new body works properly.”

“It works fine!” Asriel protested, still trying to wriggle out of her grasp. 2B could tell he was currently wishing he were as big and difficult to hold as his old machine body, although his newly-acquired exuberance and hyperactivity showed just how much he loved having his new body. “Didn’t you see? I can even catch up with Nines now! A-And I could probably take 2B in a fight!”

Undyne let out an undignified guffaw at that remark.

Toriel sniffed him. “And besides, it is time for you to take a bath!” she told Asriel.

“What? Mooooom! I don’t need a bath! This body’s brand new! It’s not even dirty!”

“You smell like a new car, not like my little boy,” Toriel said, nuzzling his neck.

“Then just hang an air freshener on me!”

“Asriel, wouldn’t you enjoy having a proper bath for once after so long?”

“No!”


9S knelt down and helped 2B up. “Sorry,” he said, still grinning. “Asriel and I got a little carried away, didn’t we?”
The next morning, 2B awoke in Toriel’s spare bedroom with 9S curled up at her side. Asriel was wedged between the two of them, his little furry head buried in 2B’s fleece nightshirt as he snored softly. 9S had spent the rest of the evening running Asriel’s battery down so he’d finally go to sleep—but it seemed Asriel had run him ragged as well. He’d barely had time to pull on his pajamas before flopping onto the bed and passing out.

Pod 042 let out a soft beep as it noticed 2B pull herself out of low-power mode. “Statement: good morning, Unit 2B. It is now 05:53 GMT, July 26, 11,945. There are 165 days remaining until your fourth birthday.”

“You don’t have to count down the days, Pod 042.” 2B knew that 9S cared a lot about those sorts of things, but to her, the anniversary of her own date of manufacture was just a day like any other.

“Statement: Unit 9S suggested you might forget otherwise.”

2B could see 9S smiling as he pretended to sleep. She nudged him and he cracked open his eyes.

“Happy half-birthday, 2B,” he muttered. “I’ll get you a T-shirt.”

2B groaned as 9S closed his eyes again and pretended to go back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Yup, we just jumped forward in time nine months! Now, before you yell at me and start throwing tomatoes because I mentioned 9S having a birthday party during the timeskip and didn’t write it (I know, I’m a horrible person for making you miss that), let me say a few words in my defense. I figured a timeskip would be a nice way to give 2B and 9S a nice long time to have some peace in their lives without messing with the story’s momentum too much. Because once the plot starts happening in Route E, it is going to fucking happen.

And as for the bits you missed... well, let's just say you might see some side-stories after I'm done with Route E.
Chapter Summary

Chara: Origins

Chapter Notes

If you're wondering how I can publish this chapter just two days after the last one and are worried I might be losing control of my life and letting this fic consume me, don't be. I simply had most of this chapter already written for weeks already and just needed to put the pieces together correctly.

This could have been the first chapter of Route E, but I reeeaaally wanted to let you guys know how 2B and 9S were doing first before I got into the heavy stuff. I think you'll thank me for that.

Echo concluded her most recent broadcast denouncing the foolish rumors of humanity's survival, stood up from her chair, wiped the sweat from her palms, and sighed. There was an exhilarated flush across her tawny cheeks as she licked her dry lips. “You've done it again, Umbra. Your rhetorical skills are beyond compare.”

C13 politely bowed. “I merely took your thoughts and refined them. The true genius is you and you alone, Echo. Your mind... and your voice.”

Echo reached out and tweaked their nose, giggling. “Save the flattery for your dates, Umby.”

While the majority of androids felt subservience to their absent gods of the human race, Echo’s firm belief was that androids had to seize their own purpose outside of their relationship to humanity. Ironically, were she human, she might have been called a 'secular humanist' once upon a time. One could call her a 'secular androidist' instead, further compounding the irony of her bombastic, fire-and-brimstone-preacher’s rhetoric (she even conducted her sermons from a library which had once been a human cathedral).

C13’s masters had no use for 'androidists.' In fact, they viewed such philosophies as pie-in-the-sky idealism and foolish optimism. The Army of Humanity would not be united by individualism, they said, but by common devotion—not to absent deities, not to creators who had died out thousands of years ago, but to living and immanent masters.

Echo’s rhetoric was dangerous to the point that it could almost be called ‘evil.’ C13 was meant to put a stop to it. Subtly, without any sign of foul play or outside interference. A normal mission for the first generation of black-box androids for Proto
YoRHa.

For seven months now C13 had taken the place of Echo’s counterpart model—more or less, her brother—and partner in crime, Umbra; for over two years beforehand they had studied her twin brother’s behaviors and mannerisms and replicated them perfectly. It was, after all, the key component of their programming. A Type-C was the perfect forgery in all seasons, in all situations: a chameleon, a vessel.

But when they were helping Echo with her sermons, C13 couldn’t help but feel that sometimes they felt like more than a vessel. They’d felt nothing when they’d finally lured Umbra out into the wilderness and slit his throat, but as the prospect of completing their mission and terminating Echo drew nearer, they found themselves filled with… could it be dread that made their throat tighten and their stomach churn so?

“One thing, though… On reflection,” Echo said as she grabbed two wineglasses from their cupboard, one with a chipped rim, followed by an old bottle of rosé (even in this era of perpetual war, some androids still found time to tend to vineyards, and Echo knew those androids well), “some of it sounded a bit too pessimistic for my tastes.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time,” C13 said.

“Religion is the opiate of the masses, it’s true,” said Echo, “but we cannot successfully do away with it if we fail to convince the masses that there is a stronger and healthier relief for their existential angst. We do not have to prostrate ourselves to old gods simply to overcome the machines. That is what we must teach the world.” Echo poured the wine into each glass equally, then took both glasses by the stems. She offered one to C13.

C13 held out their palm and shook their head. “No, no. I’ll take the one with the chipped rim. Today is your triumph. That was your best speech to date.”

Unbeknownst to Echo, C13 had spent the past few months sabotaging the underground broadcast network, making sure her speeches only reached a fraction of her audience. Echo stuck to developing her rhetoric and honing her philosophical knowledge; the nitty-gritty technical details of disseminating her message had been Umbra’s responsibility, giving C13 the perfect cover to wreak havoc.

Echo blushed and handed the wineglass she’d been planning to take for herself to C13. “If you say so.”

The crystal glasses clinked with a heavenly chime, sending pink ripples through the wine.

“To truth?” C13 offered.

“To truth,” Echo agreed.

They both drank their wine, reveling in their triumph. The luscious, blush-colored wine brought with it a rich and complex array of scents and tastes: delicate and melonish, as sweet as it was tart, invoking tropical aromas, as dazzling to the tongue as it was soothing to the mind.

That spirit of celebration, though, did not last long.

Echo’s glass fell to the floor and shattered the instant she had drunk the last drop, and
she followed suit not even a moment later, the shards of crystal lacerating her cheek. Unbeknownst to Echo, the inside of the glass C13 had declined had been coated the night before in a specific suspension of nanomachines which wrought havoc on an android’s biosynthetic processes. It wasn’t C13’s most preferred method of assassination, but it was often the most efficient.

Like always, it worked.

Stricken with convulsions, Echo writhed on the floor, fingernails scrabbling and tearing against the wood, blood welling up on her fingertips as her nails bent and tore themselves free of their beds, gurgling as foam filled her mouth. Soon the bubbling saliva blocking her throat began to run red as it trickled from her open mouth and poured down her chin and neck.

Echo looked up at C13, her dark eyes wide with shock and terror as a red light flickered behind her black pupils, a sign of the logical pathways within her brain, once so clear and orderly and elegant, ripping themselves apart. “U-Um—Umbra—” she choked out.

“I’m sorry,” C13 replied, trying so hard to ignore the lump pounding against the base of their throat, a stone that tried to pull their whole body along with it from the inside as it tried to leap up their mouth. “I—I’m so, so sorry. F-Forgive me, Echo.” Their camouflage broke down despite their best efforts to maintain it, driving the pigment from their skin and returning the hue of their eyes and hair to their base state.

Echo’s last sight was that of her own brother Umbra melting away like a phantom as a pair of red eyes, misty with tears its owner could not fully comprehend, bore down on her.

“I was only following orders.”

As Echo continued to cling to life despite the toxin tearing her body and mind apart from within, C13 drew their most cherished dagger, Carnwennan, from beneath their coat, knelt beside her, reached out and caressed her spittle- and blood-flecked cheek to calm her just as her brother (were he still alive) would have surely done, and with one fluid stroke slit her throat and ended her suffering.

Tears streamed down C13’s cheeks as they stood outside the church they had pretended to call home and watched it burn, the undulating flames belching black smoke into the air. They still clutched their bloodstained knife, wreathing them in shadow.

Everything that had once belonged to Echo and her brother now was ash… except their garden of golden flowers. No, no, C13 could never burn that. The books, the furniture, the walls and ceiling and floors, yes, but… never, never the flowers.

The machines would have burned the old, repurposed church just as well, if they ever traveled through this tucked-away, strategically-insignificant valley in the shadow of an equally-insignificant and often-overlooked mountain. They might have even been incurious enough to spare the flowers, like C13 had done.

C13 watched the plumes of smoke rise to the heavens, a new offering like the pagan sacrifices of the Bronze Age rising to the gods of the forever war.
But false gods could not answer their prayer.

For the greater good of all, the world must believe that humanity continues to live on.

That is why you, the heralds and vanguards of YoRHa, exist.

Humanity… Their evil had poisoned their creations long after their own extinction—poisoned them just as the epidemic that had swept through them thousands of years ago had poisoned the Earth, leaving a toxic blemish in the hearts and souls of humanity’s descendants. Androids had never escaped their shadow. Now they never would.

Echo… What have I done?

C13 swallowed the lump in their throat, wiped the tears from their cheeks, and tied their visor over their eyes. A holographic projection of White appeared in front of them.

“I did it,” they spat at her, bowing their head just slightly so that White could not see the wetness on their cheeks.

White gazed down at them with stern, almost cruel eyes, but sensing the agony wracking C13’s black heart, her gaze softened just a little. “Good work,” she told them. “Return to Milan to await your next assignment.”

C13’s next words came straight from their heart, not their mind, and bypassed every common-sense filter in their programming. “Please. I’ve done my part. There are still two others. Let them suffer instead.”

White was speechless.

“I’ve had enough. I’m begging you. Retire me.”

“Number Thirteen…”

“Please.” C13 began to sob. They couldn’t help it. For once, for the first time, they’d actually loved their target, so much that they had felt the knife they’d run through Echo’s throat tear through their own chest as well. And in that moment when blood and coolant and foamy spit had pooled on the warped and creaky hardwood floors of Echo’s study, C13 had lost every bit of faith in everything they had been programmed to believe. “I can’t carry on like this.” Their fingers dug into the grass, burrowing into the soil, leaving deep reddish-black bloodstains on the grass and watering the soil with Echo’s fleeting vestiges of life.

For a while, White said nothing.

Then, she spoke.

“The others have already been destroyed. You’re the only Type-C left.” Her voice softened just a little, a bittersweet, almost heartbroken half-frown tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Congratulations. You were the best.”

“Make more, then.”

“It’s out of my hands.” White apologetically glanced away. “You were a limited-production run. I’m just one voice on the senior staff, and the rest voted unanimously to suspend further deployment of black-box units pending further research and
development. The alpha version of Project YoRHa is complete. With you gone, development of Project YoRHa will be halted. I can’t say when we’ll be entering beta development, if ever.”

So I’ve done some good, after all. The thought was bitter as wormwood in C13’s head. “Then… sacrifice me on the altar of blood.”

“Very well.” The corner of White’s mouth tightened, as if she were suppressing a rebellious emotion. “I’m sorry, Number Thirteen. I’ll send out a decommissioning team posthaste.” She saluted. “Thank you for your service.”

The hologram faded in a flurry of static, leaving C13 alone.

They knelt there for a long time.

“You’re welcome,” C13 answered.

C13 rose to their feet, walked past the funeral pyre, and took their first stumbling steps up the forsaken mountain, stopping first to pluck a flower from the garden and set it in their hair.

They hardly noticed they did it at first, but soon its weight was great enough to bow their head. It was a sign of their sin, their Mark of Cain.

White’s decommissioning team arrived sooner than C13 had expected, and yet when the moment had come for C13 to join their victims in death, something inside them had screamed out.

They wanted to live.

The androids were shocked to meet such resistance, their blades yielding more out of surprise than by a lack of strength: for all they knew, C13 had begged White to be decommissioned. In fact, they had—but when one had raised his blade to C13’s awaiting neck, when they felt the cold steel against their thin, soft layer of skin, when they realized that they were about to share an eternity of oblivion with everyone whose life they had ever snuffed out—

The assigned executioner had screamed and clutched at his severed arm as blood-red coolant and electroconductive fluid spurted in heavy gouts from severed veins and coated the grass and rocks, splashing against gnarled tree trunks.

Their most treasured dagger Carnwennan wreathed C13 in shadows and hid them from sight; Caladbolg, the great broadsword, cut through their pursuers’ armor as if it were butter and cleaved trees in its wake. C13 had many other ancient weapons at their disposal, all hanging from their back, and wondered why they’d brought them with them. Had they wished to be buried with their treasures like the human pharaohs of the old world? Or had a part of them subconsciously craved to use them against their masters even when they’d been begging for death?

Soon no survivors remained of the decommissioning team; C13 stood alone on the forsaken mountain, on its verdant, forested slopes, gazing over the valley, still able to see the smoke twisting in the air from the library and the dot of gold from the unblemished garden far below.
C13 took one more deep breath of the brisk, fragrant forest air, unaware that it would be their last.

And then they fell.

Fell through the ground as it crumbled beneath their feet.

Fell to a dark, expansive cavern deep within the mountain, landing under a shower of rocky debris, pain engulfing their body.

They passed out several times from the pain, their systems struggling more every time to reboot, until when they awoke an animal was staring at them, a goatlike creature with bright, alert eyes.

“You’ve fallen down, haven’t you?”

No, it wasn’t an animal. Animals didn’t talk.

“Hey there. Are you all right?” it whispered in a soft voice. “Golly, you look hurt.” The creature began to paw through the debris pinning them in place. “Here, it’ll be all right. What’s your name?”

They paused. Their name was... Their name...

They searched through their internal memory. There were gaps. Large gaps. A person named Echo, and another named White, and one named Umbra... but where was their name?

“That’s okay, take your time.”

Their name... It was...
They parted their cracked lips and opened their dry mouth. “Chara…” they croaked.

“…Chara, huh? That’s a nice name. My name is Asriel…”

“As… riel…” Chara reached out with a trembling hand, fingers covered in blood and oil brushing against the furry caprine creature’s floppy ear and leaving a brush stroke of pink and red on the soft, bristly white fur like a splash of paint on an unmarked canvas.

The boy’s eyes were red. Red like Chara’s.

They didn’t know where they were, but they knew that it was home.

“Chara?”

Chara writhed under their blankets, fingers digging into their mattress, emptying a silent scream into their pillow, gasping for—

Soft, furry paws laid on their back. “Chara, you okay?”

A second blanket fell on top of them, its heaviness and thickness pressing down on them, soothing the racing pumping of their circulatory system, quieting the panicked whirring of their black box.

Everything had flooded back to them.

White. Echo. Umbra. The Army of Humanity. Proto YoRHa. Fourteen others like Chara—C13—all dead, all either discovered and killed while infiltrating or crushed by the weight of their own consciences.

It felt like there were two people in their head. Chara and C13. One without a past, the other without a future, their thoughts connecting like the grooved edges of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, slotting into place one after the other, stretching back years. Years of being a murderous infiltrator, a missionary of poison to those who dreamed of a stranger, braver future; years of being an amnesiac, a grateful adoptee and caring sibling to a family of royal blood clinging to their kindness like a shipwrecked sailor clinging to driftwood.

Chara caught their breath, choked down hot bile rising in their throat, and turned their head. The room was dark, but they could make out the silhouette of Asriel sitting on the side of the bed next to them. As their eyes adjusted, Chara could see that Asriel’s bed was completely and utterly unmade—the boy had torn off the duvet cover and flung it over Chara’s bed to make them comfier.

Asriel tugged on the blankets. “A-Are you…”

Chara sat up. “I’m—fine,” they lied. They reached out and ran their fingers over Asriel’s furry ears, feeling the soft bristles under their fingertips and warm skin underneath. It soothed them, letting the memories that had assaulted their mind pull away. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s okay.” Asriel put his arms over Chara’s shoulders and nuzzled their neck, the warmth of the little boy’s embrace a welcome respite. “I was already awake,” he murmured.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Chara wished they had insomnia—that would be so much more preferable to these
hideous visions. O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams.

“It’s just…” Asriel buried his face in Chara’s shoulder, his voice trembling. “I feel so bad. About today.”

Today. Asgore’s birthday had been coming up. Asriel had wanted to give him a gift he’d like. He liked Mom’s baking… so Chara had suggested they make him a pie while he and Toriel were out for the day on royal business.

Neither Chara nor Asriel had ever baked anything before, but they thought they had seen Toriel in the kitchen enough to know the ropes. Besides, there were plenty of cookbooks in the kitchen, dog-eared cookbooks with soft-edged, frayed, thumbéd-through pages, annotated and edited by a pen held in a strong, soft paw. How hard could it be?

It had seemed easy enough, but… then they’d run out of butter. One more cup of butter. Cup of butter. Buttercups would work just fine, right? Asriel had suggested it. It sounded sensible to Chara, who’d known nothing of food and very little of botany.

The simple, tiny, five-petaled flowers with lustrous butter-yellow petals Asriel had run out and gathered had sparked something in Chara. A memory, or was it a daydream? It was like a smaller, less fragrant version of the golden flower Chara had been holding onto when they’d fallen into the Underground… but there was more to it than that.

Ignoring their sense of unease, Chara had continued on, mashing the flowers into a fine paste and mixing it into the dough for the pie crust.

Perhaps they or Asriel should have noticed that the crust’s texture was off, that it came out of the oven too hard and too blackened, that it was fragile and crumbly. But Chara thought maybe that was just what the recipe was meant to be like.

That night, Asgore, beaming with pride for his son and adopted child, had taken a single bite. His eyes had bulged, he’d gagged, he’d begun to choke. And Chara had found themselves seized with a nameless fear as they watched their adoptive father—this great mountain of a beast who’d taken them in and loved them so much—contort his face in agony.

Hours later, when Asgore had begun to feel better—his retching echoing through the castle, bouncing off the stone walls and polished wood floors well into the evening—Toriel had wrung the truth out of her children. Her stern glare as she lectured them had reminded Chara of something… someone they’d known once, though they had forgotten.

Asriel, poor child, so small and so immature, had immediately burst into tears.

And Chara?

As they had thought about a person they cared about writhing and gurgling in agony, they’d found themselves seized with manic, terrified laughter, disguising the tears of horror streaming down their cheeks for tears of glee. They hadn’t understood it until now… when the doors of perception that had hitherto been sealed had finally opened up.

“I… I wish I could’ve laughed it off,” Asriel said, sniffing away tears and snot, “like you did, Chara.”

Chara chuckled. “No. Mother would have killed us both. One of us had to be the crybaby.”
“I mean… you knew Dad was gonna be all right, didn’t you? Because… ’cuz you’re older than me, a-and you’re smart…”

“Of course,” Chara lied. “Of course I knew he’d be all right. That’s why I was laughing.” Chara started scratching behind Asriel’s ears, and with a barely-suppressed involuntary giggle, the boy pulled away.

“Noooo, Chara, stop it!” Asriel bleated, batting Chara’s hand away.

“Stop being ticklish there, then,” Chara replied, their mirth keeping at bay the swirling maelstrom within their mind.

Asriel caught his breath, nervously tugging on his ear. Chara could see how distraught he was, how frightened he was, how worried he was that maybe, maybe now, after all this, his parents might be disappointed enough to no longer love him…

“It’ll be okay. It was an honest accident,” Chara told him, “and Mother and Father both know it. We’ll pay more attention the next time and get it right.”

Asriel sniffled. “Okay.”

“Would it help if you slept next to me?” Chara asked. “Maybe you’ll help me keep my nightmares away, too.”

“Um… Actually…” Asriel crawled up the blanket and leaned toward Chara, the tip of his snout nearly brushing against the tip of Chara’s nose, his voice dropping into a conspiratorial whisper.

“Can you show me your swords, Chara?”

The bluntness of the request drove a nervous bark of laughter from Chara’s mouth. “D—Do you think that will help?”

“I wanna see all your swords!”

Chara sighed, pulled themselves out of bed, and carefully crept out of the bedroom with Asriel in tow. When they had fallen into the mountain, they’d brought their collection with them, but with so many of their memories in pieces, they hadn’t been able to explain how all the weapons belonged to them—although they knew each one by name. Asgore kept them in his armory, reasoning they were too dangerous for a child to deal with.

It was strange to be thought of as a child. Such things did not exist on the surface, not anymore. Androids were born fully-grown, with fully-developed psyches based on templates from ancient humans. But when Asgore and Toriel, him nearly two and a half meters tall not counting his curled ram-like horns, her just over two meters tall, stood before Chara… Chara felt small, vulnerable, and—they supposed—childlike.

Chara and Asriel silently made it to the armory and spread out the swords in their collection on a long wooden table.

“This one is Caladbolg,” Chara began, holding a flashlight to the silvery, rainbow-slicked blade. It was a long broadsword, heavy as well, and its golden hilt and pommel glittered. “The royal blade left a rainbow in its wake whenever one swung it, and in the right hands, could split a mountain in twain.”

Asriel gasped. “Could it cut through the Barrier?”
Chara shrugged. “It might not be that strong.” They moved on. “And Carnwennan here,” they said, running their hand along the black dagger with a white hilt that served as their personal favorite, “belonged to another king, one who was often called ’The Once and Future King.’ It was said that when he died, he vowed to return when his kingdom needed him most.”

“Did he?”

“Who knows?” Chara picked up the dagger, letting tendrils of shadow slowly wrap around their body until they had vanished completely, and reappeared behind Asriel, much to the boy’s shock—he nearly leaped out of his skin. “Perhaps he has returned,” they said, laying the dagger in Asriel’s paw. The boy prince’s fingers slowly curled around it. “Perhaps it is you.”

Asriel shivered as Chara slipped the knife from his paw and set it back down on the table.

Chara moved on. “And this,” they said, gesturing to a short sword with a coppery blade, “is the Sword of Goujian. The blade renders its target untouched by the passage of time…”

“What’s this one?” Asriel asked, pointing to a sword that could have been Caladbolg’s twin, but was shorter, more slender, with a more ornate hilt and more jewelry in its pommel.

“That,” said Chara, “is the Joyeuse. Its pommel is said to contain elements of the Spear of Longinus, itself a legendary weapon which once pierced the side of a god. It has a twin, Précieuse, a blade forged by a rival of its wielder out of jealousy. However, that sword remains but a mere footnote, while this lives on in legend.”

Asriel looked over the array of weaponry, eyes wide as saucers, mouth hanging agape in awe. “How do you find these?”

“I happen across them. Relics of the old world litter the surface of the Earth. Sometimes,” Chara mused, “I can’t help but feel that they find me, and not vise versa.”

“One day…” Asriel yawned. “When I’m as big as Dad, I’ll wield all these swords at once, and I’ll chop the Barrier down…”

Chara caught the boy before he could fall and wrapped their arms around his chest, hoisting him off the ground. “Even if you’re twice Father’s size, you’ll still only have two hands,” they reminded Asriel as the boy prince began to nod off in their arms, resting his fuzzy head on their shoulder.

“I’ll… I’ll hold one in each hand… one in my foot… and one in my mouth…”

“And you’ll just hop around on one foot?”

Asriel began to softly snore.

Chara carried their adoptive little brother back to bed, holding him close to their chest like a stuffed animal and climbing into bed. With that comforting warmth and softness, Chara slept through the night, no longer troubled by the dreams of their sordid past, but knowing now their purpose.

One of these days, they would return to the surface and create a world where no one had to be like them. A world where Asriel and his parents and their kingdom could finally see the sunlight for the first time in a dozen millennia. A world of peace and tranquility. The world Echo wanted, and White, too, although doubtless, neither of them would recognize the world Chara envisioned in their stead.

The only question now was…
Far, far away, and many, many years later, in the orbital base that housed YoRHa, something inside Chara stirred. For an instant, the memory of Asriel’s soft, always-tender hugs had returned to them, so real they felt as though he were in the same room as them with his furry arms wrapped over Chara’s shoulders, just like that one night they had awakened.

With that came nostalgia, loneliness, and above all, homesickness so strong they almost felt physically ill from it.

But they brushed that feeling aside, shaking off their dizziness—for, at the moment, they had more important things to concern themselves with.

Today was a momentous occasion, and the word echoing through the corridors of the Bunker was that it could be the last day of the Fourteenth Machine War. The global machine network was in disarray, thanks in no small part to the courageous efforts of a certain pair of YoRHa soldiers, and today a battle had begun in one of the most strategically-significant parts of the world. On this very day, the machine army could be dealt an even more crippling blow, perhaps freeing the majority of the Earth from machine control for good.

Many off-duty units had crowded Ops, eager to gaze on the havoc YoRHa’s elite soldiers, commanded on the ground by none other than Number Two Type-B, were wreaking on the machine hordes. However, Chara had convinced 6O (who’d against all odds managed to get a time-off request for today approved not only the bureaucracy but by Commander White herself) to join them in their quarters instead for a more… intimate celebration. The chronically-lovelorn Operator was as eager to take up their offer as an affection-starved puppy was to receive pets.

Over the past nine months, Chara had always been there for 6O in the guise of her dear friend Lucky to console her through her frequent bouts of heartbreak. As a result, 6O had reached the point long ago where she would follow Chara to the ends of the earth and beyond if given the chance.

Chara hadn’t meant to spend so long in this wretched place, but they had made the most of it. They now had everything in place to return to the Underground and set their life’s work in motion. All that was missing now was the getaway plan. Until then…

Chara poured bubbling, golden champagne into two simple plastic cups. 6O watched intently while sitting on their cot. Although she was off-duty today, she was still in uniform, mainly because YoRHa units typically didn’t have anything to wear other than their uniforms. The only part she left off was the half-face veil which served to facilitate communication between herself and her assigned field agent—typically 2B, although another Operator was filling in today.

“Are you sure you don’t want to head down to Ops and watch the ground assault?” Chara asked.

“Oh, no, I’ve had butterflies in my stomach all morning,” 6O confessed, shaking her head. “I… I got a cold chill up my spine just walking past the command center this morning. Like I knew something bad was gonna happen.”

Chara, too, had an odd feeling about today. It was like the heaviness of the air preceding a thunderstorm or a tornado. They couldn’t quite put the feeling into words, but it was like there was something cold and hot right at the back of their mind. “Sometimes it’s hard to watch history happen,” they told 6O, handing her the still-half-full bottle of champagne. 6O plucked it out of their hand and gazed upon it in awe as if it were a holy relic.
“H… How did you get this up here?” she asked, her eyes wide as she ran her hands along the smooth curves of the emerald-green glass bottle.

“A few months ago, one of my missions brought me close to a Resistance vineyard I knew well,” Chara explained. “I merely had to cut some deals to have a few bottles smuggled on the next supply shuttle to the Bunker and sent to my quarters. Child’s play, really. More than worth the effort.” Chara gave 6O a little smile and handed her one of the glasses. The stupid little plastic cup really wasn’t appropriate for champagne, but it would have to do. It was hard to find undamaged champagne flutes amid the ruins of civilization, after all.

6O set the bottle aside on her bed and took the cup with a slightly trembling hand, staring at the rising bubbles as if hypnotized.

“The man who runs this vineyard is a weapons dealer by trade. I stumbled upon his, er, side business quite by accident while procuring some rare artifacts, and when I saw this particular wine I found it unmistakably familiar.” Chara laid on the charm as they curved their arm around 6O’s waist, gently drawing her toward them. “Bubbly, sweet, and fragrant; gold like a certain Operator’s hair, sparkling like a certain Operator’s eyes…”

6O gasped, her eyes lighting up.

“There’s that sparkle I was talking about,” Chara said, smiling as sappily as they could manage as their hand rose, fingertips just barely brushing the curve of the Operator’s spine. 6O shivered.

“T-Toast?” 6O blinked. “A-Are we supposed to heat this wine up before we drink it?”

Chara chuckled, pulling their free hand away from the back of 6O’s neck and using it to guide the cup in 6O’s hand, raising it until the edges of both glasses clinked together. The sound, unfortunately, was dull and faint—a disappointment—but like the cups, it would have to suffice. “This is a toast. In the old world, they say, humans would toast to declare love, or wish one health, or celebrate a momentous occasion. Shall we toast,” they suggested, “to all three? Love, life, and triumph?”

“Um…” 6O’s cheeks were turning brighter and brighter red by the second. “U—Uh, I-I, um… Lucky, I…”

The room went dark. 6O, in her surprise, yelped, and Chara heard the sound of wine splashing against the floor. The cup, of course, made no sound but a light thump, unlike the screech of shattering glass that had heralded Echo’s death so many centuries ago, and Chara threw their own cup to the floor in a panic before grabbing 6O by her forearms to steady her.

The lights flickered; when they came back on, they were dull, red emergency lights, bathing Chara’s sparse quarters in stark shades of crimson. 6O clung to Chara as if they were a living shield, and Chara found themselves inwardly welcoming her embrace.

Something had gone very, very wrong… but for Chara, it could be the lucky break they had spent the past few months waiting for. Because at last, they were ready to leave.

Jumping into action, Chara slid a long black box of lacquered wood out from under their mattress,
removed the lid, and gazed upon the polished gladius within.

The hilt was a matte-black ebony wrapped in shiny sable leather; the opalescent jewel set into the pommel matched the blood-red light beating down from the ceiling; the blade was the length of Chara’s arm from wrist to shoulder and double-edged, black as the rest of the weapon, with eldritch runes etched deep into its length. The carved runes sparkled with ruby light, as if the blade, beneath its coating of sleek, obsidian-colored metal, was composed of pure diamond. Set at the base of the blade was an enormous orb of fire opal shimmering in many dancing colors as the bloody light played upon it.

This was Mourning Star, also called Wormwood in ancient tongues: a weapon from eons long past—a weapon said to be of demonic origin—which would feed on the souls of others. It was the most magnificent of any ancient weapon Chara had ever encountered.

Chara had spent weeks poring over ancient myths and relics from the old world merely to learn of its existence (the server on the moon, a collection of human knowledge unsurpassed by anything on Earth, had proved an invaluable asset—it had been a shame Chara had had to set 9S up to die to get that information, but 9S could always be replaced, after all). Tracking it down was a journey that could have taken a thousand lifetimes…but as if fate itself smiled upon Chara, they had found it within only a few months.

Perhaps this blade, like all the others, had sought them out.

Magic swords did not come with instruction manuals, but Chara had learned as much about Mourning Star as they could. This was a vessel suitable for Chara’s purposes…one which rendered their traitorous brother obsolete. It was their Plan C: If their other two candidates for vessel-hood both proved unworthy as Asriel had, then this sword would take in the seven souls in their stead and be the vessel Chara needed.

Laying their hand on the hilt, Chara could sense that the blade was not yet hungry…but that was no obstacle. They would not need to collect their souls up here, after all.

Chapter End Notes

You know what’s coming next.
The first thing Chara noticed when they stepped into the blood-red hallway was laughter. A cacophony of laughter, howling, hysterical, agonized, shrieking laughter bouncing on the walls of the Bunker and echoing, looping on itself in its ripples and waves like a symphony of the damned.

Needless to say, it was a far cry from the tense, hushed calm normally engulfing the space station.

"This is—is a message from th-the C-C-Council of Humanity. The Council is—is d-d-dismayed to rep-p-port that—HAHAHahahaHAahaha!" The piped-in transmission from the alleged 'Council,' normally spoken in a gruff, gravelly, masculine voice, shifted to a childish, high-pitched voice interspersed with giggles and plagued with electronic interference. "The cOUNcil is DIsmayED to REPoRT thAt ALL YoRHa gROUnd fORcEs h—hAve b-b-b-bEEN eLIMinATED. OuR cONdoLEnCES to thE FaMiLiES oF thE DECeaSeD! HEEheeheeHEEHEEheeehee!"

"Well, that can’t be good," Chara found themselves glibly remarking as Pod 413 floated out of their quarters alongside 6O and parked itself in the air over Chara’s shoulder.

A pair of androids in black coats stumbled around the corner, staggering drunkenly through the hall, helmets at their sides and swords in their hands. 6O waved at them. “Hey! 12H! 40D! What’s going on?”

The two androids looked up at the sound of the Operator’s voice, the red light emitted from their eyes nearly blinding.

“Oh, shit!” Chara wrenched 6O’s arm, shoving her behind them, and readied the Mourning Star as the two androids, their minds reduced to a fine paste by a logic virus infection, raised already-bloody swords and lunged forward, somehow still alert enough to dodge the automatic bursts of gunfire from Chara’s pod.

Chara caught the first one—12H—as she swung her blade, parrying with the obsidian blade of the Mourning Star. Type-H units were healers, almost never put on the front lines or even assigned weapons—so this one was easy to disarm. Chara stabbed her in the shoulder, wrapped their arm around her neck, and held her in front of them like a living shield as her equally-addled companion—40D, again, not a combat unit—ran her sword through her own companion’s body, then leaped back as the blade exited 12H’s back and sidestepped the protruding blade, swinging downward with their own sword and severing 40D’s arm. With a second strike, Chara slit the infected android’s throat,
sending a gout of blood shooting up and splattering on the ceiling as 40D slumped to the floor.

As 6O stood there, shivering in shock, flecks of blood smeared on her cheek, Chara grabbed her by the arm and dragged her down the hall. “Follow me. The hangar bay. Now.”

As willing as she was, her legs took some persuading—but 6O stumbled after Chara nonetheless. “All the ground forces?” she mumbled, dazed.

“Oh, please, 6O. Why would you think our enemies would tell us the truth when a lie would hurt us just as much?” Chara said as they led 6O on, the elevator leading to the hangar bay in clear sight just a few meters ahead.

Another pair of androids, these ones fully-armored, stumbled down the hall with all the grace and poise of the living dead. These ones were Type-B’s, with actual combat subroutines to draw on: Even in the throes of viral infection, they were still alert enough to fight with some semblance of skill, dancing around the suppressing fire from Chara’s pod. A swung blade nicked Chara’s stomach, tearing their uniform as they leaped back and inadvertently knocked 6O to the floor. One of the infected units raised her thick, broad falchion—

Only for a javelin to tear through her back and exit her chest in a spray of blood. The infected android dropped her sword, letting it clatter against the ceramic tiles, and scrabbled at the exit wound as the scarlet-colored optical sensors in her helmet flickered and went dark.

A long steel blade bit into the other android’s shoulder, cutting diagonally almost all the way through her torso. Both androids slumped to the floor, their synthetic blood pooling on the tiled floor.

Chara would have sighed in relief, if not for the same white blade that had saved them pointing itself at their throat.

The two androids who’d saved their life—

“2B! 9S!” 6O exclaimed, half shocked and half overjoyed.

Chara threw up their hands as 2B’s ice-chip eyes bored into theirs from behind her black visor. Or were her eyes blazing red now, like the others? 9S stood at her side, spear in hand, a splash of blood diagonally bisecting his soft and boyish face. His eyes, too, were hidden. And between the two of them—

Commander White laid her hands on the two androids’ shoulders. “Look at their eyes. These two aren’t infected.” The two pods floating beside 2B and 9S chimed in their agreement after a quick examination.

Chara took a grateful breath. “And you two?”

2B gingerly extricated herself from 6O’s hug, despite her Operator’s insistence on clinging to her. “I
“L-Look aT YoURSELVES, aNDROiDS. P-P-P-PATHetIC cREAtURES of fAlsE fLeSH and cIRcUITs. PAnTing and sWEAting in—in—the IMaGE of yOur fAuTY a-a-a-a-a-aNCesTors. WE, yOur bELoVED maCHInes… H-H-How could you HoPE to CHallENge uS?”

“Shut up!” 9S impotently shouted at the haywire messages from the Council of Humanity.

“L-Let US pUNish yoU For yoUR hUBris. HAHahaHAhahaHA! Like ICaRUS fAlling tO the oCEAn… Fall! Fall! FalL!”

White keyed the elevator; the light turned green and the door slid open almost immediately. “This way.”

2B and 9S filed in, 6O in tow; Chara passed White on their way in, only to feel her hand fall on their shoulder.

“Number Thirteen,” she whispered, her emerald green eyes—rendered pitch-black in the red emergency lighting—cutting into Chara’s very soul.

She knew.

She knew who Chara was.

There was no trace of the awe, suspicion, fear, confusion, or any of the other emotions Chara would have expected to have heard in her voice. When had she figured it out? Just now? Nine months ago? Any time in between? If so, why hadn’t she ever acted on it? Had she not seen C13’s return as anything to be concerned about? Had she viewed them as a prodigal son?

“Welcome back,” White added in a hushed voice, ushering Chara into the elevator before stepping in after them and closing the door.

Once the five of them had crowded into the elevator, the floor began to sink.

“The machines set off an EMP,” 2B recounted as the elevator slid down its shaft and headed for the hangar. “After that, all the other units around us started behaving erratically.”

“’Erratically’ is putting that a little lightly,” 9S said. “They were as hell-bent on killing us as the machines. We had to detonate our black boxes to neutralize them.”

“Neither of us expected the virus to have hit the Bunker, too,” 2B added.

“HAHAhahahaHAHAHAhaha! You dIDn’t thINK we’d EVEntuALLy fUnd the bAckdOoR yOU sO tHOughtFUL ly lEfT foR uS, dID yOU?” the mocking machines chimed in. “It aLL bUt hAD oUR NAmes oN IT! LiKe yOU wAnTED uS tO FinD it!”

“’Backdoor?’” 9S repeated. He turned to face White, a suspicious scowl growing on his face.

“I was assured by the senior staff,” White said, a nervous twitch threatening to break her mask of dispassionate calmness, “that it was well-hidden, heavily-protected, and solely for use by the Army of Humanity, in the case of an emergency.”

The machines’ representative girlishly giggled again, then switched its voice back to the same gruff, masculine voice that usually relayed messages from the Council.

“The following materials document the final stages of the YoRHa project. Note that this information
is classified as Level-SS, meaning that it must not be disclosed to anyone involved in the YoRHa project, including the Commander of the Bunker. Project 0 3-0 1: Disposal of YoRHa. The backdoor of the Bunker has been set to open once the time approaches to switch to new models when enough combat data has been collected. The Bunker will be disposed of by having it be deliberately attacked by machines. At this time, all materials regarding the YoRHa project, including this document, will be lost, and falsification of the information that mankind still resides on the moon will be complete.”

The message left the elevator in utter silence. Even Commander White was left speechless, her mouth agape.

“Falsification?” 6O repeated, her voice timid and wavering.

“They’re just… tossing us out… like garbage?” 9S wondered aloud, a quiet fury underlying his voice.

Chara let the words sink into their conscience. It wasn’t as surprising to them as it was to the others. In fact, it made perfect sense. Chara had killed plenty to silence dissenting voices and lend credence to the rumor that mankind was alive and well… and this was just the logical conclusion of that plan. Destroy everything, cover up all the loose ends, and build something new on the ashes to hide the corpses. What was surprising was that White was just as in the dark about how disposable she really was. It felt… almost poetic.

Laughter bubbled up from Chara’s chest. Instantly 2B and 9S had their weapons trained on Chara, both worried this was a sign of viral infection. Stifling themselves, Chara shook their head. “Oh, White. Isn’t it just like old times?”

The elevator door mercifully slid open, and White all but threw herself out into the hangar. “We’ll discuss this on the surface,” she said, her bloodstained white gown and frayed ash-blonde hair trailing behind her, “assuming we live that long.”

“You’re damn right we—!” 9S dismissed his own thought with a frustrated growl, sighed, shook his head, and ran out of the elevator, suppressing his anger for the time being as the other androids filtered out behind him.

The hangar bay, normally filled with dozens of flight units ready to fly, was a ghost town. Only four units remained.

Four units, and five people trying to escape.

“Where’d the rest of the flight units go?” 6O gasped. “The hangar bay… The ground assault didn’t use all of them, did it?”

A cough echoed through the empty hangar. Chara zeroed in on it and spied, among pools of blood and scattered corpses, a slightly-less-corpselike body slumped over in the corner—like the others, a Type-M unit designed to maintain vehicles and other parts of the space station as part of the Bunker’s permanent staff. His clothes were covered in grease and blood in equal amounts, his skin ashen, his eyes (very much not red) glassy, and his lips starting to turn blue.

9S knelt beside him, cringing at the sight of the hole in his stomach, and laid a hand on his shoulder. “What happened here?”

The Type-M barely looked in his direction. “They just… scrambled for the flight units. The red eyes. Killed every one of us who tried to stop them.”
“Of course. Type-M’s have no combat capabilities,” 2B said. “I’m surprised you put up a fight at all.”

“We couldn’t just…” The android coughed, blood dribbling down his chin as he clutched at the blossoming wound in his gut. “…let those walking virus factories head to Earth, could we?”

And yet you did, Chara wanted to point out (but held their tongue out of respect for the dead).

“What’s your designation, sir?” White asked.

The Type-M looked up at her, eyes widening, the corners of his mouth curling as if he were looking up at a saint. Chara nearly gagged. “Commander… it’s 12M, ma’am.”

“YoRHa Unit 12M.” White held her hand to her chest in a formal salute. “Thank you for your service.”

“For whatever good it was,” 12M weakly muttered (Chara knew the transmission from the “Council of Humanity” was weighing heavily on his mind). Yet still, he smiled, closed his eyes, bowed his head, and passed away. Chara felt a soft, slender, weak hand wrap around theirs; knowing it was 6O’s, they squeezed back.

“We should take these flight units,” said 2B, breaking the silence, “before any more infected units show up.”

Everyone looked around at the four remaining flight units, nobody wanting to say the obvious—that there were one too many people trying to escape.

“I’ll stay behind,” 6O finally announced, her voice quiet, hoarse, and mousy. “I—I’m useless on the surface, a-and besides, I can’t even pilot a flight unit…”

Chara felt their stomach drop as they heard 6O volunteer to sacrifice herself. She couldn’t… They needed a YoRHa unit to complete their plan, and they would vastly prefer one who couldn’t fight back over a combat-capable unit like 2B or 9S. Under no circumstances could they afford to let 6O leave their side!

“I—I always wanted to see the Earth, but…” 6O gazed down at her boots, her eyes misting. “But not like this. Not if going means one of you has to die. I…”

Chara had to stop this.

“I’ve lived here all my life,” said 6O. “I’m happy I got to see so much of the Earth through your pod’s eyes, 2B. And, um… 2B, before you go… And you, too, Thirteen… I wanna say… I… I always had feelings for…” Her voice began to break.

Chara clamped their hands on her shoulders. “No!” they shouted out, shaking her. 6O couldn’t help but raise her head and look them in the eyes. “You’re not staying here, 6O. I… I knew it from the second I met you, that day you came to comfort me after my friends were killed. I knew how I felt about you. I refuse to set foot on the Earth without you—because I love you, 6O!”

The declaration left everybody in shock.

6O buried her face in Chara’s chest, sobbing. “I—I—Thank you so much, Lucky! But… But I…”

White cleared her throat. “You can slave two flight units’ functions to a single support pod. Number Thirteen, link your pod to two of the flight units and give one to 6O with the autopilot enabled. 2B
and 9S will cover you.”

2B was taken aback. “What? Commander, what about—”

“Does it not make sense for the captain to go down with the ship?” White asked, a sardonic grin cracking her stern facade. “Besides, you wouldn’t be stranding me here. I have a personal ship docked on the other side of the station I can take instead. It’s a prototype for the next model of flight unit bound exclusively to my private key. I was content to let it go up in flames with the rest of the station, but…”

“Rank has its privileges, I guess.” 9S stepped forward. “Won’t you need an escort, ma’am? We don’t know how many infected units are still—”

White let out a sharp, uncharacteristic bark of laughter. “I did not become the Commander of the YoRHa forces by sitting at a desk. All I need is a weapon,” she said, letting the riding crop she carried at her side drop to the floor. “9S, if you would…”

9S acquiesced and handed White his blood-soaked spear.

“I’ll take good care of it,” White said, grabbing the shaft and holding the spear at her side. “We’ll see each other again on the surface. Glory to—”

She looked at the weary, demoralized faces before her.

“The old salute,” she mused, “doesn’t feel right anymore, does it?”

*For some of us, Chara thought, it never did.*

At the other end of the hangar, the elevator door slid open as if on cue, and a gaggle of combat units poured out of it, giggling and laughing like rabid hyenas.

“Take off!” White called out, stepping between what remained of YoRHa. “I’ll take care of these.”

Four flight units fled the Bunker, silently cutting through the abyss of space. Other flight units, manned by infected YoRHa soldiers, zeroed in on them, nearly two dozen moving in a loose cloud like a swarm of insects with no sense of tactics or formation.

*We can’t let any of the infected units reach the surface,* said 9S, his voice ringing directly in Chara’s ear. His flight unit clipped one of the attacking units’ wings, throwing off its trajectory; as the unit swung around with guns blazing 9S rolled out of the way and switched to attack mode, heat saber shearing through the enemy unit and slicing it in half. *There are enough units causing havoc on the ground already.*

*I’ll take care of them,* 2B responded. A surgical burst of machine-gun fire caused an enemy unit’s cradle to erupt in a silent blossom of explosive shrapnel, tossing the mangled remains of its pilot into space. *9S, head for Anemone’s camp and lend your support to the Resistance.*

*And leave you behind?* 9S asked, incredulous.

*I’ll rendezvous with you once I’ve eliminated the infected units up here. I’m the better pilot, and they’ll have more use for your hacking skills on the surface. 13B, I’m sending you the coordinates for Pascal’s village. Escort 6O there. She’ll be safer with them than she’ll be in a warzone.*
Chara ignored the coordinates as they popped up on their HUD. They had a different location in mind. [Roger that. I’m counting on you to open a path for us.]

[On it.]

Chara kept their view of the Earth steady as they began their descent, 6O’s flight unit trailing behind them with its controls slaved to theirs. The enemy units immediately saw 6O and took her for an easy target, closing in on her as 2B and 9S did their best to lead them away.

Chara gritted their teeth as a stray missile blast rocked their flight unit. 6O screamed in their ear. Chara could tell she had her eyes closed, and would probably keep them closed through the majority of the journey down to Earth. Watching the action unfold from the safety of an orbital satellite as 6O did a dozen times a day was nothing compared to actually being in a perilous situation. [Lucky! What was that?] she asked.

[Turbulence,] they answered, keeping a level head.

[In space?]

[Pod 413, enable stealth shielding on Unit 6O’s machine.] Chara ordered. The pod did so, and the electromagnetic coating on the flight unit’s armor shimmered, projecting an image of its surroundings like a chameleon changing its skin. That ought to make the ride less bumpy.

The enemy units were derailed for a little while—but soon began targeting 6O’s flight unit again, prompting her to shriek every time a stray shot sent a shudder through her machine. Their shots were getting more precise by the second. How could they target her so well without being able to see her?

[Lucky!]

[I’m working on it,] Chara growled, beginning to lose their cool under all these mounting frustrations.

9S’s voice came through, crackling with interference as he picked off two of the attackers on Chara’s tail. [13B! The enemy units are targeting 6O’s exhaust trail!] Another flight unit came close to 6O, shifting into attack mode and drawing back its heat saber, ready to cleave her in two—only for 2B to blow its arm off with a well-placed shot.

[Bring 6O’s flight unit closer,] 9S continued, [and use your own unit’s exhaust to mask her presence.]

Consolidating two targets into one made things easier for the enemy, and it would leave Chara less room to maneuver… but it wasn’t as much of a risk as leaving 6O out there as a sitting duck. Besides, they had no choice. Both of them would reach the mountain, or neither would.

Another shot cut through the vacuum of space, and another, tearing through another two enemy units. [9S! 6O! 13B!] 2B shouted. [Go!]

Chara drew 6O’s flight unit closer to theirs until the two were flying wing-to-wing, 6O’s electromagnetic camouflage shielding projecting a warped image of the Earth on its armor as both flight units began to skim the atmosphere. They gunned it, skidding against the atmosphere; the gunmetal-gray armor of the flight units kicked up sparks and began to glow orange against the friction. Chara felt their teeth rattle in their skull.

[You’d better not be too far behind, 2B!] 9S called out to her as he began his descent behind Chara and 6O, launching a salvo of missiles behind him to slow the other flight units’ attacks.
[We’ll all meet up soon, right, 2B?] 6O asked, strains of panic lacing her voice. [Don’t you die up here! Please!]

A backward glance showed 2B’s flight unit dancing around roughly half a dozen enemy units. Despite being outnumbered, she had the advantage of agility and skill over her foes. However, more enemy units were still in the area, and with 2B distracted, they had their eyes on Chara and 9S.

[We’ll rendezvous at the village.] 2B told the others, turning her attention away from the enemies engaged in close combat to squeeze off a shot and take down an infected unit that had nearly gotten a bead on 9S. [Just go—]

An attack from two fronts caught 2B, shearing off one of her flight unit’s legs and one of its wings. She quickly launched a counterattack and cut through both attackers in one fluid stroke, but the remaining fighters, smelling blood in the water, closed in on her.

[Just go!] 2B shouted. Interference began to swallow up her voice as the atmosphere swallowed Chara and the others up. [Don’t waste any more time—!]

[2B!] 9S and 6O screamed out in unison.

The silence of space gave way to the rushing, deafening roar of wind as air currents, heavy and thick, buffeted the flight units. Chara shifted into flight mode to present the wind with a more aerodynamic profile.

Gravity’s hold became tighter and tighter as the flight units continued their descent and the air became thicker and thicker, wispy high-altitude clouds slowly giving way to their thicker cousins closer to the Earth’s surface.

Chara breathed a sigh of relief.

“Don’t get complacent,” 9S warned them, his voice straining to be heard amid the environmental noise. “We’re not through yet.”

The sea of clouds beneath them burst, a cluster of flight-capable machines flying through to meet the three descending flight units. Their blade-tipped quad-copter designs spun around them as they opened fire.

9S dodged the flood of bullets and launched a salvo of screeching missiles through the air at the approaching machines as a burst of gunfire from above rocked his flight unit. “What?”

Chara consulted their radar. Machines below them, dozens of them—and more hostile-looking blips approaching from above. Five enemy flight units in total.

“Shit!” 9S switched back to attack mode and spun around, firing on the attacking flight units as Chara focused on the machines blocking their path. “If they got 2B…”

“They got 2B?!” 6O wailed.

Chara pressed on, their flight unit and 6O’s skimming the sea of clouds as bullets and beams of hot plasma cut through the air. 9S fell back as well, firing a few parting shots at the enemy flight units. One burst into flames, but the other four were undeterred. Between the machines and the infected androids, Chara, 6O, and 9S were caught between a rock and the mother of all hard places.

Chara could hear 9S grinding his teeth. “Androids and machines working together,” he spat. “Never thought I’d see the day. Dammit, I… Huh?”
Chara glanced at their radar. Another signal was approaching from above, and closing in fast. It was moving at… three times the speed of the other units?

“As if we didn’t have enough to worry about!” 9S snarled, firing wildly at the enemy. “Son of a—”

A stray shot from the machines below splashed against one of his flight unit’s engines, sending out a shower of sparks and gout of flames, and belching out thick black smoke. 9S began to struggle to maintain his altitude, still firing wildly on the approaching flight units.

Chara took out one of the flying machines below that had gotten too close for comfort and spun on a dime, firing on the four flight units and downing one of them before it could finish 9S off. It was a thrill to watch the flight unit erupt into a blossom of flames, but a short-lived one. The other three were gaining ground, guns blazing, the impact of the shots pockmarking the armor of Chara’s flight unit. 6O shrieked as her camouflaged unit was caught in the crossfire, bullets blackening the hull of the flight unit and deadening the camouflage projector panels. 6O’s flight unit, once nearly invisible, began to appear in pieces hanging in the air.

This was it. This was where all of Chara’s careful plans and sky-high ambitions came to naught. This was where—

Twin beams of light lanced down from a pinprick in the sky, skewering the other two flight units through their cockpits. The lasers kept going as they pierced their targets, catching clusters of machine lifeforms below as well and engulfing them in blooming fire.

The pinprick grew rapidly, taking on a harsh-angled, draconic form as it roared through the air, dancing around salvos of gunfire with almost supernatural deftness and grace. A message popped up on Chara’s HUD:

PROXIMITY ALERT

Flight Unit Mk. V.0.2.1

YWM-zx5 [Epyon]

‘Epyon…’” 9S gasped. “This must be the prototype the Commander was talking about!”

The Epyon closed in, unfolding itself from flight mode to a more humanoid attack mode, just as any normal flight unit would do. Its basic structure was much like the other flight units, but more. Larger, more heavily-armored, with longer limbs and a spiny silhouette; sharp talons capped long arms jutting from wide shoulders; its legs bristled with vernier thrusters; a segmented, whiplike tail cut an undulating trail through the air as it dangled behind a sleek, thickly-armored core. Two long cannons sprouted from its shoulders, swiveling forward as the flight unit unfolded itself. Its color scheme, rather than the white or black of standard-issue flight units, was a glistening pearlescent with gold trim.

The single remaining enemy flight unit whirled around to face the approaching Epyon, only for the Epyon to reach out, snatch the flight unit out of the air, and curl its talons around the unit’s fuselage. As the enemy flight unit’s machine gun batteries fired wildly and scored the Epyon’s gilded armor, the Epyon squeezed and crushed its cockpit in its talons, then released it. The crumpled flight unit fell through the air like a stone, dropping into the sea of clouds far below and leaving ripples in its wake.

A badly-damaged flight unit, missing three limbs and trailing black smoke, released itself from the Epyon’s back, floating in the air as the advanced flight unit that had carried it sped downward and
cut a swath of devastation through the cloud of machine lifeforms below. Despite its heavy damage, the smaller flight unit swooped toward 9S.

“2B? Is that you?” 9S asked.

The damaged flight unit took hold of 9S’s unit with its single remaining arm, supporting both of them with its flagging engines. “You... didn’t think I’d leave you behind... did you?” 2B asked, panting in exertion.

White’s face popped up in a cutaway panel in the corner of Chara’s HUD. Her complexion was ashen, her blood-stained, pale blonde hair a tangled and snarled mess; her eyes glowed a bright, searing red as she fought against the virus tearing her mind apart. “Th—This is... YoRHa C-Commander White. Pro—Proceed to—to the s-s-surface.”

“Commander!” 9S shouted. “You’re...”

“This is—is my f-final... order.” White squeezed her eyes shut. Each word was forced out with more difficulty than the last. “Run. I’ve alr—ready s-s-s-set the self-d—destruct on this unit for five minutes, but...”

6O’s voice came through as a hushed, trembling whisper. “Commander...”

The Epyon’s shoulder-mounted cannons tore through a large swath of the enemy machines, a heat saber mounted on its whiplike tail cleaving through one that had gotten too close. “If I lose c—control,” White warned the others, “the Epyon will—will k—kill you. Even if you hadn’t sustained... s-s-such d—amage(504,672),(599,690) already, you’d be no match for this high-pere... performance m—model. Put as much d—istance—between us as possible!”

“We’d best do as she says,” said 2B. “Our plan... hasn’t changed. 9S and I w—will head for the city ruins and clean up the berserk infantry units. We’ll rendezvous later...” She gasped, as if in pain. “A—At Pascal’s village.”

The four flight units made as speedy a retreat as they could through the sea of clouds, 2B’s and 9S’s flight units limping along and bleeding thick black smoke. The clouds broke, revealing the spinning and rushing ground far below, and as the ruins of civilization dotting the land grew larger and larger, Chara peeled off the other two flight units, 6O’s still-camouflaged flight unit following close behind.

“13B? What are you doing?” 9S asked. “Pascal’s village isn’t—”

“It’s too close to the combat zone,” Chara explained, punching in a different set of coordinates to guide both their flight unit and 6O’s. “I know a safer place. I’ll send out a signal once we’ve landed so we can meet up there.”

“Lucky, where are we going?” 6O asked, sounding increasingly worried.

Chara kept flying, towing 6O along. As they flew, their pod alerted them to a secure-channel transmission.

From White.

They muted 6O and took the call, making sure nobody else could hear them. “Hello, White.”

“C13. I knew y—you would... return.” White’s breathing was labored, her voice pained.

“Hmm. Did you now.”
“I knew… you would do the right thing… eventually.”

“May I ask when you figured out my identity?” Chara asked.

“Soon after you changed 13B’s eye color to red. You must have thought I—I was stupid.”

Chara decided not to comment. “And you thought I came back to fight the good fight?”

“If you did… I’m proud of you.” Chara could hear a smile in their old master’s voice. “How poetic… for the first of YoRHa’s experimental units… to see its end…”

Chara couldn’t help themselves. They began to laugh, sharp peals of laughter tearing themselves from their throat. White joined in as the logic virus continued to break down her stern facade.

“I came back to YoRHa,” Chara said, fighting past their laughing fit, “not to fight this war… but to gather the materials I needed to cleanse this world. Androids… machines… soon, very soon, neither of them will exist. A new race will inherit the Earth in their stead… and dance on our old gods’ graves.”

Chara and White laughed together. It was hard to tell whether the Commander was laughing or crying anymore… or both.

“Thank you so much, my dear White, for all your help,” Chara said, catching their breath. “If you hadn’t sent me to kill Echo all those years ago, I’d never have found my true calling. I know this won’t mean much to you… but I am the future of humans and monsters!”

White nearly screamed with laughter, growing increasingly hysterical before the signal abruptly terminated, leaving Chara in silence.

A low rumble filled the air as a globe of light like a second sun split the blanket of clouds covering the sky over the rapidly-receding ruined city, the shockwave buffeting the two flight units.

That was it for Commander White. That was it for YoRHa. And good riddance, too.

“Where are we going?” 6O repeated.

“You—You said it was safe?”

The peak of a mountain poked up above the horizon. Chara felt their heart leap.

It had been too long—far too long—but there it was.

Chara nodded. “We’re going home, 6O.”

Far above them, the Bunker they had begrudgingly called home these past six months—that 6O had never once set foot off of in her entire life—blossomed into a ball of shrapnel and incandescent gas like the ugliest possible fireworks display high in the sky, forever sealing their fates.

The destruction of the Bunker in orbit of above the Earth left a starburst like the blossoming of a pale yellow-white flower in the sky, visible through the hole in the clouds left by Commander White’s Epyon as it had exploded. Remnants of YoRHa’s command center would float in low Earth orbit for months before drifting into the stratosphere as shooting stars and burn up in the air; some larger components such as habitation and storage modules would make it all the way to the Earth’s surface.
as mangled, unrecognizable lumps charred pitch-black. Perhaps a fraction of a percent of the material that made it to Earth would be salvageable.

Anemone, leader of the area’s Resistance forces, watched the sky with growing unease, more worried for the future than she’d been in decades. Her subordinates scurried around her to secure the camp, setting up barricades they hoped could block out machine lifeforms as well as any berserk YoRHa units that might have still been running around the city ruins. They’d already had to put down 87R and 12H, but not before the two infected androids had killed five good men (and that was an impressive feat, considering neither were combat-focused units). Blood, oil, and coolant stained the ground in the center of the camp, with a few bodies still scattered around the site of the carnage; the two mangled YoRHa units responsible lay facedown in a pool of their own fluids, their backs bristling with swords and spears jutting from them as if they were pincushions.

Anemone counted her camp lucky they’d only lost five men. A YoRHa soldier with their wits about them could have probably wiped out everyone stationed in the camp if they really wanted to. She’d never been afraid of her own kind before, but now…

For all this to have happened when victory had seemed inevitable—it was as if the universe had played a cruel joke on this embattled planet. What had happened? And… what would happen next?

A2, former YoRHa combat model and current number one on YoRHa’s shit list, glanced up at the sky and saw the remnants of the Bunker for only a few seconds before letting out a bitter laugh, tossing her long white hair over her shoulder. Yeah, it was probably bad for the war effort that the Army of Humanity’s own great white hope had gone up in smoke like that, but what the hell, A2 didn’t give a shit about the war anymore, not after what she’d been through. She just felt like Commander White and all her little puppets had finally gotten what was coming to them.

Why did that thought feel so sour in her head all of a sudden? After YoRHa had thrown her to the wolves and left her to die, she’d stewed in her resentment for years without feeling the slightest guilt or conflict, but now…

Shaking her head, A2 leaped off the tree branch she’d been perched on and landed on the forest’s mossy floor. Maybe chopping up some machines could clear her mind.

Pascal, the chief of a village of pacifistic machine lifeforms, looked up at the shooting stars filling the afternoon sky. He’d read in old human books that it was considered good luck to see shooting stars and that it was prudent to make a wish on them. Whatever you wished for, it was said, if you asked a falling piece of space debris, somehow that piece of rock or remnant of some old satellite would make sure it came true.

It was silly, but Pascal couldn’t help but wish for lasting peace. However, he couldn’t help but feel a strange twisting in his circuits as he made his silent wish—as if some nebulous force had answered him already and said… “No.”

Pascal shuddered and tried not to wonder what the future might bring.

And far out on the outskirts of the city ruins, YoRHa Unit 2B dragged herself out of her flight unit,
static filling her body from the inside out as it became harder and harder to think clearly. Her legs felt like jelly, her muscles like liquid sloshing beneath her skin as she pulled herself through the ruins on nothing but sheer strength of will.

She’d hidden it well, but in truth, she’d felt the initial pangs of the logic virus infection in the back of her mind, burning like a fever in potentia, since just after she’d taken off from the Bunker.

She had to get to the camp. She had to get to the…

No.

She couldn’t go there. She couldn’t spread the corruption coursing through her circuits to anyone else. She had to find somewhere quiet and secluded to allow the virus to run its course, a forsaken place where she could disappear.

For the 2B on the surface, this was the end.

But for another 2B, one this 2B would scarcely even recognize were the two of them ever to meet, life would go on.

If this 2B knew that, she might not have felt so forlorn in her final moments.

Chapter End Notes

you *sobbing*: qubeley... just write a gundam fic already
me: no
Chapter Summary

2B’s mind can't help but wander to the surface.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That morning, Asriel Dreemurr dug into his breakfast as if he hadn’t eaten in months.

Because, well, he hadn’t. For the first time since he’d died, Asriel had a proper mouth.

Well, that old machine body he’d been stuck in had had teeth hidden behind that blank moon-like face (and no, neither 2B nor 9S could explain why the machines were designed like that, even though they had said the Machine Wars had been going on for seven thousand years). Alphys had tried altering the machine’s head to give it a working mouth, but the results had been less-than-ideal, and by “less-than-ideal” Alphys meant that Asriel had taken one look at himself in the mirror after the “upgrade” and had spent the next week shut up in his bedroom.

“That food is not going anywhere,” Toriel chided her son as he all but inhaled a plate of pancakes. Asriel mumbled an apology, his muzzle sticky with syrup, but went right back to wolfing down his breakfast. “Emil, dear, are you sure you wouldn’t like anything?” she asked the stone head lying on the table to Asriel’s left.

“No thanks, Mrs. Asriel’s Mom! I’m just happy to hang out with you folks! Besides,” Emil added, “I’m not really the kind of guy who lives hand-to-mouth! You know, since…”

Alphys took a deep breath as she poked at a pair of poached eggs on her plate. These next few days would be particularly nerve-wracking. She’d have to be vigilant, carefully and closely observing the boy to make sure nothing went… horribly, horribly wrong. She knew what “horribly, horribly wrong” looked like, after all. It was never what you expected.

Well. Asriel seemed to have a pretty healthy appetite, at least.

“Hey, guys?” Asriel asked. There was a wide, simple grin on his face. “I just had a thought. What if Chara comes back as an android, too? Wouldn’t that be funny? We’d be robo-bros!”


“Nope, my voice sounds good now, Doctor Alphys!” Asriel chirped between shovelfuls of food. “And all my teeth feel fine! No problems with tasting stuff!”

“Not a thing!”

Alphys nodded. “O-Okay, good. Mind if 9S and I run a s-scan of your, uh, limbic system later today?”
Asriel waved his arm, nearly knocking a mug of coffee (actually, 9S’s idea of ‘coffee’ roughly consisted of equal parts milk, coffee, and sugar) out of 9S’s hand. “Limbs work fine!”

9S switched his mug to his right hand to keep it away from Asriel’s flailing limbs, lest he spill it all over his pajamas. “Uh, no, kid. The limbic system is the part of your brain that handles—”


“Actually—”

“The limbic system governs moods and impulses,” 9S explained.

“How do you know?” Undyne crossed her arms. “Thought you were a soldier, not a doctor.”

“Knowing how stuff works is my specialty. I’m a Scanner, after all.”

“Yeah? Can you scan my brain?”

“Oh, no.” 9S looked flustered. “No, but, I, uh—because you’re not a synthetic lifeform.”

“There’s another reason.” 2B took a sip of her coffee (surprising absolutely no one, she took it black). A faint, wry smirk formed on her face. “Even somebody as skilled as Nines has difficulty scanning for things that aren’t there.”

“Whoa!” Undyne clapped her hands with such force that every plate, cup, and utensil on the table rattled. “Nice one! Fifty points to 2B!”

Toriel steadied her plate as it shivered on the table, then prodded her ears to make sure she hadn’t burst an eardrum from the thunderclap. “Captain, please. This is my fine china,” she admonished Undyne.

Toriel was being nice, but Alphys could tell she still didn’t quite like Undyne, and probably tolerated her only because Alphys was her girlfriend. Toriel didn’t like that Undyne was part of the Royal Guard, nevertheless that she was the head of the Royal Guard. She didn’t like that Undyne liked Asgore. And she certainly didn’t like that Undyne sometimes slipp’d up and accidentally called Asgore “Dad” the same way 2B sometimes slipp’d up and called Toriel “Mom.” Toriel was very civil and always kept those things to herself, but sometimes, even without saying anything, the old ex-queen would wear her heart on her sleeve.

“And as for you, 2B, need I remind you that roasts are for dinner, not for breakfast,” Toriel snickered, her mood lightening. “We could have a roast tonight if you’d like… but I am concerned you cannot take it nearly as well as you dish it out.” When Toriel winked, Alphys could almost hear the rimshot. That was what you got when you workshoped all your jokes with Sans.

Everybody at the table rolled their eyes. Except for Emil. He rolled his entire head right off the table, hitting the floor with a loud clunk and rolling right out the dining room. In the next room, something very heavy fell to the floor with a thump. Shocked, Asriel all but leaped out of his chair and ran after him. “Emil! Noooooo!”

2B stood up, wincing as she held a hand to her forehead. “E… Excuse me.”

“Something wrong?” 9S asked, setting down his coffee.

“Just a headache. I think I need to lie down for a minute.” She set aside her plate. “Thank you for breakfast, Mom,” she told Toriel as the old ex-queen rushed over to attend to the catastrophe in the
Toriel took a second to double back and pat her on the head. “There, there. Let me know if you need anything. Asriel, get away from there! You will hurt yourself!” she cried out, hurrying off to survey the damage done.

Concerned, 9S rose to his feet and took 2B by the arm. “I can take a look if there’s…”

“No, it’s all right,” 2B muttered, gently lifting his hand. “I’ll be fine.”

As 2B hurried away, Alphys wondered if she should have offered to do anything for her. Instead, she followed Toriel into the next room, just in case Asriel had hurt himself trying to extricate Emil from the overturned bookcase he’d gotten trapped under.

The cavern marking the entrance to the Ruins, in which 2B and 9S had landed nine short months ago, no longer contained the remains of the two flight units they’d entered the mountain in. Where wild golden flowers had once grown in the filtered light from the hole in the ceiling far above, a small plot of dirt had been set aside for a garden, buttery yellow blossoms in neat and orderly rows gently swaying in the air. Given a wide berth from their neighbors, a few fragile lunar tears had sprouted in the soil as well, their spindly ivory petals so lustrous they all but shined.

The garden had been Asriel’s idea; the lunar tears had been Emil’s. With Toriel’s knowledge of horticulture, they’d transplanted the lunar tear they’d found in Waterfall, cultivated seeds from it, and planted them. Emil said it was a miracle they’d grown—lunar tears were rare, needy flowers.

2B stood in front of the garden, mentally exhausted, her bare feet lightly sinking into the cool, damp earth. The odachi that had once belonged to 2B’s old master towered over the flowers like a tree, vines already curling up its length. Seeing nature reclaim that sword gave her the oddest feeling as if her soul itself was being bathed in warm, pure water.

6O would like it here, 2B found herself thinking. Over these past months, her thoughts had turned to YoRHa with shocking regularity as she found herself imagining what must be happening on the surface with her and 9S’s doppelgangers. Sometimes she wondered how many times the other her had killed the other 9S by now. Or maybe they’d run away together as 2B had always wanted to. Or maybe, somehow, they’d gone for months without the order coming down from YoRHa command.

Sometimes she had daydreams of life on the surface, some of them strangely vivid. They had continuity. Sometimes they seemed almost real. Sights and sounds clouding her senses of victories and defeats, small moments of tranquility amid the chaos with 9S at her side, and—this hurt most of all—hearing herself behave so brusquely and so coldly toward him as she’d used to. The longer the visions had gone on, the harder it became to ignore them.

The episode she’d had this morning at breakfast had been the hardest to set aside.

2B had almost felt as though she’d been torn in two, part of her sitting at the table, the other part running across the surface. The sky was overcast. A legion of sable-armored soldiers followed in her wake, obeying her commands—until their eyes all lit up red, glowing with a searing and baleful crimson light. She’d felt the bloodlust singing in her ears. She’d felt her desperation as she and 9S fought their way through their own allies only to be overwhelmed, to reach for their black boxes once again, struggling to reach each other through a mass of bodies until the corners of their black hearts finally met and unleashed the inferno—
As the vision had progressed, she’d had no choice but to rush to Toriel’s spare bedroom and all but throw herself on the bed, fists clenched, face buried in a pillow, until the vision had passed her by and the instincts screaming at her to pick up a sword and start slashing had faded away. It was worse than being possessed by Chara. Those memories had never been so visceral, had never triggered the fight-or-flight subroutines in her programming so strongly.

What if it was…

No, that was impossible. She couldn’t have been receiving data from the other 2B. That was absurd. It must have been simply a result of separation anxiety, an unconscious part of her that still felt guilty for abandoning YoRHa, or maybe simply a subconscious desire to know what was going on in the world outside this mountain. Any of those things, or maybe all three, concocting fantasies for her. It was because she was… homesick, somehow, for a home that had only ever hurt her.

That was what she told herself.

The next vision hit 2B as she stood before the garden, overwhelming her with a whirlwind of sensations and contradictory impulses and commands. Her head pounding, she fell to her knees. That was, a part of her fell to her knees. Another part kept walking, stumbling on legs that didn’t want to move.

She couldn’t tell which part was down here and which was up there.

Pulling herself through a dilapidated cityscape. She couldn’t fight. Couldn’t even swing a sword. Could barely even walk. Machines took notice of her, creeping toward her faster than she could walk; she was defenseless.

2B tried to focus on the garden. Fixing her eyes on 14E’s sword as a reference point. The rest wasn’t real. It wasn’t—

The world went black and white, flickers of static and blocky, broken pixels running past her display; white noise stung her ears as the bitrate of her audio processor dropped into single-digit kilobytes per second. Still, she pulled herself along even as her joints threatened to lock up. She had to reach the abandoned commercial facility. There were no androids there. She could die in peace without passing along the logic virus to—

*Logic virus. Logic virus. Logic virus. Logic virus.*

The pain was real. It was real. It was all real.

*It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real. Go away. Stop it!*

2B plunged her hands into the soil, balling her fists, letting the soft, moist dirt—the garden had been watered this morning—ground her. *This* was real. *This* was 2B, not—

A woman with her face stood before her, long white hair cascading down her back. An older YoRHa model, thin skin layered over a hard black subdermal chassis. She had no uniform—in fact, she wore nothing at all; rather, what had seemed to be clothing at first was simply massive patches of exposed and skinless armor spanning her torso, arms, and legs.

2B fell to her knees—she was already on her knees—and planted her sword in the rocks, letting it stand before her just as the sword in the garden did. Her vision blurred and doubled for a split second, split between bare rock and verdant soil. And then the two were synchronized. One and the same.
I’m not here.

“These are… my memories… Take care of everyone for me…” She panted, gasping for air as her lungs began to shut down and her body overheated. “Take care… of the future… A… Two…”

A2 stepped forward and pulled the sword from the stone.

2B felt it pass through her gut, stained crimson with her blood. She felt herself slide off the blade, glancing over her shoulder and laying eyes for the last time on… “Oh… Nines…”

“I’m here, 2B.”

9S pressed her head to his chest, running his fingers through her hair. “What’s wrong?”

“Logic virus…” she choked out. He couldn’t be here. How could he have reached her so quickly? He was all the way over on the bridge, so tiny in her eyes, and if she glanced back over her shoulder she could still see him…

He lifted her chin, his eyes wide and frantic as they stared into hers, fear etched into his face as he thought the unthinkable—but soon it vanished.

“You’re—too late… N-Nines…”

“2B,” he hissed, an urgent quaver in his voice. “The pods aren’t picking up any logic virus. You’re fine.”

“Fine? You think I’m fine? Just… look at my eyes…”

“Your eyes are blue!” His hands gripped her shoulders. “2B, listen to me.”

2B blinked. The two worlds collapsed into one. For an instant, she was utterly frozen, unable to breathe, wondering if perhaps even her black box had come to a momentary stop.

9S was crouched down in front of her, gasping for breath, sweat and dirt clinging to his skin and his pajamas. The pods floated over his shoulders, almost looking concerned in the way they slowly bobbed up and down in the air.

“I’m sorry,” 2B breathed, still reeling. “I… I should have told you I was…” She collapsed onto 9S’s shoulder. “I thought they were just daydreams at first…”

She told him everything.

9S sat next to 2B as she lay down on the ground, her head resting in his lap. “Oh,” he said.

“That doesn’t sound… insane to you?” 2B asked.

Pod 042, helpful as always, offered its opinion. “Analysis: cursory scans of Unit 2B’s logical processes show no sign of mental instability.”

“I mean, considering you’ve been tying knots in the flow of time with reckless abandon,” said 9S, “and the whole, um, possession thing with Chara… I’m not really surprised at anything that happens to you anymore, 2B.”

“Ah, that’s reassuring,” said 2B.

“S—So this other 2B’s experiences felt real to you, right?”
“Yeah.” 2B sighed and closed her eyes, uneasily recalling that final daydream. If the other 2B was real, then… would the visions stop, now that she was dead? “Yeah,” she repeated.

“One affirmation will suffice, 2B.”

2B’s eyes snapped open. She raised her hand, brought it to 9S’s cheek, and gave him a gentle mock-slap. “How long,” she asked, “have you been waiting to say that to me?”

“Since our first mission together,” 9S replied, shrugging.

“Anyway…” 2B closed her eyes again. “The visions feel real. But that’s not possible.”

“You know…” 9S said, pulling out his words slowly as he ran his fingers through 2B’s hair, “I’ve often thought a lot about how YoRHa never let any individual unit send their consciousness data to multiple bodies at once, despite how much easier it would make everything.”

“Easier?” 2B repeated, feeling her spirits lift. “You think it would be easier for YoRHa if there were fifteen of you all running around at once?”

9S tried to ignore that remark, though 2B heard him suppress an undignified snort of laughter. “I’m wondering… if any unit who was doubled the way you were would have these experiences. Like quantum entanglement. You know, how two particles can be on opposite sides of the universe and the change you make to one will still instantly affect the other. Maybe your black boxes, or your souls, or whatever…”

2B ignored 9S’s rambling foray into quantum mechanics. “But you haven’t had any visions from the other 9S?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s kind of a flaw in my hypothesis. Maybe you’re just more attuned to this stuff. Like how we both came down here the same way, but only you gained the ability to screw up time itself.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

“Dunno. Does it make you feel special?”

2B reached out and let her hand lazily drift over one of the golden flowers that grew like weeds in this cavern, her fingers lightly playing over the silken petals as her mind went back to the morning’s shocking and painful visions. That infection, that despair, that feeling of utter and inconsolable loneliness that had permeated her ailing and breaking-apart mind as the virus ravaged her system…

“At first, I thought I was just homesick,” she said.

“Homesick?” 9S let out a stifled laugh. “Why? I mean, the surface… it was pretty, but not very fun if you catch what I mean.”

2B didn’t talk much to 9S about YoRHa anymore. The two of them still felt differently about it. To 2B, despite the horrible orders YoRHa had made her carry out against 9S, despite the pain it had inflicted on the two of them for so long, it was an organization with a noble purpose, one that did a lot of good for the world. But 9S didn’t want to see that. He’d never seen sympathy in Commander White’s infamously stern gaze the way 2B had. He wanted to see himself and 2B as victims of a malevolent leader, not tragic circumstances… of sadistic whims, not cold and painful necessities of war.

If her visions were true, 2B got the sinking feeling that YoRHa’s days were numbered. And she didn’t know how to express how that made her feel to 9S. Home was where the heart was, and a part
of 2B’s heart was, evidently, still stuck on the surface.

“Do you ever miss anyone from YoRHa?” she finally asked him.

“I guess… 21O might like it down here,” he admitted. “You know, I could never get a read on her. She was even more of an ice queen than you. Always acted like she had an iron rod shoved right up her—” He paused. “Um, never mind that. But anyway, she kept asking me to find old world stuff about human families for her. Toys, stuffed animals, kid stuff. I think she’d drive Toriel crazy with questions. What about you?”

“6O would like it down here, too,” 2B replied. 6O had always wanted to see the surface, but there was no way any Operator, with zero combat capabilities to speak of, would ever have been permitted to venture out of the Bunker as long as the world was still infested with machine lifeforms.

The more 2B thought about it, the more she realized that, technically, 6O was the only friend she had in YoRHa apart from 9S—for a given value of ‘friend,’ considering that 2B was not much of a friendship-oriented person.

2B supposed she’d never see her operator again now, never hear her excited gossip, never endure her gushing about flora and fauna she’d looked up, never hear her begging for a shoulder to cry on after getting rejected yet again, never find herself assuaging 6O’s weekly heartaches (somehow, it seemed even the friendzone eluded poor 6O).

She’d supposed that before, of course—mainly when mulling over the possibility she and 9S would stay down here indefinitely, perhaps for hundreds or even thousands of years—but now, after those visions, there was a finality to those thoughts that had never been there before. It felt more like a certainty than ever before. Certainty, she decided, felt like a twisting gut.

“She’d have liked it here. It’s probably the one place on Earth she’d be safe,” she added, noticing the slightest of hitches in her voice.

▫▫▫

As her remote-controlled flight unit finally reached stable ground, 6O finally stopped holding her breath, though she still kept her eyes squeezed shut (she’d done so ever since the flight unit had taken off—being in one of these things was infinitely more stressful than monitoring another unit’s descent from her workstation).

There was air here, and 6O greedily breathed it in, savoring its rich and brisk scent. It was nothing like the air on the Bunker, which always had the slightly-sweet, slightly-acrid metallic tang of vacuum no matter how thoroughly it was filtered.

So this was the surface of the Earth. 6O had dreamed for so long of coming here, but not like this. Not like this. It was all gone. All her friends, her quarters, her personal effects, the Commander. Everything.

As the true enormity of what had happened bore down on her, 6O found herself feeling increasingly claustrophobic in the restrictive harness binding her to the flight unit’s cradle and, as her breath grew short, began to scrabble fruitlessly at her restraints. “L-Lucky!” she gasped, hyperventilating. “Help! Help, help! I—I, I-I’m—”

The flight unit unfolded, its servos whining in protest, and spat 6O out. 13B grabbed her as she fell and held her tight as 6O swallowed her terror and began to breathe easier, soothed by the feel of 13B running her fingers through her hair and brushing against her scalp.
“There, there. 6O, open your eyes. It’s okay. We’re safe now,” she cooed, taking 6O’s hand and twining their fingers together. “I’ve got you. It’s okay. We made it.”

6O struggled to stand up, but with 13B at her side, she managed to control her wobbling legs, and slowly opened her eyes, squinting against the sunlight. It was so much brighter and harsher on her eyes than she’d expected, but after a few seconds, her eyes adjusted, and she could see that 13B had landed the two of them on a rocky mountainside. Far below was a vast and verdant forest cut by sparkling rivers; in the distance, a lake that glittered in the sun like an enormous jewel stretched to the horizon. 6O had only ever seen such a sight in videos, but here, everything looked as though she could just reach out and touch it. She took a deep breath of the crisp mountain air, filling her lungs and letting the scent of the Earth—rich, complex, savory, sweet—drift into her nostrils.

This… This was the Earth! It was more beautiful than 6O had ever imagined!

Exhilarated and with adrenaline still pumping through her, 13B smiled, her burgundy eyes sparkling in the sunlight. That same light that made her eyes sparkle also lent a heavenly glow to the patina of sweat, like dew on grass, coating her skin, granting her an almost saintlike aura. “Quite a view, isn’t it?”

6O nodded, riveted. The sight of the beautiful landscape, the sound of birds chirping in the distance—real birds!—the scent of the pine trees blanketing the slopes of the mountain… and most intoxicating of all, 13B’s breath, hot on her cheek as she held her close. All of it was just overwhelming. 6O felt like she was short-circuiting. Even for a Type-O designed specifically to process data, there was too much stimulus down here.

Before she was fully aware of herself 6O’s lips had brushed against 13B’s as she clung to her savior. It was only for a second, and accidental—but 13B grabbed 6O gently by the chin in response, and with great care and deliberation guided 6O in for a proper kiss.

6O had never kissed or been kissed before in her short life, as much as she’d tried. For an instant she was grateful for beyond words; the bliss drove the pain and stress from her mind just as effectively as the sight of Earth’s beauty had. The kiss sucked the breath from her lungs, leaving her panting for air when 13B finally released her, her cheeks hot and flushed, her head buzzing, her body down to her fingertips and toes tingling.

6O wrapped her arms around 13B and squeezed. It wasn’t enough. She wanted to lie down and feel the warmth of another person and have it stay there for hours and hours and hours. She wanted to fall asleep hugging someone and wake up with them still in her arms. She wanted—no, needed. It was all too much for her, today had been too much for her, every nerve and synapse in her body was still screaming, every circuit was still screaming. Every part of her body but her mouth wanted to scream and scream and never stop screaming, and she needed to shut it up, she needed to shut it all up, she needed 13B to shut it up for her, she needed Lucky, she needed 2B, no matter who she turned to, she’d only ever really—

The next thing 6O knew, she was lying on her side, tears streaming across her nose, her knees tucked into her chest with her arms wrapped around them. Gravelly pebbles pressed hard against her cheek, digging into her shoulder, her hip, and her thigh as she curled up on the rocky ground.

13B knelt beside her, stroking her hair. “It’ll be okay. There’s a cave here we can take shelter in. Can you stand?”

“Aren’t we gonna call 2B?”

“We’ll hold off on that until morning. Until then, we need to find shelter. Can you stand up?”
“I wanna stay here until—”

“It’s safer inside the mountain,” 13B insisted. “Trust me. Do you trust me?”

“You said the mountain was safe.”

“The inside is. This is the wilderness, 6O. There’s lions and tigers and bears. They might mistake us for food.”

6O nodded. She knew the world was dangerous… and that animals weren’t always as cute in real life as they were in all the videos she watched in her spare time. “Okay.”

13B helped her to her feet, brushing a bit of stray gravel from her side. “There we go. Feeling better?”

6O took a few tentative steps. She’d spent her whole life on the Bunker; she wasn’t used to walking on an uneven surface, especially not one covered in tiny rocks that slipped around under her feet. But 13B steadied her, hands on her waist, leading her into a ragged cavern leading deeper into the mountain. 6O glanced back at the sunlit terrain stretching out to the horizon, but 13B led her into the dark tunnel.

“It’s all right,” she assured 6O. “I’ve been here before. We’ll be safe in here. Just take my hand and follow me.”

With a hesitant nod, 6O acquiesced, letting 13B take the lead and stumbling after her. As the tunnel grew darker, 6O found herself squeezing 13B’s hand tighter and tighter, as if fearing with every step that she might vanish and leave 6O all alone. But she trusted 13B. She trusted her with her life. After that daring escape, how could she not?

She knew for sure that 13B loved her now. What a wonderful thing, to finally have her affections returned…

“I—I’m sorry,” 6O stammered as 13B led her deeper into the mountain. “We—We didn’t get to have any of your champagne…” She knew that wine was the last thing that should have been weighing on her mind—all her friends were dead, and who knew what had become of 2B and 9S—but, in spite of herself, that was what lingered. Not the familiar halls of the Bunker drenched in blood-red light and filled with corpses and damned laughter and screams. A silly, bubbly drink.

“Oh, we’ll have our toast someday.” There was an audible smile in 13B’s voice. “There’s bound to be more champagne out there somewhere in the world.”

6O nodded. Maybe one day 13B could take her to that vineyard she’d mentioned. “R-Right. There is.” A chill went up her spine, a tingling sensation like a forest of needles pressed lightly against her skin flowing through her body from head to toe. 6O shivered. “D-Did you feel that?”

“So this is what the barrier…”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” 13B nodded. “There’s a draft in here. Sorry, 6O. I should have warned you.” She gave her hand another comforting squeeze and smiled.

The darkness in the cave soon began to fade, even though there was no light source 6O could discern, and as the walls grew less dim, 6O noticed the craggy, natural rock give way to purposefully-laid stone bricks. Had humans once lived in this mountain?

At last, she and 13B reached an elegantly-carved stone door emblazoned with a curious symbol—
three triangles flanked by angelic wings. 13B glanced at 6O and smiled, and 6O couldn’t help but reciprocate, no matter how scared she still was. They were still holding hands, and even through their gloves, 6O could feel the warmth that told her everything would be all right.

13B laid a hand on the stone door and pushed it open. Soft, slightly-amber light spilled out, and without any hesitation, 13B pulled 6O along.

The back of a massive gilded throne, all gold filigree and violet velvet, stood before the two of them. 6O had seen such things in fantasy media field operatives occasionally brought up to the Bunker. This one was built for a giant.

What almost felt like sunlight filled the throne room, feeble and muted though it was. Golden flowers and crawling green vines framed the walls, and troughs filled with beds of the same flowers flanked the throne. Off in the corner was a small table with two chairs and a tea kettle. The floor was tiled marble and 13B’s heels clacked against it, the noise echoing across the vaulted ceiling.

13B walked around the throne, still leading 6O along, giving her hand a gentle and encouraging squeeze whenever 6O straggled. Hundreds of questions ran through 6O’s mind as she took in every detail of the room, the sensory overload straining her processor. Her breath began to grow short again. What was this place? A throne room? For whom? Who was cultivating the flowers? They certainly didn’t look wild…

A door swung open on the far side of the throne room, and from it emerged a giant—at least 2.5 meters tall—wrapped in a flowing violet cloak with gilded trim. It was not an android or a machine, nor was it a human. It was a beast, a white-furred creature with a golden mane. 6O couldn’t tell if it was a bear, a lion, or a giant ram. Whatever it was, the mere sight of the towering monster froze the breath in 6O’s lungs and rooted her feet to the floor.

The monster stood there on the threshold, mouth slightly agape as if it were surprised—as if it had just seen a ghost.

13B stepped forward, spreading her arms. “Father!” she exclaimed, her voice ringing out and echoing through the throne room, clear as a bell. “How I have missed you these past centuries!”

“Chara?” the beast gasped in a hushed whisper.

13B took the creature’s paw. “Yes, Father… It’s me… Chara…”

Panic engulfed 6O’s mind as she glanced at her partner. It was as if 13B had become a different person at the mere flick of a switch! What was she doing? How was this monster her father? Where was this place? Why had 13B brought her here? “L-Lucky,” she squeaked out, her throat still tight as she felt her black box begin to whirl louder than ever before, “wh—what’s g-going on h-h-here?”

13B looked over her shoulder at 6O, eyes bright, mouth stretched in a toothsome and almost-feral grin. “I’d like you to meet my dad, 6O. This is King Asgore Dreemurr. I’m sorry, it’s nothing personal, but he’d very much like to kill you.”

6O couldn’t breathe, try as she might to suck even a morsel of air down her throat; as the giant monster cast its gaze upon her, static engulfed her sight and she passed out.

Chapter End Notes
I wasn't really sure it would end up like this when I first started writing this fic, but this is probably the most utterly and completely loathsome version of Chara I've ever put in a fanfic. If you need to wash the taste of Total Bastard Chara out of your mouth, take a look at a much more wholesome little Undertale fic I wrote a while back starring an unequivocally non-evil Chara for once.
6O opened her eyes and found herself lying on the cold tile floor of the throne room, utterly paralyzed. 13B—or was it Chara?—looked down at her with a ghoulish expression as she stood at the side of the massive beast she had called “father.”

The beast held a tall, crimson trident, and the prongs of the trident were positioned over 6O’s chest, hovering just a few centimeters above her chest.

6O did the first thing that came to mind: she screamed at the top of her lungs and began to cry. The white-furred beast recoiled as if she’d struck it, stumbling backward. 13B gave it a look that seemed to silently say, are you kidding me?

Shaking its head, the beast resumed its position.

“Don’t kill me, please!” 6O wailed, choking on her own tears. YoRHa might have been a lie all along, her purpose in life might have gone up in flames with the Bunker and the Commander and everyone else she knew, she might have had nothing to her name but her uniform, but still she didn’t want to be killed, even if she had nothing and nobody left. “I don’t wanna die! Please, please don’t kill me! Everyone else is dead but me, a—and, and, I—I-I don’t want to go!” she sobbed.

“Father,” 13B snapped, drawing her black sword.

The beast’s eyes widened and it stepped away, hastily laying down its trident. “Uh—little girl, um—do not be afraid! I am putting the trident down!” The beast’s voice was deep, rumbling, sonorous, and masculine, yet it was—of all things—soothing. It held up its empty paws. “See, I have laid aside my trident. I will not hurt you. E-Everything will be all right.”

“Father,” 13B snapped, drawing her black sword.
“Settle down, Chara.” The giant beast knelt before 6O, reaching out to her with a massive paw. 6O could not help but notice the long black claws poking out of the thick white fur, and wished that her flight unit had followed 2B and 9S. Surely 2B of all people was safe and sound by now! 6O began to wail anew as the monster’s horrible claws inched closer and closer…

Only for its soft fur and smooth, almost rubbery paw pads to brush with astonishing gentleness against 6O’s cheek. She was so shocked that she stopped screaming, though she still couldn’t help but whimper a little.

“See, little human? I mean you no harm.” The beast smiled beneath its bushy, golden beard. “I am King Asgore Dreemurr, lord of this mountain. What is your name?”

Enraged by the king’s benevolence, 13B shoved his paw aside and brandished her jeweled black blade, holding it to 6O’s throat. The expression twisting her face was like nothing 6O had ever seen: wild and hateful, hardly the Lucky she’d known and befriended. Had she gone insane? Was she infected by the logic virus? What else could have caused such a sudden change in her personality?

“Chara!” Asgore barked, grabbing 13B by the shoulder.

Undeterred, the cold blade pressed against 6O’s neck; with its pressure on her skin, she found the feeling of her muscles undulating as she nervously swallowed almost unbearable. It was all she could do to whine pathetically as the knife pressed just a little deeper and ever so slightly began to slide, cutting a shallow line into her flesh…

And then it stopped. 13B blinked, gritted her teeth, and slowly withdrew the sword before standing up to her full height, looming over even the crouching giant at her side. With a disdainful grimace, she slunk away, leaving 6O with even more questions and far less mental capacity available to answer them.

Asgore watched 13B depart. Looking down at 6O once again, he shook his head. “I am so, so sorry for my child’s conduct, little one. I will need to speak to them about their behavior.” He gave 6O a gentle pat, brushing her sweat-soaked bangs away from her forehead. “I am so sorry for frightening you. What is your name?”

As 6O realized she wasn’t going to die (at least not at this moment), she sniffed away the last remnants of her tears. “I—I’m O-O-Operator 6O, s—sir. YoRHa Number Six Type—”

“6O,” Asgore repeated, stroking his beard. “Do all you humans have such odd names nowadays?”

“I’m an android.” 6O hiccuped. “P-Please don’t kill me.”

“You are… an android?” Asgore asked, raising his bushy blonde eyebrows.

6O nodded.

“Ah, what a relief!” Asgore’s face lit up. “I am supposed to kill every human who comes into this mountain. It is my duty as king.” He cringed a bit, his reddish eyes flitting to and fro. “It is… a long story. Perhaps I could tell it to you over tea?”

“T-Tea?” 6O repeated, wondering if her audio systems were functioning properly.

“Oh, but what am I thinking?” Asgore slapped his forehead. “Poor girl, you look like you’ve come out of a war! The last thing you need,” he said, scooping 6O up and lifting her off the floor, “is to hear a doddering old fool talk your little ears off about his mistakes.”
6O felt the room spin around her as the king cradled her in his arms, draping his voluminous cloak over her. She struggled at first—the last thing she wanted was to let this beast carry her into its lair—but the creature only held her tighter, and as King Asgore carried her out of the throne room, 6O’s weary eyes fell closed and she immediately felt sleep close its nebulous fingers around her, despite the hundreds—no, thousands—of fears still swirling around in her mind.

Before she nodded off, 6O felt a horrible ache run through her chest, so strong it nearly felt as though that alone could rip her black box in two and consign her to the same oblivion that had taken all her friends. She remembered how kind, how sensitive, how gentle 13B had been…and didn’t understand how that same person could have held a knife to her throat with such a vicious look in her eyes.

It was just her luck that the one person who’d actually loved her back for once had only been pretending.

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Chara clutched at their forehead so tightly their fingernails left crescent-shaped imprints in their skin as they stood in the dining room, leaning over the table at which they had once shared so many breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and desserts with Asriel and his parents. The savory smell of slow-cooking stew wafted from the kitchen, tickling Chara’s nostrils and filling their heart with bittersweet nostalgia. It felt as though some creature was tearing away at them from the inside of their chest.

They hadn’t expected Asgore to balk, but they should have. He had always been such a kind and gentle man. And after all, in that long-ago erased timeline, the timeline in which Chara had first made 2B’s acquaintance, Asgore had elected to treat her with kindness and spare her life, despite the swath of violence she’d cut through his kingdom. Chara should have known. They should have expected their first plan to fail.

But Chara hadn’t expected their own knife to falter and their own hand to freeze when the blade came so close to 6O’s throat.

Why had their hand refused to move? Why had a single droplet of blood welling up from the shallowest of cuts been enough to paralyze their body?

A frustrated growl tore itself from Chara’s throat as their fists slammed against the table, rattling the ceramic vase stuffed with flowers standing in the center. Why did I hesitate? Killing everyone else was child’s play. So why, 6O…why am I compelled to spare the life of you of all wretched people? After all the preparations I made to lead you to the slaughter, lamb that you are?

They looked down at Mourning Star, at the opal orb set at the base of the obsidian blade. It wasn’t hungry yet.

Was that why they had stayed their hand? Or, now, of all times—had Echo started to haunt them again?

Something was dripping onto the table, leaving scattered dark spots on the polished wood below Chara’s bowed head. Their hands began to shake.

Damn you… damn you… damn you…!

“Chara?” King Asgore laid a paw on Chara’s shoulder. “Chara, my child… what is troubling you?”

“Nothing,” Chara said, wiping at their eyes before looking up at their father. He looked as though he hadn’t aged a day since Chara and Asriel had died…just like Toriel. The two of them were frozen in
time, paralyzed with grief, awaiting their children’s impossible return. Now it had happened. 
“Nothing, Father.” They smiled. “I—I’m back. And I couldn’t be happier.”

“Nor could I, my child,” Asgore beamed, his maroon eyes twinkling. “Well… it would be nice if your mother were here to see you as well. And if…”

“Asriel.”

Asgore tried to keep smiling, although the brightness faded in his eyes. “I am so happy to see you again, Chara. All these centuries,” he said, beginning to choke up, “have been so, so lonely. How I have missed you…”

Chara had no means to defend themselves as Asgore wrapped them up in one of his signature bear hugs, squeezing them against his broad chest. Their feet left the floor as they dangled in Asgore’s soft, thick arms. “Father…”

“Oh, Chara! My dear… I—I cannot… Please tell me, my child… tell me I am not dreaming!” he sobbed.

“Were you dreaming,” Chara gasped, trying to pull themselves free, “you would not be wringing the air from my lungs!” There was a familiar scent on Asgore’s violet robes, a sweet and floral aroma clinging to him as tightly as he clung to Chara. Was it… 6O’s perfume?

“Oh!” Asgore dropped Chara. “I—I am so sorry.” He grinned sheepishly, wiping at his eyes. “I’ve been alone so long… I must have forgotten my own strength.”

“Of course. Now, we have much to catch up on, don’t we?” Chara asked, putting aside what they’d learned for now. “How many hundreds of years has it been?”

“Too many.” Asgore sniffled up his remaining tears, still resting his paws on Chara’s shoulders as if he were afraid they might vanish. “Now, how on Earth have you returned? And… how did you know I’d been collecting souls?”

“It’s a long story, I’m afraid. Perhaps we could tell it over dinner? You must have missed having an extra pair of hands in the kitchen,” Chara said, licking their lips, their mouth growing moist with saliva as they eagerly recalled dinners past.

Toriel and Asgore would always cook dinner together, standing shoulder to shoulder at the kitchen table where they could nuzzle noses and pile mountains of affection on top of each other. Occasionally they would grow so distracted in their displays of love they would miss a crucial step, or the food would start burning, or something else would go wrong… and when that happened, Asgore would deign to have pizza delivered to the castle. Chara missed those days.

“Oh, of course, of course, my child.” Asgore chuckled. “To tell the truth, I have been having trouble with my portion sizes. I often still find myself cooking for four, and with nobody to share it with…”

He tenderly patted his belly, and that was when Chara noticed that their father had changed over the years. He had not grown older or taller or shorter—however, he had grown a bit wider. “I started some beef stew earlier this afternoon. How does that sound?”

“Perfect.” Chara heard their stomach squeal with anticipation. “I couldn’t think of a better meal.”

Asgore smiled. “Chara, why don’t you freshen up?” he asked, brushing grime from Chara’s cheek. “You are quite filthy… and that dress of yours is in tatters. I have kept all of your clothes in your room.”
“I suppose…” Chara glanced down the hall. “By the way, the human I brought with me… where is she?”

Asgore chuckled. “Oh, no, no. She is not a human. She is, in fact, a robot! Like that Mettaton fellow who is always on television. Quite a misunderstanding, isn’t it?”

Chara rolled their eyes. “Father…”

“Oh, it is okay, Chara. It is an easy folly to make.” Asgore patted them on the cheek. “My wonderful child, I am so proud of you for going so far out of your way to help me liberate our kingdom. There is no shame in being mistaken.”

“Her soul is just as good as any human’s,” Chara insisted. “Trust me. I’ve done my research.”

Asgore glanced away. “Er… Um… I think… we should have the Royal Scientist take a look at her. You know. Get a second opinion. She knows robots very well, after all.”

“Where is she being kept now?” Chara asked, quelling their anger.

Asgore sighed and led Chara down the hall. “I brought the poor girl to… uh, my room. She looked like she could use a soft bed.” He softly rapped on the door to his own bedroom. “Hello? Little girl, it is I, Asgore. May I come in?”

There was no answer.

“Heh. She must still be sleeping.” Asgore smiled. “Chara, why don’t you wash up? Dinner will be ready by the time you are done. And then, afterward, we can—”

“Check on her,” Chara suggested.

“Chara, doesn’t a soothing, warm bath sound like just the thing—”

Chara knew what stalling looked like. “Just open the door a crack. If she is sleeping, she won’t mind.”

Asgore relented, his shoulders slumping. He was a terrible liar. Had he really fooled his own people all these centuries into thinking he was the kind of ruthless man they needed to bring them their freedom?

The door creaked open. The room was empty, the bed unmade.

“Oh, good lord!” Asgore gasped (an obvious charade). “She has escaped!”

Just as expected. Chara tried not to let their anger show on their face. They had delivered the key to salvation to Asgore in person, descending to the Underground like the angel Asgore had always believed them to be… and here he was, hoarding it. Wasting it.

Chara’s grip tightened around the Mourning Star’s hilt. “You enjoy your dinner, Father. I will track her down.”

“Chara, wait.” Asgore laid a paw on their shoulder. “We must talk. I know you think you are making me proud, but I have had a long, long time to reflect on my sins. That girl you brought with you from the outside—”

“You aren’t going to kill her, then?”
“Look at her. Have you looked into her eyes?” Asgore asked. “She is—”

“Our enemy.”

“A scared little girl.”

Chara had never been so disappointed in anybody, least of all their adoptive father. They glowered at Asgore. “Don’t you even want freedom?” they asked him.

“Not at this price.” Asgore shook his head. “I realize that now. Chara, please understand. There is no such thing as a sunk cost. You can always—”

Chara shrugged off Asgore’s paw. “I do understand,” they replied. Were Asgore to obtain the power of a god, he would have the strength to purge the surface with but a snap of his fingers and render the beautiful bounty of the Earth unto the kingdom of monsters, its most deserving inhabitants. But the old fool could never do such a thing, even with Chara at his side to advise him.

“I understand,” Chara repeated, clenching their fists. “You see, I’ve been watching over you after my death, Father. I’ve seen _everything_ you’ve done—your moments of strength and weakness alike.”

Asgore cringed and averted his eyes for a brief instant before refocusing on Chara, withering under their accusatory glare. He knew they spoke the truth—that they proclaimed a bitter judgment upon him.

Chara went on. “You declared war for Asriel and me. For our sakes, in our names. For revenge and for liberty. You rallied the kingdom in their moment of deepest despair. But now that victory is in your grasp, you can’t bring yourself to claim it. Despite your centuries of bluster, Father, the godhead you promised our people you would claim come hell or high water… you’re afraid of it, aren’t you?”

Asgore let out a forlorn sigh. “Chara, put aside your anger and try to see through my eyes. Through your father’s eyes. Machine or not, that girl looks to me just as you did on that day we found you. I could no more kill her than I could have killed you—”

“I am nothing like her,” Chara hissed.

Asgore gazed into the distance over Chara’s shoulder. “The ones who fought back were easy to kill. Easy to justify their murders, no matter how much weaker they were compared to me. When I saw them, all I could think of were Asriel’s murderers, and bloodlust came easily to me. But the ones who were so weak they could barely stand… Those ones, Chara, I should have spared. Should have waited for someone to come down here with blood on their hands. I should have let the innocent live here in peace, as I did for you.”

“There _are_ no innocent people on the surface.”

“What did the girl do?” Asgore asked.

Chara swallowed a lump in their throat. “She—”

“She said she thought you loved her.” Asgore’s eyes narrowed, suspicious of Chara’s methods, their moral righteousness. “Who is she? What did you do to bring her here?”

“She works for an organization called the Army of Humanity.”

“I know what soldiers look like, Chara. She is no soldier. That much is clear,” Asgore growled. “I
am no longer letting the blood of the weak stain my paws. Not when I can show them mercy. She will be my guest here, and that is that. If you cannot show respect for those I extend my hospitality toward, then you—"

“So you did hide her in this castle!”

“Chara, if you make any attempt to harm her, you will not be welcome under this roof!” Asgore roared.

A fraught silence filled the air as father and child stood apart from one another, rhetorical blades at their metaphorical throats, each passing second increasing the odds that those blades and those throats would soon be all too literal.

“…I see.” Chara turned their back on Asgore, striding away from him with a scowl.

Chara stopped at their bedroom—Asgore really had kept it just as they’d left it—cleaned the blood and grime off their face, and replaced the godawful uniform YoRHa had insisted its combat units wear with something more sensible and more in line with Chara’s tastes. Over it they threw on a dark, hooded cloak, then took their leave of the castle altogether, giving Asgore one last baleful glance on their way out.

If only I were a monster myself, Chara thought. Then I wouldn’t need to put my trust in proxies like my father. They glanced down at the still-slimbering Mourning Star holstered at their hip. No, that is a last resort, they told themselves, knowing that a demonic blade was only marginally preferable to someone like Flowey. There is still another monster in this kingdom with the zeal to free our people. That one… I will make my ally. But to do that, first, I must…

Chara glanced at a newspaper kiosk as they walked down the road, a headline catching their eye: King Asgore to Deliver State of the Kingdom Speech Tomorrow.

They smiled.

King Asgore, my cherished adoptive father… your guilty conscience may save your soul, Chara mused, sweeping their cloak around them as they licked their proverbial wounds and pondered their next move, but it will not save her life. And it will not consign this kingdom and its people to darkness. I won’t let it.

Come hell or high water, by hook or by crook, I will see to it that the final sacrifice’s life no longer rests in your hands.

6O woke up in a dark room, lying on the softest mattress she had ever slept on. The blanket tucked under her chin was thick but light, and just as soft as the bed itself. Involuntarily, she found herself snuggling deeper into the bedding, wrapping the blanket around her aching body. She’d never been in so much physical pain—the worst she’d ever gotten in her life of safety in space had been a hangnail. But the bed somehow soothed the worst of the pain.

She was finally on Earth, at long last, and sleeping in a warm cocoon of fluffy blankets just as ancient humans once had, the furthest thing in the world from the hard cot that had furnished her quarters on the Bunker—all things that should have made her elated beyond measure. But the only feeling that greeted her was a gut-wrenching hollow in her stomach.

YoRHa was gone. The Fourteenth Machine War was lost.
No, too big. It didn’t feel real.

The Commander was dead.

No, still too big, too unfathomable.

21O was gone. She’d been so brave, so much bolder and stronger than 6O could ever dream of being, even deciding to convert to a Type-B unit and participate in the ground assault—something 6O had never even considered doing. And now she’d most likely been consumed by the same logic virus that had taken everybody else.

6O sniffled. That stung a bit more. 21O was really gone. One of the few Operators who’d actually acted like she kind of enjoyed 6O’s company, even though her stoic demeanor couldn’t have been more different than 6O’s. One of her few friends.

2B and 9S were probably dead by now, too. Knowing their rotten luck, the logic virus had probably gotten to 9S first, and 2B would have been forced to...

It was an open secret among Operators that 9S’s constant deaths and the constant “corruptions” of his backups necessitating factory resets were more than likely not accidents. No one dared say a word, of course, and no one dared theorize who kept killing him. What would happen to 2B if 9S had to die with YoRHa gone, the Bunker gone, all his backups gone, without even the promise of a fresh-off-the-assembly-line 9S for her to meet all over again?

No, no. Poor 2B...

A moan wrenched itself from 6O’s lips as she curled up, drawing her knees up to her chest. She’d probably never see 2B again either. She’d never get that chance she’d always wanted… to have 2B in her quarters at long last, to get that girl with her frosty, closely-guarded heart to finally open up… in more ways than one...

6O broke down sobbing. All of her dreams were dead. As dead as her friends, her colleagues, her fellow soldiers. Every last one of them. And one person she had loved, one person who she thought had actually loved her back—That had all been a lie, hadn’t it? The Lucky she had known, the one she had grown so close to had never really existed at all.

Maybe it was for the best. No matter who she’d had a crush on, no matter who she’d asked out, she knew she’d only ever really carried a torch for the woman she’d spent years watching over like a guardian angel, even if such feelings would never be reciprocated. Maybe none of those relationships had ever worked out because she’d sabotaged them herself, because she’d never actually felt fulfilled by them, because she was just using them to fill a void of unrequited love that now would never be filled.

There was a soft knock on the door. “Hello? Little girl? It is I, Asgore. May I come in?”

6O pulled the covers over her head and curled into a ball, wrapping a hand over her mouth to keep any errant whimpers from giving her away as the door slowly creaked open. A faint light from the hallway outside bled through the blanket as the wooden floorboards creaked under Asgore’s paws. A rich and savory scent unlike anything 6O had ever smelled permeated the room.

Her stomach growled in spite of itself. Technically, androids had no need whatsoever for water or food. However, since their personality templates were modeled after human psychology, they occasionally felt phantom pangs of hunger and thirst, especially in times of stress or in certain environments. That was why androids were still designed with limited digestive capabilities. Right
now, for the first time in her life, 6O felt as though she was starving, as if her stomach had twisted itself into knots and wrapped itself around her spine.

She heard the sound of a heavy object settling on the floor, then felt Asgore’s massive paw fall on her shoulder through the thick blanket she’d hidden under. 6O gasped, fear pumping through her mind.

“It is okay, child. I know you are afraid of Chara. They are not here right now. Please, do not hide.” His voice was so soothing… but what did that mean? Anyone could have a soft and soothing voice, no matter how monstrous they were. 6O knew that now.

Asgore grabbed the blanket and pulled it aside. Exposed, 6O pulled herself away, putting as much distance between herself and the monster as possible. What was he going to do to her? What horrible, barbaric, primitive ritual awaited her in the depths of this mountain?

Asgore knelt down, resting a forearm on the edge of the bed. “Are you hungry? I have some food here, if you would like. If I may just turn on the light…”

6O glanced at the dark shape sitting on the ground beside Asgore and realized that it was the source of the aroma filling the room. Merely looking at it made her stomach contract in protest against its emptiness.

“May I turn on the light?”

6O nodded.

Asgore reached for the bedside desk and turned on the lamp standing on its surface, bathing the room in a soft amber glow. Taking a few seconds to adjust, 6O began to pick up more details about the room. A cabinet, a dresser, a desk… and on the floor, a pot filled with meat and vegetables swimming in a brown gravy, two bowls, a ladle, and two silver forks.

Asgore smiled, taking the lid off the pot and heaping its contents into one of the bowls. “There. See? It is all right.”

Gingerly, 6O sat up, her legs dangling off the side of the bed, and took the bowl from Asgore, resting it in her lap. The food’s heat bled through the ceramic, warming her thighs.

“This is a wonderful stew my wife and I used to cook together,” Asgore told her, filling his own bowl and sitting, cross-legged, on the floor facing her. “I haven’t gotten the recipe quite right yet, but I think you will like it.”

6O speared a chunk of potato on her fork, dredged it through the gravy, and raised it to her mouth. As the savory aroma filled her nostrils any instinct she might have had to avoid food offered by a stranger evaporated. She took a bite.

The taste was so intense that for a few seconds, all 6O could do was hold the food in her mouth. She’d forgotten what to do with it next; in fact, she was so shocked and so confused that she nearly reflexively spat the food out.

At last, she swallowed the morsel, and not only did her stomach not hurt as much, but her sadness and fear lessened as well. Emboldened and invigorated, she ate a few more forkfuls.

“I have a bad habit,” Asgore said, “of cooking too much food. And I was always taught to clean my plate as a boy… which, as you can probably assume, are two habits that do not go well together.” He smiled, patting his ample stomach. “I am so thankful to have somebody to share dinner with.”
6O set down her fork after just a few bites.

Asgore eyed the half-empty bowl. “Oh. Are you done, then? I would have thought you’d be hungrier.”

“I—I’m sorry,” 6O stammered, worried she’d committed a faux pas, and not only that, but had done so in the presence of someone who could easily kill her. “But we androids weren’t built to need food. Our stomachs can only hold so much…”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that! We monsters are more magic than matter, and our food is the same. It takes up very little space once you break it down. Please, eat as much as it takes for you to feel better.”

With the king’s encouragement, 6O kept eating, finished her bowl, and even found herself asking Asgore to fill it again. With every bite, she felt stronger, more awake, and more alert. She even began to feel, of all things, almost satisfied.

“That is the spirit,” Asgore said with a smile. “Now, 6O, I have so many questions for you, but I do not wish to upset you. Would you mind if I asked you about Chara? About what they have been doing on the surface?”

“I…” 6O paused, setting down her fork again. She remembered 13B’s kindness, how often she’d consoled 6O when Operator after Operator had shot her down again and again… and the way she had always so tenderly embraced 6O, the feel of 13B’s lips meeting her own… and those pleasant memories faded to ash when she connected them to the look of pure contempt in 13B’s eyes. “I—I, um…” Her throat began to tighten. “I don’t…”

Asgore’s smile shrunk to nothingness, and as he realized what he had asked, he bowed his head in shame. “Please forgive me. It was not my place to ask you. Obviously, my child has caused you horrible pain… and for their actions, I apologize from the bottom of my heart. I do not wish for anybody to be hurt because of me—yet it seems that many still find ways to force others to suffer in my family’s name. Perhaps you should ask whatever questions you have instead.”

6O swallowed the growing lump in her throat, eating just a little more to push it down. “Wh… Why didn’t you kill me like you were supposed to?”

“Because… when I saw you crying, it—it reminded me of my son.” Asgore’s paws, still clasping his bowl of stew, began to tremble as his downcast eyes grew misty. “If you stay here,” he said, resolve flashing in his damp crimson eyes, “I will keep you safe. I will not let Chara hurt you, or anybody else for that matter. I will look after you as if you were my own flesh and blood. I swear this on my crown. You will not come to harm under my roof as long as I am here.”

6O pondered his offer. There’s nothing else I can do, she thought. There’s nowhere else I can go. There’s no one else I can turn to. This monster… I have to trust him if I want to survive.

6O nodded. “Okay,” she whispered, the word trying to stick in her throat and render her silent before she pushed it out. “I’ll stay.”

As relief washed over his face, Asgore reached out and embraced 6O, his furry face and bushy golden beard brushing against 6O’s cheek as his paw ran through her hair. “Oh, thank you, my child… I will do everything in my power to make sure you are comfortable here. I promise.”

With Chara absent, Asgore helped 6O wash up, tended to some of the worse bruises she’d suffered over the past day, and even swiped a clean satin robe from Chara’s bedroom for her to wear instead
of her dirty and tattered uniform (until, he told her, he could go out and buy more clothes for her—
hopefully Chara wouldn’t notice one item missing from their cabinet). Before he left her alone for the
night, Asgore plucked one of the golden flowers from one of the many vases littering his home and
tucked it behind her ear, marveling at how well the bright and lustrous yellow-gold petals matched
her hair.

A promise from the king meant little to 6O, 13B’s—Chara’s—betrayal still fresh in her mind and
throbbing like an open wound. But beyond the four walls of this room, beyond this castle, the
outside world held nothing but mortal peril to greet 6O. In here, she was a prisoner, but at least she
was alive.

And there were such pretty flowers here…

Once he had put the poor girl to bed, Asgore returned to his garden, lost in thought, and of course,
his thoughts turned to Chara. Those bright flashing eyes, that wide, wry grin, those flushed cheeks
on a pale face… What a joy to see those again after so many years, to see them in real life and not in
troubled dreams and flashbacks to that horrible day…

_I’ve been watching over you after my death, Father. I’ve seen everything you’ve done—your
moments of strength and weakness alike._

Asgore shuddered. _Had_ Chara come back as an angel of some sort, to punish him for his weakness?

_Legend has it, an ‘angel’ who has seen the surface will descend from above and bring us freedom._ It
was a legend every child learned of in school, one that predated written history. That legend was
what the Delta Rune, the ancient symbol of the Dreemurr family that adorned so much of the
Underground, was derived from. _Was it true?_

Asgore had often wondered, in private, to Toriel whether Chara was the prophesied angel who
would one day leave the Underground empty. He’d spoken of his two children, Asriel and Chara, of
the bond between them, as “the future of humans and monsters.”

It seemed he was right.

And Asgore was…

A little unnerved.

No, he was thinking of a different word, one that wasn’t becoming of a man of his size and stature.

_He was frightened._

He pulled his cell phone out from his robes, fumbled with the number pad (he’d endured no end of
teasing for not having a modern phone that could text, but a man with fingers as big as his didn’t
want a phone with a teensy keyboard he had to squint to see), and called one of his closest
confidants.

“Hello, Doctor Alphys. Could you please come over? I need to speak to you. I have something you
may be interested in.”

Asgore steeled himself. He’d made up his mind. No more needless killing. No more callous
slaughter. No more innocent blood slicking his fur. Even if a god told him to kill that girl from the
surface, he would refuse. For once in his life, finally, he would be brave.
For the first time in centuries, Asgore vowed once more to be the kind of man that Toriel, wherever she was, could be proud of.
A Chance Meeting, Part I

Chapter Summary

Alphys gets an urgent call from Asgore regarding the latest person to fall into the mountain.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, this week has been hectic, and the next few might be pretty hectic too. Thanks for reading!

Also PLEASE LOOK AT THIS SPRITE EDIT BANE OF EGGS MADE FOR ME IT'S SO CUTE OH MY GOSH

Cherish these sprites!!!

By the time Doctor Alphys received the call, a long day of subjecting Prince Asriel to the wonderful drudgery of comprehensive data consistency self-checks had passed her by. At least 9S had stuck around that afternoon to commiserate with the boy and keep him from whining too much (“Yeah, yeah, I know it sucks, but you’ve gotta do it every once in a while to keep everything organized,”
he’d said. “Like going to the dentist,” Toriel had chimed in. “Sure,” 9S had replied, “whatever that is, it’s exactly like that.”

And at least Asgore hadn’t called her during dinner.

But Toriel had prepared such a heavy meal, and now Alphys felt so slow, so heavy, so tired…

But Asgore was Alphys’ boss—well, he was everyone’s boss, indirectly—and he’d sounded so stressed, unwilling to allow himself much time to explain himself but insisting that Alphys arrive immediately. If she got there and all Asgore needed was to have his UnderNet browser switched back to Icewolf, Alphys was gonna hand in her resignation on the spot.

Burying her frustration, Alphys put on her coat and wrapped her scarf tightly around her neck, knowing full well she had a long and miserable trek through Snowdin to look forward to. It was just her luck that Asgore would call her now of all times and pull her away with an urgent summons after Toriel had treated everyone to a decadent and filling dinner, when the day was just beginning to wind down and those wintry wastelands would soon be at their coldest, windiest, and darkest. She could barely keep her eyes open, smothering a yawn with her scarf as she wound it over her snout.

Ugh. Snowdin. How anyone could stand to live there, Alphys would never know. She guessed it helped if you had really thick skin or no skin at all, or if you were a robot…

“Hey, uh, M-Miss Doctor Alphys?”

Asriel tugged on her scarf as she wound it tighter, and Alphys had no choice but to look him right in his big, adorable eyes.

She’d designed his body based on painstaking research, including examining the lines on the wall in Asgore’s home where he and Toriel had marked the growing boy’s height, and she’d had no choice but to make his height accurate to his original body at the time of his death. As a result, Asriel, a twelve(?)-year-old boy, was almost as tall as Alphys.

She was just maybe a tiny little bit self-conscious about her short stature. Sometimes.

“Can I come with you?” he asked. “To see Dad?”

He looked at her with eager anticipation. How could Alphys say no to a face like his, so bright and beaming and with such a sparkle in his eyes?

Well…

LAB RECORD 001.430.4.2

I think the flower became Asriel due to prolonged DT energy exposure. That flower must have absorbed his essence after he died due to his dust mixing with the soil.

He’s so excited to be back. He can’t stop asking when he can see his mom and dad again.

I haven’t told Asgore. I… I don’t think I can. At least not until I know whether Asriel is stable.

Alphys took a deep breath, inhaled a mouthful of knitted wool in the process, and promptly pulled down her scarf. “Y-Your Highness, I think you should stay here until I, uh… Until I know you’re stable.” She instantly regretted it. Why did she use the word stable, just like she had in those old lab
records? It was like she wanted to jinx everything.

Asriel’s smile grew thinner. “Y—You think I’m gonna… fall apart or something?”

“No!” Alphys hastily backpedaled. “No, uh, I th-think you’re gonna be fine! I just wanna give it a few days until, uh, um—j-just to make sure.” She reached up to pat his head and tousled his fur, chuckling nervously. “We don’t w-want a repeat of what happened last time, do we?”

As soon as Alphys withdrew her hand, Asriel started trying to un-muss his fur. “Uh, yeah, I—What do you mean, ‘last time’?”

“L-Last—What?” Alphys felt her blood turn as frigid as the snow outside as she realized what she’d let slip out.

Noticing trouble brewing, Undyne stepped in to intervene. “Alphy didn’t say anything about a last time, kiddo. Looks like we’re gonna have to take a look at your aural sensors after all!” she said, forcing a jovial laugh and tugging on the boy’s ear.

Alphys let herself breathe again. She hated gaslighting the Prince of All Monsters, but…

“My mouth’s fine!” Asriel protested, sticking out his tongue at Undyne as if to demonstrate.

Undyne gently nudged the prince. “A week’s not gonna kill you or your dad.”

“B-But he’s gotta miss me! Unless… Unless he really is a jerk now, like Mom says…”

“Of course he misses you!” Undyne told him. “That’s why we’ve got to make sure everything’s working the way it’s supposed to, get all our frogs in a row…”

Asriel sighed with resignation, his heart heavy, eyes downcast. “I… I mean, you’re right,” he admitted. “It’d be really sad if we got Dad’s hopes up and then after a few days I ended up with a logic virus or something.”

“I’m sorry.” Undyne dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around Asriel. “I know it sucks. Just bear with us for a few more days, okay? Alphys’ll be right back here to run more tests tomorrow. She’ll try to bring you back something from home.”

“Uh, yeah, of course!” Alphys said, wondering as soon as she agreed to it what questions Asgore would ask if he noticed her sneaking into his deceased son’s bedroom tonight. “If there’s, like, a book you like or a toy or something…”

“Can you see if my locket’s still in there?” Asriel held out his paws, his fingers bent in a heart shape. “It’s gold, looks like this…”

“We’ll see what we can do. Go play with Emil and 9S some more.” Undyne patted Asriel on the shoulders, then sent him along.

“Phew,” she sighed, once she was sure he was out of earshot. “Never thought resurrecting a kid would be so stressful. So, to Asgore?”

Alphys nodded. “To Asgore.”

“All right.” Undyne stretched. “I should see the big guy too and make sure security’s all set for the big speech tomorrow.” Alphys felt Undyne’s arm wrap around her waist as the captain hoisted her up and opened the door, letting the bitter, howling wind in. “Let’s head out together!”
Someone else might feel embarrassed being lifted and carried like that, but not Alphys. At least, not when it was Undyne who was doing the carrying. “Th—Thanks for saving me. I can’t believe I almost told him… How did 2B do it all those years?”

“Well, you know her,” Undyne said, tramping into the snow and letting the door to the Ruins close behind her and immediately starting to shiver. “Sh-She’s g-g-got nerves of s-s-s-steel.”

A foot wedged in the door stopped it from closing. “Actually,” 2B said, pushing the door open and walking past Undyne, “my nerves are a complex silicon composite.” Even with the cold wind ruffling her snow-white hair, she was as stoic and statuesque as ever. Alphys couldn’t help but be jealous of those YoRHa androids with their tolerance of temperatures as low as minus forty Celsius.

“I’m leaving so soon, Toobs?” Undyne asked.

“I noticed you two preparing to leave and—”

“This support unit,” said Pod 042, “has concluded that organic lifeforms become slower, more sluggish, and less adept at physical and mental activities after heavy meals.”

“We’d love to s-s-stick around,” Alphys sighed, trying to stop her teeth from clacking against each other like castanets, “b-but the King—”

“Proposal: Unit 2B will render assistance.”

Undyne chuckled. “What’re you gonna d-do, walk f-f-for us?”

Without a word, 2B hooked her arms around Undyne’s knees and back and swept her off her feet, all too quickly and fluidly for Undyne to mount any resistance before she broke out into a swift run.

As soon as the snow-dusted trees began to whiz by, Undyne, still tightly gripping Alphys in her arms, began to squirm. “Y-You can’t carry both of us!” she protested, the wind whipping her fins and hair.

“The two of you combined still weigh less than me.” There was a note of pride seeping into 2B’s voice. “I think I can.”

“Put us down!” Undyne insisted. “I-It’s embarrassing! I c-can’t let anyone in S-S-Snowdin see me in another girl’s arms l-like some d-damsel in distress!”

2B was unfazed. “I’ll let you down when we reach the edge of town.”

Undyne relented, knowing she was beaten, and allowed herself to suffer the indignity of being carried across the frigid forest and ice-choked ravines to town, no doubt holding her breath every time 2B carried her past one of the Royal Guard posts scattered across the icy expanse and hoping they sped past too quickly for anyone to see her.

All things considered, there were, Alphys supposed, worse ways to travel.

They arrived at Snowdin soon enough, and as 2B had promised, she let Undyne down at the outskirts of town. The cold wind had numbed what little of Alphys’ skin she’d had exposed to the elements; at her side, Undyne tried to massage some feeling back into her cheeks.

Undyne sighed in relief. “Ah, g-good. No one s-s-saw us.”

A slow electronic voice boomed at the three of them from above. “HELLO CAPTAIN UNDYNE.
Towering over them, nearly invisible in the twilight and falling snow, was a gargantuan machine lifeform, one of the handful of peaceful machines that had bubbled up from the depths of the mountain once Undyne and 2B had taken care of the violent ones. The pinprick eyes on its tiny head blazed green.

According to records so helpfully provided to Alphys by the androids and their pods on machine lifeforms in their various forms, this one was classified as a “Goliath biped”: nearly two stories tall, with massive arms nearly the size of its torso. It was not one machine lifeform, in fact, but rather a colony of several linked together to form a single entity.

This one called itself “Mill.” It did odd jobs all around town, such as shoveling (its massive hands could clear a road of snow in mere minutes) and construction (it made for very convenient scaffolding in a pinch).

“Oh. Hi, Mill.” Undyne nervously adjusted her coat. “Didn’t see you there.”

Mill shuffled aside, its thunderous, plodding footsteps shaking the ground. “PAPYRUS TOLD ME I AM SO BIG THAT PEOPLE CANNOT HELP BUT NOT NOTICE ME. THAT IS WHY HE DEPUTIZED ME TO STAND GUARD AT THE ENTRANCE TO TOWN. I LIKE IT. IT IS PEACEFUL. HE HAD ME MEMORIZE A LIST OF FRIENDLY FACES AND SOMETIMES I SEE THEM. MOST OF THE TIME, IN FACT. HIS LIST OF FRIENDLY FACES INCLUDES EVERYONE IN TOWN.”

Undyne shivered and wrapped her coat tighter around herself. “Guard duty, huh? But the c-c-cold…”

“My temperature sensors are inoperative.”

“I—could fix those for you,” Alphys offered.

“Why? It makes my job easier. I am happy to provide such utility. I would not be as happy if it hurt to be cold.”

Alphys supposed that was an interesting way of looking at things.

“Alright then. Well, uh,” Undyne said, “I hope you won’t t-t-tell anyone about this.”

“About what?”

“Exactly.”

The three of them walked past the machine and into town, the amber streetlamps and lights from within each building softly pushing back the dusky gray-blue shadows painting the snow.

“Well, that was embarrassing,” Undyne said. “But thanks for the ride, anyway. Got a big day tomorrow with the S-S-State of the Kingdom address, and I…” She rubbed her shoulders. “I don’t want this c-c-cold sapping any of my strength.”

“Happy to help.” 2B looked just a little smug as she said that. “Alphys, you’ll be returning to run more diagnostics on Asriel tomorrow morning, right? Meet me here when you arrive and I’ll—”

Alphys felt her phone begin to buzz in her pocket. “E-Excuse me,” she said, reaching into her coat and fumbling around for the phone, hoping to reach it before the caller gave up or left a voicemail.
“I’ve got to…”

She pulled out the phone, tugging at it a bit to free the Mew Mew Kissy Cutie phone charm dangling from its case as it snagged on her zipper. The caller ID on the screen was—who else?—*The Boss.*

Alphys raised the phone to her ear. “H-Hello, Your Highness. D-Doctor Alphys here.”

“Hello, Doctor!” Asgore’s voice came through excessively cheerily. “I just realized, when I called you earlier, I completely forgot to tell you what was the matter!”

“Oh, um, th-that’s okay, it doesn’t matter to me! When you c-call, I show up! Th-That’s my job!” Alphys replied with equal excessive cheer. *Please, Asgore,* she thought, *don’t tell me you just called me all the way across the kingdom to get your email working again…*

“Oh, nonsense! It was very irresponsible of me. Now, here is the problem. I’ve just received a very strange guest. She fell into my throne room from the surface!”

Alphys was struck dumb, struggling to decide how to respond. She settled on “Oh?”

“She is a very human-looking robot, much like your friends. And she is very scared. I would like you to stop by and see if there is anything she needs repaired.”

“A—A robot? You mean like an android?” Alphys asked. Undyne and 2B were staring at her now with bated breath.

“Yes! An android! That is exactly what 6O called herself. She said she was from a place called, er… what was it again… Yuri? Yadda? Yor—”

No way. Alphys nearly dropped her phone. “YoRHa?” she offered. *Another YoRHa android fell into the mountain?*


“Yes! That was it!” Asgore replied.

“E-Excuse me for a moment, Y-Your Highness.” Alphys pulled the phone away, holding it at arms’ length, and muted its microphone. “Uh, 2B,” she asked in a hushed voice, “do you know any androids named, uh… Six-Oh?”

A note of shock flitted across 2B’s face, her eyes widening. “She was my…”

“YoRHa Number Six Type-O,” Pod 042 answered. “Unit 2B’s assigned communications operator. This support unit has thirty-seven related photos stored within local storage—”

2B shushed the pod.

Alphys put the phone back to her ear, unmuting herself. “S-Sorry about that. We—We’ll be right there, King Asgore!” she told him, nearly tripping over her words. She hung up.

“Thirty-seven related photos, huh?” Undyne asked, nudging 2B in the ribs and grinning.

“I, uh…” 2B looked away, a faint pink glow on her cheeks. “She would ask me to take pictures of flowers and send them to her.”

Undyne’s grin widened, showing more of her snaggled yellow fangs. “Is that a *euphemism* for…”
“No, Captain.”

“S-So,” Alphys asked 2B, “I guess she’s a f-friend of yours?”

2B nodded. “I didn’t bother much with socializing on the surface. But it wouldn’t be inaccurate…”

“W-Well let’s go!” Alphys rushed to the harbor. “Let’s find out what your friend’s doing down here!”

9S reeled back against the wall as he fell out of hacking space, staggering drunkenly, his HUD elements sparking and flickering. Nothing major—he shrugged it off.

“9S? You are not teaching Asriel how to cause any sort of trouble, are you?” Toriel called out from the kitchen, the clatter of dishes ringing out behind her.

“No! Of course not, Toriel!” 9S called back from the bedroom as he taught Asriel how to cause trouble.

The kid didn’t have any native hacking support, of course, but that was nothing a good pod connection couldn’t pick up the slack for. And he was a surprisingly quick learner—in only fifteen minutes he’d gotten past a low-level firewall 9S had set up. He was a natural. 9S wasn’t sure if he should have been sad Asriel hadn’t been born a Scanner, or relieved.

As 9S nursed his aching head and tried to blink away the chromatic aberration and fringes of uncooperative colors still plaguing his visual display, Asriel bounced excitedly on his bed, reveling in his triumph. “C’mon! Is that all you’ve got?”

“Don’t get cocky, kid.” 9S clapped him on the shoulder. “I was hiding my power level.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course!” 9S said, crossing his arms. “Do you have any idea how many machines’ heads I’ve blown up?”

“You can do that?”

“Of course!”

“Teach me!”

“What? No!”

Asriel gave 9S his best sad-puppy face. The kid loved having a face and made sure to use it to its full extent. Hell, if 9S had spent almost a year stuck as one of those machines, he wouldn’t take having a face for granted anymore either. “Aww, why not?”

“Because of all the things I can hack,” said 9S, clearing his throat, puffing out his chest, and putting on his best stern-lecture-voice (which wasn’t very good, as he’d never had to use it before), “your mom isn’t one of them. And she’d sell me for scrap metal if I taught you how to make things explode.”

Asriel let out a forlorn sigh, flopping down onto the bed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Now, you’ll have to promise me and Pod 153 you’ll only use your powers for good, Asriel,” 9S
said. *Is this what it feels like to be an older brother?* he asked himself. *There’s so much…* responsibility. It’s almost as daunting as an airdrop into the middle of a machine colony. *Like, if he gets hurt or turns out bad, it’ll be my fault…* “If you prove to me you can hack responsibly, I’ll talk with Alphys about putting a hacking module into Asriel Mk. II.”

Asriel grinned. “I’ll do my best!”

9S opened his mouth to say something more, but before he could, Pod 153 let out a beep through his visor’s direct link with his audio sensors. “Incoming message from Unit 2B.”

“Um, sorry, Asriel. I gotta take this.” 2B’s face appeared in a cutaway panel projected on 9S’s visual display. “Hey, 2B. What’s up?”

“Nines, I’ve just received word that another one of ours has fallen into the mountain. I’m on my way to Asgore’s castle with Alphys and Undyne to investigate.”

“Another one of our own? You mean—”

2B nodded. “YoRHa. And… it’s 6O.”

The *same* 6O who’d been 2B’s communications operator? The same one she’d talked about missing earlier today? Forget how coincidental it was—how was that possible at all? “What the fu—”

9S remembered to hold his tongue around the boy. Asriel snickered and held a paw over his mouth.

“What do you *mean*?” he asked. “There’s no way a Type-O would be permitted on the surface, let alone be in any position to come here.”

Then again, if 2B’s out-of-body experience from earlier that day really had been accurate, then it was obvious something horrible had happened on the surface… something horrible, perhaps, to all of YoRHa. Something that may have explained why an android permanently stationed on the Bunker had fallen to Earth.

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” 2B replied.

9S nodded. “I can’t say I’m not curious, too. I’ll meet you there,” he answered before disconnecting.

Asriel groaned. “You’re leaving?”

“Sorry.”

“But—Emil had to go back to his job and—it’s just gonna be me tonight?”

*You really know how to guilt-trip, kid.* “Look, if you get scared tonight, Mom’ll be right there.”

“I’m not gonna get nightmares or anything!” Asriel insisted defensively. “Just… I’m gonna be bored.”

“Observation: Unit Asriel is scheduled to enter low-power mode in five minutes, forty seconds,” said Pod 153. “It is necessary for children to sleep as many as nine hours a day.”

“Androids don’t need sleep!”

“We need *some* sleep,” said 9S.

“Not nine hours!”
“Well, um, no… but it feels good.”

Asriel grumbled. “Yeah, yeah.”

*Oh, geez, I’m really rubbing off on this kid, aren’t I? 9S sighed. “2B and I’ll stop by tomorrow morning, okay? Sleep tight, don’t let the killifish bite.”* He opened the door and began to step out into the hall. “And don’t tell your mom I’ve been teaching you hacking!”

9S took one step forward and immediately collided with something tall and fluffy.

“You’ve been teaching him what?” Toriel asked.

As 9S struggled for a response, his mouth went dry. “J-Just… regaling him with stories of heroism… from the surface…” he said, gingerly stepping around her as her stern gaze bore into him. “Y’know. Us salty old war dogs and our stories… we just can’t shut up…”

Toriel’s eyes never left him, and 9S had never been so happy to be wearing his visor so she couldn’t actually make eye contact with him.

He bolted for the exit.

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Try as she might, 6O couldn’t sleep. Even after Asgore had brought her a cup of tea he said was perfect for insomniacs and would put her right to sleep. Even after three of those cups. She couldn’t sleep.

It shouldn’t have been difficult. She was exhausted. Every part of her body ached. The bedroom was bathed in darkness, and the blanket wrapped around her was so thick and soft. But when she tried to close her eyes she just saw the familiar halls of the only home she’d ever known bathed in blood-red light, saw fellow androids she’d never imagined would ever draw weapons on her lunging forward to cut her to ribbons, saw the splatters of blood as they all fell to the floor, heard them gurgle and moan in their death throes…

She’d seen combat. Not personally, but through her work with 2B. Indirectly, through a monitor in an operations room high in orbit above the Earth. She’d seen blood and violence and death. But when it was right in front of her…

It was so different. So scary. And she could relive all those moments every time she closed her eyes. Her thoughts orbited those experiences ceaselessly, like water spiraling down a drain but never falling.

Fumbling in the dark, 6O reached out for the flower Asgore had set in her hair, feeling its silky-soft petals beneath her fingertips. She’d never touched a real flower before, only ever looked at pictures. The first time she touched a flower should have felt like a first kiss, something momentous, special, breathtaking. But…

There were three soft knocks on the bedroom door. 6O poked her head above the covers as the door swung open, light from the hallway pouring into the room around the silhouette of a human-shaped figure. Its shadow stretched across the floor, hand outstretched, phantom fingers creeping up 6O’s chest and toward her throat, as if it were both a herald and an omen.

It wasn’t Asgore. It was—

“6O? Is that really you?”
That voice—

6O sat up. “T-Two… 2B?”

That night, 9S crossed the busy streets of New Home at a brisk pace on his way to the castle, weaving through crowds of pedestrians. To say New Home had a bit of a population density problem was an understatement. New Home was so teeming with life that it almost seemed itself like a single writhing organism. The streets were packed as much with foot traffic as they were with vehicles. A thousand cacophonies filled the air. Scents, too, filled the air, a dozen wafting from every direction and blending into an indescribable melange.

It was almost sensory overload. Sometimes there was so much going on in this city that it almost hurt to be there.

*All these people, 9S would muse, living in one place. Was this what cities were like when humans still lived on Earth? So many of the battlegrounds on the surface were abandoned cities. 9S had always tried to imagine what they had looked like in their prime, and his imagination, boundless as it was, had always fallen short.*

He willed himself to speed up, not wanting to get caught up in city-watching, as he sometimes did. In some ways, empty ruins were preferable to these living behemoths.

“All alert: incoming machine lifeform.”

“What?” 9S reached for his sword before realizing he’d left it at home. Well, at least he could hack it if it tried to—

With a thunderous, metallic clatter, a metal bin of refuse fell at 9S’s feet, and as the trash poured out across the sidewalk, a small stubby stained with rancid liquid crawled out after it. 9S sighed in relief.

It was one of the benevolent machines, like Mill over in Snowdin.

Well, not quite like Mill. Not all machines who’d started living among monsters were upstanding citizens. For example, this was Zizek.

“Dumpster diving again?” 9S groaned, sidestepping the mess the machine had created. If Undyne were here with him she’d try to arrest this machine for public littering (for the fifteenth time or so), and 9S almost wanted to make a citizen’s arrest on her behalf.

As it dug through the garbage, the machine tossed out a rote response while continuing unabated to rifle through the pile of refuse. “I already am eating from the trash can all the time,” Zizek said. “The name of this trash can is ideology.”

9S wasn’t sure if he should point out that the machine had no mouth.

Zizek pulled the soggy remains of a hot dog—dripping with mustard—from the garbage and smeared it against the lower half of its face. “The material force of ideology makes me not see what I am effectively eating,” he said.

“Oh. Yeah. Okay.” 9S righted the trash can. “Whatever.” He picked up Zizek, straining under the machine’s weight, and set it in the can. “There you go. Enjoy, you little weirdo,” he said, pushing the can back into the nearest alleyway.

“Ew! Like, don’t put him in here with us!” a purple-furred cat standing in a ramshackle kiosk in the
alleyway protested.

“Yeah! he’ll, like, eat all our sweet merch!” the cat’s alligator friend chimed in.

9S ignored the alley-cat and alley-gator and went on his way, picking up speed. *A YoRHa android in the mountain. And a communications operator at that. Maybe YoRHa’s gotten what it deserved, but at any rate, something’s happened on the surface, and it isn’t good.*

“Black box signal detected.”

“*Here?*” 9S skidded to a stop and whirled around, scanning the busy city street from the sidewalk, spying monsters of all shapes and sizes but no familiar faces. “But 2B’s…”

His HUD showed the signal, all right. And others. There should have only been nine signals in the entire kingdom—his and 2B’s, the six black boxes harvested in the past few centuries by the king, and the newcomer. How could there be ten?

“9S. What a surprise! We meet again. Or… is it the first time?”

There, down the sidewalk, stood Chara Dreemurr—the long-forgotten YoRHa prototype android, C13. Their reddish-brown bangs hung over their forehead, framing cold maroon eyes; a long black greatcoat disguised their tall, lanky frame. A black sword hung at their back, levitating via the NFCS capabilities of their body—13B’s body.

But that was impossible, unless… *they’d come from the surface, too.* Had Chara brought 6O down here?

“I suppose you don’t know me.” Chara stared at 9S with a fiery intensity. “But I know you quite well, 9S. I—”

“Hi, Chara.”

Chara’s eyes widened. “Oh—Oh, well then!” They clapped their hands. “You preserved your consciousness after the reset. Bravo! That saves me a lot of trouble!”

9S crossed his arms. “Yeah. I’m sure it does. What do you want?”

“I must say, of all the people I expected to run into down here, you, 9S…” Chara stepped closer, looking around. “You’ve been down here a long time, haven’t you?”

“Nine months.”

“My, my. How many lifetimes is that for someone like you?” Chara smiled. “The locals seem to accept you.”

9S stuck his hands in his pockets. “Well, we’re androids, not humans. They know that.”

“And they don’t know about your black boxes?” Chara raised an eyebrow. “Well, it must be nice.”

Oh, boy. Chara was being devious. 9S just knew it. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I was homesick.”

*Yeah, sure,* 9S thought. A thought occurred to him—Chara liked him, didn’t they? Back when he’d...
first met them, Chara had given that whole spiel about enemies becoming friends and friends becoming enemies, seemingly courting him as a potential ally.

*Whatever you’re really up to, it isn’t good.* “Whatever you’re up to,” 9S said, “I want in.” If Chara was willing to tell him their whole plan, he would pretend to be their ally for as long as possible.

Chara grinned, their eyes sparkling, and offered 9S their hand. “I’m honored.”

9S shook it. “The honor is mine. So fill me in—what can I do for you, partner?”

Chara took back their hand, examining their fingernails. “Shoo your pod away. Conspiracies work best without listening devices in plain sight.”

Right. This was one smart cookie. 9S tapped Pod 153 on the side. “153, I’m ordering you to enter sleep mode.”

“Affirmative.” 153 sank to the ground and powered down.

9S looked Chara dead in the eyes. Their scarlet-maroon eyes—the same color as Toriel’s, Asgore’s, and Asriel’s. They really *were* a part of the same family.

“I’m listening,” he said.
It was her.

It was unmistakable. Even in the darkness, 2B could see the girl’s silhouette. And her voice when she’d called out 2B’s name, tentative and wavering but unmistakable, high-pitched and squeaky yet hoarse.

A bedside lamp turned on, filling the room with a soft amber-toned light. The round face; the golden hair, long and thick and braided into twin plaits that fell down her back (frayed and frizzy as they were from what must have been a harrowing sequence of events); wide, watery blue eyes. YoRHa Number Six Type-O, in the flesh. Impossible, but there. It was really her.

2B hadn’t seen another one of her kind apart from 9S for months, and now that another android from YoRHa was staring her in the face—one who didn’t want to kill her—she felt a homesick ache in her chest.

“It is you,” she breathed.

And 6O all but leaped from the bed, tossing the thick blanket wrapped around her aside and throwing herself into 2B’s arms.

2B caught her but reeled back under the unexpected impact (although, apparently, Type-O’s were very light), stepping past the threshold of the bedroom and stumbling into the hall. She held on as gently as she could, as if she were handling a delicate glass sculpture, as 6O wept into her chest. The girl felt so soft and tender in her arms, as if every muscle in her body had been pounded into a paste—or perhaps it was just because Operators had so much less muscle tone and density, lacking the reinforced chassis and endodermis of models designed for combat.

6O looked up and cracked open her watering eyes, eyes hooded by dark gray rings. It occurred to 2B that she had never gotten a good look at her before—6O had almost always been in uniform when she and 2B had interacted, either on-duty or off—and she had never noticed her face. She had almost the same face as 6E, but softer, rounder, fuller, without a hint of malice.

Yet 2B had never seen 6O like this. She had a dazed, haunted look about her.
“Two…”

“It’s me,” 2B said, resting a hand on the back of 6O’s head and lightly scratching her scalp, her fingers running through tautly-pulled hair. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“How did you get here?” 6O asked. “I… 13B flew me so far away, and—and you and 9S were going to deal with the other infected YoRHa units, and—Why aren’t you in uniform?” Her fingers tightened around 2B’s arms. Her hands were shaking. No, her whole body was trembling like a leaf in a storm, her breathing rapid and shallow as her eyes darted to and fro, meeting 2B’s gaze and hurriedly looking away. The emerald-green satin robe 6O was wearing shifted to reveal a patch of bare skin on her shoulder riddled with cloudy, fresh bruises; noticing the damage, 2B relaxed her grip, yet it didn’t seem to improve the girl’s mood.

“It’s a long story, but I can explain. What are you doing down here, 6O?” 2B asked. “Did something happen to the Bunker?”

“Did… Did something…” 6O let go of 2B, taking a hesitant step backward. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Who are you?” 6O took another stumbling step backward out of arm’s length, swaying on weak and unsteady legs like a baby deer learning to walk. The elation on her face had turned to fear. “You’re with them, aren’t you? Aren’t you?”

Of course—what must she look like to 6O, standing here in such strange clothing, flanked by such strange-looking creatures? And what must 6O be thinking right now? She’d last seen 2B a scant few hours ago, but 2B had not seen her in months. The 2B she’d known and the 2B standing before her were completely different people.

2B raised her hands, her palms facing outward. “6O, calm down. Let me explain myself. 9S and I…"

“Get away from me!” With a hoarse cry, 6O grabbed the lamp off the nightstand and charged at 2B, wielding it like a bludgeoning tool.

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9S and Chara stood in a nearby alleyway as the inhabitants of New Home flowed by, filling the sidewalk and streets alike.

“It’s good to be back,” said Chara, sparing a glance at the teeming masses of monsters milling by, “but my goodness, it has become crowded. You never saw even half as many people on the streets in my day.”

Most of the buildings filling New Home reached up to the ceiling of the cavern containing it; the highest floors were also the newest. It was a city that was always growing, always building itself up on newer and newer layers, brighter and fresher and more colorful layers, to accommodate more and more people, while Snowdin, Waterfall, and Hotland grew emptier and emptier.

“It seems to me we’re facing quite a Malthusian dilemma here, but—” Chara cleared their throat. “Oh, but forgive me for boring you with my facile analysis. You live here. I’m sure you read the newspapers, browse the ’Net, gobble up whatever tidbits you can get your hands on…” They produced a crumpled paper from beneath their coat; 9S noticed that while the biggest headline was about tomorrow’s royal speech, the headline under it was about overcrowding. “You know more
about this than I do, don’t you?”

9S nodded. The kingdom was facing a population crisis, and no one seemed willing to admit its full severity. Under the state of war declared by King Asgore following the deaths of Asriel and Chara, morale had soared in patriotic fervor, leading to a population explosion that was, to some extent, still ongoing. However, with each passing year, Snowdin got colder, Hotland got hotter, Waterfall got wetter, and thus New Home got more crowded. To deal with the strains on the power grid and food supply in New Home, periodic electricity and food rationing had been rolled out. The outskirts of the kingdom escaped the worst of it, but only due to their low populations and lower demand on infrastructure.

Everybody just thought they could relocate back to the less-hospitable parts of the mountain if it got too bad or they could excavate more caverns to build out New Home and the problem would be solved. But such sentiments were blissfully ignorant—perhaps on purpose—of the reasons why those parts of the kingdom were growing emptier in the first place. The kingdom was dying even as it was thriving.

“Do you think this kingdom can survive another generation?” asked Chara, “If the Barrier doesn’t come down—and soon?”

9S hated to admit it—but Chara was probably more right than they knew. “Probably not.”

“So it goes…” Chara let out a heavy, forlorn sigh, shrugging their shoulders. “So you would agree that lowering the Barrier is the greatest priority for this kingdom.”

“I mean, it’s pretty dangerous on the surface,” 9S pointed out. Wait, he thought. I’m trying to butter Chara up so they tell me whatever it is they want to do. Maybe I should be more agreeable?

“Of course, you’ve already thought of that, haven’t you?”

“Indeed I have.” Chara began to study their fingernails. “Now, 9S, what does it take to destroy or pass through the Barrier?”

“A human soul.”

“Or, by happenstance, a black box can do the same.” Chara smiled. “I should know. I did it once, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah. Everyone knows the story.”

Chara nodded. “On the subject of black boxes… I believe that in the hundreds of years between the Eighth Machine War and the Fourteenth, when the Army of Humanity was conducting its development of our kind, prototypes such as myself were… drawn to this mountain. Somehow, as if our souls resonated with the Barrier. This way, Asgore collected six black boxes in my absence… and now needs but one more to break the Barrier for good.

“But now we face a crisis of supply.” Chara returned their gaze to 9S, their red eyes meeting his blue eyes. “YoRHa has been destroyed. Eradicated, down to, as far as I know, every last android.” A smile tugged at the corner of their mouth, sardonic and mirthless. “Erased through treachery, destroyed to cover up the last loose end regarding the lie of human persistence… and to turn us elite dolls into martyrs who would galvanize our kind to the end of time with our gravestones.”

Regardless of 9S’s feelings toward YoRHa, the news still hit like a punch in the gut. Everyone… not just the Type-E units he’d once felt so bitterly toward, but the combat units, reconnaissance units, healers, scanners…
The thought that _everybody_, not just him, had finally become innocent victims of that damned organization just as he and 2B had once been left him feeling oddly empty. 9S steadied himself against the wall, his legs nearly giving out, reeling as if he’d been dealt a physical blow but trying not to show it.

“Oh, yes, it was truly ghastly,” said Chara, eyeing 9S’s ashen face. “Humanity was an evil species, and by enslaving us androids to their will even in death, they poisoned our kind forevermore. You see, from what I’d gathered, there was a backdoor installed on the Bunker, set to open on the Army of Humanity’s command. At that point, the machines seized the opportunity to transmit a logic virus to every soul in YoRHa, save for the lucky few who had forgotten to sync up to the Bunker’s servers. That is the only thing that ensured my survival… and that of the one android I brought with me to the mountain.

“As far as I know,” Chara said, “there are only ten black boxes left in the entire world. Yours, mine, and 2B’s… the six collected by Asgore… and 6O’s. All facilities and documentation tied to YoRHa have been destroyed. No new YoRHa models will ever be made. No new black boxes will ever find themselves filled with the intangible, phantom essence of the soul. Who knows if any other life form on Earth has a soul that resonates in quite the same way?”

“So out of the four of us, one of us has to die,” 9S reasoned, trying to keep his voice level and his tone nonchalant. _Maybe_ too nonchalant? he wondered, second-guessing himself. _If I’m too glib, will Chara suspect I’m acting in bad faith? Or if I’m too emotional, will they think the same thing? Should I be practicing 2B’s old mantra right now?_ He scanned Chara’s face, looking for any sort of tell regarding how they were parsing his tone. But Chara’s face was an affable mask.

“I’d hate for it to be me, of course,” Chara admitted, “as I _am_ the sole surviving heir to the Dreemurr family. And as for you and 2B… I _like_ you two.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Sadly, Father doesn’t see things my way,” said Chara. “He took one look at 6O and lost his nerve. Perhaps he never _had_ his nerve to begin with—who knows? Anyway, I’m not going to wait for him to realize what dire straits he’s really in. Tomorrow, while he is preoccupied making his speech, I will sneak into the castle, steal the six black boxes, kidnap the girl, and present it all to whoever is willing to do what is necessary to free our kingdom.”

_A shockingly simple plan._ 9S crossed his arms. “A coup, huh? Well, what can I do to help?” he asked, already thinking about what he could do to sabotage Chara’s plan. Moving 6O out of the castle seemed the obvious choice, or taking the six black boxes and hiding them in new locations. Preferably, both.

“How callous!” Chara exclaimed, their eyes widening.

_Oh, shit,_ 9S thought, his stomach sinking. _Have I given myself away too soon?_

“6O is the _last of our kind_, and here you are, so eager to hand her over…” Chara stroked their chin. “I didn’t know you had it in you. I suppose you Scanners are full of surprises.”

“It’s better her than us, isn’t it?” 9S stuck his hands in his pockets. “As you said, the kingdom is facing a crisis. Besides, if you had any idea what YoRHa did to me and 2B,” he added, “you’d know I don’t give a damn what happens to 6O. As far as I’m concerned, she and 21O were complicit.”

Chara raised a curious eyebrow. “Oh?”
“They had to have known.” 9S modulated his voice to sound angrier, knowing that he was giving Chara a good reason to take him at his word. “21O was my communications operator for three years; 6O was 2B’s for just as long. After the first dozen or so ‘accidents’ they must have figured out for themselves what was going on. But they stood by and watched.”

Of course, 9S didn’t think 21O and 6O had done anything wrong—What could they have done, even if they had figured out what was going on? But he had to be convincing for Chara.

“Ah, I am glad I ran into you.” Chara stepped closer, throwing their arm over 9S’s shoulders, and raised their hand to the ceiling. “When seven human souls, or seven black boxes, unite with the soul of a strong monster, a godlike being of unfathomable power is created—one capable of creating the world anew. Imagine, 9S. Blue skies overhead. The fresh wind on your face. And a world without war, without borders or boundaries. The Machine Wars will end tomorrow, 9S. I’m so happy to know,” they said, smiling as their sparkling eyes turned to face 9S and their outstretched hand laid itself on his chest, “that I can count on you to join me in the new world.”

The most terrifying thing was how enticing Chara’s plan sounded. 9S knew that Chara was bad news. After all, what they’d tried to do to 2B had been unforgivable. But… What they wanted to do now—wasn’t it the right thing? Free the kingdom, wipe the machine scourge from the planet? If 9S hadn’t known anything about Chara, if he’d never met them, if he hadn’t had to save 2B from their sinister machinations… he might have wanted to follow them to the ends of the Earth.

A hot wind blew through the alley, carrying on it a dizzying array of odors and a roaring din of sounds, but 9S still felt a chill run up his spine. Centuries ago, Chara had convinced Asriel to assist them in their own suicide and harvest their black box, all for the sake of a ghoulish excursion to the surface. Now, 9S knew how they had done it—with a grand, tantalizing vision like this.

“Tomorrow, when the king begins his speech at City Hall,” Chara said, pulling away, “at ten-thirty in the morning, I want you to be at his castle. I will arrive once the speech is underway, and we will search the grounds together for 6O and the other black boxes. So all I need you to do until then,” they said, “is make sure that you and only you will be waiting at the castle with 6O when I arrive.”

9S nodded. “Sounds good. What monster did you have in mind, anyway? To inherit all that power?”

“I’ll deal with that. You don’t worry your snow-white little head about it.” Chara sighed and smiled like a fool in love. “Oh, I do so love it when a plan comes together…” They rummaged in their coat, producing a long dagger with a coppery blade. “Now, I have my work, and you have yours. I suggest we both get to it. But first…”

Chara pricked their thumb with the tip of the dagger and watched a dot of blood well up on their thumb tip, an oblong dome of scarlet trembling in the air. “An oath. Hold out your hand.”

What? What kind of primitive ritual was this? “I—is this really necessary?” 9S asked.

“I’ve entrusted you with quite a lot, 9S,” said Chara. “If you’d prefer, I could ask you to kneel and swear fealty to me instead,” they added, an iron bite creeping into their voice. “What’s wrong? You don’t go faint at the sight of blood, do you?”

9S resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he presented his hand to Chara. There was a sharp, yet fleeting sting as the ancient dagger nipped at his skin. Chara slipped the blade away and took 9S’s hand, letting the blood they’d drawn intermingle.

“Let this be our cruel blood oath,” they solemnly intoned, closing their eyes. “A promise made… to bring to Earth a brave new world.”
9S closed his eyes as well and felt Chara’s fingers slip away from his.

When he opened his eyes, they had vanished. 9S rushed out of the alley and into the crowd of pedestrians spilling over the sidewalk, but Chara was already lost in the crowd.

6O opened her eyes. A miasma of static faded from her sight, her vision unblurring. She was back in bed, as if she’d never gotten back up. The lamp she’d picked up had been set back in its place, as if she’d never picked it up. Her wrist throbbed.

Standing above her was 2B, but not 2B. She had the same silvery-white hair, the same black hairband holding her neck-length bob in place, the same slender face with the same mole near the left corner of her mouth. But without her visor, blue-gray eyes like bottomless vortexes of ice chips stared out from behind snowy bangs. And what she was wearing was by no means standard YoRHa attire—a black turtleneck sweater and a cropped, long-sleeved jacket of glossy, pale blue velvet clung to her body. A support pod with a chrome hull floated in the air beside her.

It couldn’t be 2B. She’d never dress like that, for starters, let alone do even so much as remove her visor without good reason. It had to be Chara pretending to be her, or somebody else acting on their orders. Pretending to be her just as they’d pretended to be 13B. This had to be a trap.

King Asgore stood at the impostor’s side, towering over her. Of course, 6O shouldn’t have trusted him. They were in on this together.

More monsters, too. A short, lemon-yellow lizardish creature peering at her from behind thick, round spectacles; a much taller monster, finned like a fish with deep blue scales and red accents, a patch covering her left eye and scarlet hair—a patch of it bleached pure white—tied in a long ponytail flowing over her shoulder. All of them painted in ghoulish chiaroscuro by the lamplight.

This was the end. 6O wanted to summon the will to fight, to tear herself free, but it was hopeless. Her limbs felt like they were filled with paste and her whole body still hurt. She was going to die here, as perhaps the last surviving member of YoRHa, all to fulfill some horrible ritual…

“Is she usually this paranoid, 2B?” the blue monster asked.

The impostor 2B shook her head. “Not that I recall.” She laid a hand on 6O’s shoulder; 6O tried to squirm out of the way but felt so worn-out, so bereft of energy, that there was little she could do. “6O, It’s okay. It’s me. Read my IFF signal if you don’t believe me.”

2B—not 2B—reached for 6O’s wrist, pressing it against her own. The familiar ID flashed past 6O’s eyes—YoRHa Number Two, Type-B. But it could have been a trick. Anyone could spoof an IFF signal.

“Remember Operation Argama.” 2B wrapped her hand around 6O’s. “9S and I were shot down during the assault.”

6O nodded and couldn’t help but recall, even as she tried to pull her hand free. Operation Argama. Nine months ago. In the aftermath, 6E had wanted to send out a search-and-rescue team for 2B and 9S, but the Commander had declined to expend those resources. 2B and 9S had both been presumed dead and restored from their backups. That had been when 6O had first met Lucky—

Had first met Chara.

Had they been planning all of this even back then?
“We weren’t killed. We ended up here instead,” 2B said.

And she’d… *stayed* here? For nine months? Instead of trying to return to YoRHa? No. Impossible. 2B would *never* go AWOL. She would never just *abandon* YoRHa—

But YoRHa had abandoned them. It had abandoned *everyone*.

*The backdoor of the Bunker has been set to open once the time approaches to switch to new models when enough combat data has been collected.*

Everyone, even the Commander, had just been a tool to toss away when they were no longer needed.

*At this time… falsification of the information that mankind still resides on the moon will be complete.*

For a cause that wasn’t even real. ‘Glory to Mankind…’ to a long-dead race, to absent masters.

“2B would never desert us,” 6O found herself muttering. “Never. She was better than that.”

But what was so bad about deserting when you were just doomed to be thrown out like trash anyway? Disposable, expendable, replaceable, what was the point of *loyalty* if it only went one way?

Even the Commander had been loyal. Loyal to the end. Never dropping the pristine, spotless face she put on for her position, even though (if the rumors that her personal quarters were a pigsty were accurate) her true self couldn’t have been more different. And how had her loyalty been repaid? Doomed by the same contagion that had taken everybody she’d presided over…

But it was *wrong* to cast aside that loyalty, it just felt so *wrong* to every circuit in 6O’s body. “How could you *do* something like that?” she blurted out.

“6O…”

Her throat tightened. She felt a weight on her chest, squeezing, crushing her. She couldn’t breathe. She squeezed her eyes shut, curled up, let tears leak through her closed eyelids, buried herself in the blankets. “*How could they?*” she choked out. “*How could they betray us? How could they just leave us behind and let us get slaughtered like animals?*”

2B took 6O’s hand. “Calm down. I’ll explain everything.”

*Observation: Unit 6O’s behavior demonstrates the presence of significant psychological trauma.*

2B’s pod spoke in a cool, male voice. “*Proposal: reduce stimuli and encourage deep, regular breathing until normal functions resume.*”

One of the other creatures spoke up, laying clammy, scaly talons on 6O’s shoulders. “Hey, chill out. It’s gonna be okay—”

“Get back. She needs some space,” 2B told the others, barking orders just as the real 2B would have done. The monster immediately released 6O.

*“Is she having a panic attack?”* 6O heard Asgore ask. “*I could put on some lavender tea…*”

“Just go.”

6O heard the others shuffle out of the bedroom, the door gently swinging shut with a soft squeak behind them. 2B took her by the shoulders, rolling her onto her back. 6O didn’t fight back. Everything was getting foggy…
“Deep breaths, 6O. You’re safe here.”

6O tried, but her breath faltered, and with a shuddering cough, she emptied her lungs in short, irregular bursts. She could feel her black box growing hotter by the second, its whirring pitching up to a keening whine.

2B brushed the hair from her forehead. “Try again. Breathe in. Slowly.”

She gasped for breath. “Don’t hurt me.”

“No one here wants to hurt you.”

“Don’t touch me.”

Shocked, 2B withdrew her hands.

At last 6O felt her body begin to pump hot, stale air from her lungs once more. She cracked open her eyes. “You look just like her,” she muttered as 2B glanced away, unsure of what to do or what to say, cradling her own hand as if 6O had bitten it. “But you’re nothing like her…”

She took another deep breath, her lungs swelling, and exhaled. The next breath came easier.

“It’s me,” 2B insisted.

“Prove it.”

“Before Argama,” 2B said, “during our last regularly-scheduled contact, you told me you were going on a date with 14O and asked me to wish you luck. How did that go?”

6O racked her brain. That had been a long, long time ago. “Terribly.” She chuckled in spite of herself. She hadn’t ever met anyone she’d had less in common with. Hadn’t 2B even told her that she’d known another Number Fourteen and that those personality types were ‘difficult to get along with?’

“That’s a shame,” 2B said. “But I did warn you.” A strained silence filled the air. There was a sad warmth 6O had never seen before in her eyes, in the gentle curve of her lips. “Nines and I have a good life down here,” she added, “but I’ve… missed you, 6O.”

“2B…” 6O swallowed a lump in her throat. If this 2B knew about that date, then it was really her, not some impostor. Even the 2B she’d known, restored from a backup created just before that conversation had happened, wouldn’t have remembered it.

“It’s really you,” she admitted, shame twisting her stomach into knots as she reflected on her behavior. While she’d been in hysterics, 2B and her friends had only wanted to help her…

And she had only ever wanted to be the best communications operator she could be to 2B. She’d always wanted to be there for her, to help her, to know that 2B relied on her, but she’d always been so frosty and so distant…

6O tried to prop herself up, but her weak and wobbling arms couldn’t support the weight of her torso. Pod 042 reached out and wrapped its claws around her arms as she collapsed and helped her sit up.

“I’m sorry for freaking out,” she told 2B, still sniffling back a few vestiges of tears.

“I understand.” 2B reached out to grab 6O, then paused. “May I?”
6O nodded and 2B guided her with a surprisingly soft touch as she leaned forward. Resting her head on 2B’s shoulder, 6O rubbed her cheek against the soft satin of her jacket. She shivered. She wasn’t alone. After all the horrible things that had happened today, she wasn’t alone.

With a faltering voice, she did her best to tell 2B what had happened, speaking until she barely had the energy to speak, until the fatigue that had eluded her crept up on her yet again.

“There’s nothing left,” she croaked, her voice barely a whisper. “There’s no one left.” Even 2B and 9S, the ones she’d known, probably hadn’t lasted long on the surface.

“You’re not alone.” 2B wiped at her tear-sodden cheek.

“We’re alone. We’re all alone. Humanity is gone.”

“I’m sure the lunar colony is well-protected. Even without YoRHa—”

“There was no lunar colony. There aren’t any humans.” 6O could barely think to say it. But it was true. All of the records of the human refugees taking shelter on the moon had been falsified, and YoRHa had been destroyed solely to erase the only remaining evidence of the subterfuge. She had to force the words, sacrilegious as they were, from her sore and aching throat, because they were true. “It was all useless…”

2B looked away. She seemed saddened, but not shocked or surprised by the revelation. Had she known all along? 6O wondered. Was that why she was always so cold?

But 6O dismissed that thought. The information that had been leaked during the fall of the Bunker had been classified top secret, and even the Commander had been taken by surprise by some of it. If any other android got a hold of that information, they probably would have been executed—

Oh.

No wonder 2B’s partner had kept having ‘accidents.’

“That’s why you kept losing 9S, isn’t it?” 6O asked.

2B’s eyes widened, her mouth hanging ever so slightly agape. There was a flash of vulnerability in her face 6O had never seen before. She squeezed 6O tighter, pressing herself closer to her. 6O felt 2B’s silvery hair brush against her cheek, felt soft, firm, strong hands hold her. Holding her close…

Close.

All 6O had ever wanted was to be close.

“It must be nice,” said 6O, “not to have to worry about that down here.” Drained emotionally and physically, she closed her eyes. At last, she fell asleep, still cradled in 2B’s embrace.

A hand fell on 2B’s shoulder, rousing her.

“All tuckered out, huh, 2B?”

2B cracked open her eyes. At some point, while she’d been waiting for 6O to fall asleep, she must have dozed off herself, without enough warning to turn off the light before she’d collapsed.

While 2B had been sleeping, 6O had curled up next to her. Very next to her. So next to her, in fact,
that 2B could feel 6O’s black box humming against her back. 6O’s arms had ended up wrapped loosely around 2B’s waist, her cheek pressed into the back of her neck.

9S stood over the bed. “Kept you waiting, huh?”

2B sat up and attempted to push herself to her feet, trying vainly to pull 6O off without waking the poor girl. 6O’s grip tightened, but she showed no sign of waking, merely clinging to 2B like a barnacle to the hull of a ship. “You took your time getting here, Nines.”

“Sorry I missed the big reunion. Geez, she must’ve really missed you,” 9S remarked.

2B tried to stand up again, 6O hanging from her back like a lead weight. “Apparently. I think she’s just excited to see another friendly YoRHa unit.”

“Who knows?” 9S shrugged. “Maybe she was dating the other 2B.” His grin was rascally, roguish, and nearly made 2B want to punch him. Not hard, just a light ’assert-your-dominance-as-older-sister’ tap on the face.

“No chance.” 6O didn’t feel that way about 2B, did she? She’d have said something. Wouldn’t she have?

“Well, I mean, you—the other 2B, uh—probably kept sending her pictures of flowers like you used to. Who knows? Maybe something… blossomed.”

2B couldn’t help but groan. “Okay, 9S. I’m going to hit you now.”

9S held up his hands. “Wait! Before you do that, guess who I ran into on the way here.”

“Mettaton again?” 2B guessed. “We’re citizens now, 9S. If he keeps bothering you, you can get a restraining order—”

“Chara.”

2B’s voice froze in her throat.

“And boy,” 9S said, brushing a bit of lint off his vest, “did they sing like a canard.”

“Tell me everything. But give me a minute first.” 2B pried her former communications operator off her back and set her down on the bed, pulling the thick, colorful blankets over her and drawing them up to her chin. Noting that the bedspread’s color scheme was predominantly a pale, pastel lavender, 2B wondered if this had once been Toriel’s bedroom. She’d thought married couples always slept in the same bed, but apparently, she’d been wrong.

Despite finally being separated from 2B, 6O murmured something indistinct with a soft sigh and curled up under the blankets, her complexion no longer sickly and ashen. At last, she looked peaceful. Not skittish, not paranoid, not afraid of her own shadow… She even had a bit of a smile on her face, and a light tinge of pink on her cheeks behind the light and cloudy gray patterns of bruises marring her skin.

As she stood up and lingered over the girl, 2B took a deep breath. Even in spite of her nap, exhaustion still seeped from every pore of her skin.

It felt good to see a friendly face from 2B’s past (as opposed to not-so-friendly faces—2B could only hope 6E had gotten what she had deserved at some point). 6O had always been so chipper and bubbly… when she hadn’t been crying her eyes out over a recent breakup or bad date. But the way
she’d behaved today had been draining, almost painful to watch. And when 6O had accused 2B of betraying YoRHa… those words had stung more than 6O could know.

“Anyway, what a coincidence, huh?” 9S took 2B’s hand, sighing. “Maybe if I’d talked about 21O more she’d have made it down here, too.” There was a mournful note in his voice, and 2B wondered if at last, he saw YoRHa the way she did.

“I see better?” Asgore asked, poking his head into the bedroom as 2B switched off the lamp. Shafts of amber light from the hall stretched across the darkened floor.

“I think she’ll be all right now,” 2B told him. “Thank you for looking after her, Your Highness,” she added with a polite, restrained bow.

“It is very fortunate you three were friends,” Asgore observed as 2B left the room and gently closed the door behind her. “I had wondered, of course, but felt it would be quite prejudiced of me to assume all androids knew each other.” He gave her a pat on the shoulder. “I am sorry you had to meet her under these circumstances.”

“At least she’s still operational.” 2B made her way to the king’s living room and wearily allowed herself to collapse into the rocking chair next to the hearth, feeling her black box still whirring with residual anxiety. It was funny how closely Asgore’s home mirrored Toriel’s, at least where the interior and floor plan were concerned. 2B felt she could find her way around blindfolded.

Now that 2B knew more of 6O’s harrowing escape from the Bunker, she felt relieved knowing she could chalk up the bruises on her skin to simply the work of turbulence while her flight unit had brought her to Earth. Those vehicles could be rough for first-timers, let alone those with more resilient bodies than squishy, unprotected Operators. When Asgore had told her what had happened and the circumstances of 6O’s arrival, 2B had worried Chara had done something horrible to her, beaten her or…

Chara.

C13. The ancient prototype android, a relic from long before YoRHa had been publicly known to exist.

Whatever had happened on the surface to cause such chaos—2B still felt the echoes, the phantom pain from her vision earlier that day, the vision of her own death—Chara had taken advantage of it to bring 6O here. 6O had trusted them, had found within them something she had been searching for to no avail for years. And then Chara had tried to kill her… and the part of poor 6O that trusted people had cracked.

And according to Asgore, Chara had all but insisted he take the black box from 6O and use it to break the Barrier—and when Asgore had refused and protected her, he and Chara had nearly come to blows.

2B’s fists clenched, her fingernails biting into her palms. She could still see Chara as they had appeared to her so long ago, when the two of them had battled in her mind for dominance over her body. Their shining red eyes, their sneering grin, their condescending voice.

She’d suspected they’d somehow attained corporeal form on the surface after the last reset—how, she couldn’t imagine, but no one else would have sent 14E’s sword to the Ruins with that message—but hadn’t imagined they would ever return here.

But return they had, and they had done something horrible in the process to one of the few friends
2B had had back in YoRHa.

2B would kill Chara on the spot the next time she saw them. Without the slightest hesitation, she’d exterminate them like the vermin they were.

Chapter End Notes

Since you readers have seen so much of Chara in the past route, it's easy to forget that the last real encounter 2B had with them was chapter 8 (28 chapters ago), and 9S only met them once in chapters 17-18 (18 chapters ago). That's right, it's been that long since either of our protagonists have seen hide or hair of this story's main villain.

It would have been funny if after the 9-month timeskip 2B and 9S had just forgotten all about Chara...
Now that he knows Chara’s plan, 9S puts his into action. No matter what, somebody is going to get played like a damn fiddle today.

2B had wanted to go after Chara right away, although she still felt oddly worn-out as evening became night, but 9S had convinced her otherwise.

“We have Chara right where we want them,” he’d argued. “Let’s not play our hand too soon. We can send 6O somewhere they won’t expect in the morning and set a trap for them right here in the castle.” There’d been a devious grin on his face, a devilish twinkle in his eyes. “I think ancient humans used to call it a ‘setup.’”

Asgore had volunteered to bring 6O to City Hall with him early in the morning—Undyne would be there, along with a half-dozen other soldiers forming the king’s honor guard, ensuring that 6O would be looked after and protected.

But he had been loath to voice his approval for 2B and 9S’s role in the subterfuge. Chara was his child after all. A child he still loved, and he was sure still loved him. After learning what Chara had done, and given what she already knew about them, 2B didn’t care. It didn’t matter to her how many times Asgore had shared dinner with Chara, or how many times he’d tucked them in and read them a bedtime story, or how many times Chara had told him they loved him.

That night, she had lied and told Asgore she would subdue them alive.

Morning came too soon, as it often did.

King Asgore Dreemurr was a big appreciator of communal breakfasts, so much so that he often called emergency meetings of his cabinet early in the morning just to get everybody to his dining room table. Alphys was very familiar with this practice because she was often invited to those emergency meetings.

Alphys looked down at the blobby, misshapen pancakes, browned nearly to the point of blackening in spots, clustered in a heap on her plate. A melting pat of butter oozed its way across the pancakes. Alphys liked pancakes. But…

She speared a pancake on her fork, cut off a square, and took a bite. It was the driest pancake she’d ever eaten, so dry she could feel it desiccating the inside of her mouth.

Dozens of these breakfast ambushes and Asgore still hadn’t learned how to make pancakes right. At least these tasted like pancakes, though.

Undyne slid a jug of syrup over to her. “You’re gonna need this,” she whispered.
Alphys nodded. “Yeah.” She doused the pancakes liberally with syrup. “Th-Thanks.”

“No problemo, my little cherry blossom.”

Alphys could tell from the heat under her scales that her cheeks had probably turned the color of cherry blossoms. She was so easy to fluster, and she knew that was one of the things Undyne liked about her.

The androids sat on the other side of the table. 6O ate sparingly, clinging to 2B’s side. 2B also ate sparingly, although that may have had something to do with 6O rendering one of her arms completely useless as she wrapped around it. 9S, though, dug in without seeming to mind how burned and dry the meal was.

He did notice, though. “Hey, Asgore,” he said, at least remembering to swallow before talking.

2B nudged him.

“I mean, hey, Your Royal Highness. These pancakes are pretty dry compared to ones I’ve had.”

Asgore looked sheepish, staring at his own plate and grimacing. “Well…”

“It’s interesting! Is it a regional thing?” 9S asked. “I’ve heard that foods can vary from place to place, but of course, no one really eats much on the surface…”

“Y-Yeah!” Alphys butted in, hoping to spare Asgore the indignity of admitting he still didn’t know how to cook. “New Home-style pancakes are always s-super dry!”

Undyne slid the jug of syrup over to 9S. “It’s a shock to out-of-towners, but don’t worry,” she said, quickly playing along. “If you can’t handle it, it’s okay to use lots of syrup. No one’s gonna be offended!”

9S eyed the captain’s plate. “Can’t handle yours dry, huh?” he asked with a competitive little grin, noticing that Undyne’s pancakes floated in a veritable lake of syrup.

“I can if I want to,” Undyne insisted.

Asgore cleared his throat. “So,” he said, noticeably uncomfortable as he stepped in to head off a potential eating competition, “6O, dear, how do you and Miss 2B here know each other?”

“I’m her assigned communications operator,” 6O piped up. “I make regular assessments of 2B’s mission progress from orbit and report directly to, um…”

She stopped talking, letting an uncomfortable silence settle over the table. It looked like Asgore had struck a nerve.

6O hadn’t talked much about the circumstances surrounding her arrival with anyone other than 2B, and 2B wasn’t the kind of person to share much about herself, let alone other people. But it seemed obvious from that outburst last night that 6O had gone through a lot, and even Alphys could tell that it kind of wasn’t a good idea to bring any conversation around to things like… where she’d come from and how she’d gotten here.

Wanting to defuse the attention, Alphys leaned over and spoke up. “‘From orbit?’ Y-You mean, in space? You’re from space?”

6O blinked, bemused. “Um… yes?” Her eyes were watering.
Alphys felt a solid lump settle in her gut. *Oh, shit, I chose the wrong topic to segue to.* “W-With, like, stars and the moon and stuff?” She cringed inwardly. She knew she wasn’t helping. So why couldn’t she stop?

“Operators like 6O were permanently stationed on the Bunker,” 2B explained as 6O huddled at her side. “Units such as myself and Nines, though, spent most of our time on Earth.”

Undyne smiled. “Aww, so you two kinda had a long-distance relationship!”

6O’s face reddened as she loosened her grip on 2B. Alphys sighed in relief. At last, somebody with social skills had stepped in!

The plates rattled as Undyne’s fist slammed onto the table. “This is great, 2B! Now you can do double dates with me and Alphys!”

Undyne’s proclamation was so shocking that 2B forgot how to look stoic. “Dates?” she asked.

“Dates?” 6O squeaked.

“That’s right! No more excuses!” Undyne rubbed her hands, beaming. “Now, Nines, that just leaves you…”

9S became very interested in the syrup he hadn’t been pouring on his pancakes, raising the jug to his lips and chugging it as if he hadn’t drunk anything in weeks.

“Right, right. A triple date would be way too crowded,” said Undyne. “Oh, hey, 6O, do you do your own hair? I love your braids!”

“You do?” For the first time that morning, 6O let go of 2B. “Thank you! They’re a little messed up right now,” she said, gesturing to one of the fraying yellow-gold plaits, “but…”

Undyne dredged a forkful of dry, burned pancake through her syrup pond. “They’re so cute! When this whole ‘trying to kill you’ thing blows over, you’ve got to show me how to do it!”

6O’s eyes lit up. “Your hair would look so good in braids!”

Undyne shot to her feet. “Let’s do it right now!”

At the head of the table, Asgore brushed the fur away from his wristwatch. “Oh, dear. Captain, I’m afraid that will have to wait for later.” He rose to his feet. “Thank you so very much, all of you, for sharing breakfast with me. I know I am not much of a cook—”

“No!” Undyne insisted. “You’re fine! The syrup was so sweet and flavorful!” she said, referring to the jug of syrup which, judging by the label, had obviously come from a supermarket.

9S nodded in agreement. “It’s always a treat to try new things. Thank you for your hospitality, Your Highness.”

Asgore bowed his head. “You are all too kind. Now, I must be off. Captain, if you would help 6O pick out something to wear…”

Alphys checked her own watch. Was it that late already? Asgore’s speech was in an hour! “I-I’ll have to get going, too. I’ve got to go to Toriel’s—”

She recognized her slip of the tongue immediately. The last thing she wanted to do was bring up Asgore’s ex in front of him, let alone accidentally reveal that she’d brought Asgore’s son back from
the dead. What a nasty situation for the poor guy. One child comes back all murder-happy, the other comes back fine, but Alphys wasn’t ready to tell Asgore that because she was afraid that maybe the kid wasn’t fine…

“T-Tutorial some new interns on m-maintaining the Core!” Alphys nervously sucked air through her teeth as she stood up. “Really important, I p-promised I’d do it today…”

Then she realized that since 2B was staying here to lay the trap for Chara, Alphys would have to trudge through Snowdin alone.

Great. That would be fun.

“A-Actually,” Alphys clarified, “I can put it off another day.”

Asgore’s home became a hub of activity from that point onward. With the kitchen cleared, Asgore dressed in his ceremonial robes, and 6O given her pick of the clothes in Chara’s closet (with Undyne helping her put an outfit together, since like 2B and 9S, she’d never worn anything but her uniform before), everybody was soon ready to go their separate ways.

Alphys felt her tail twitch with anxiety, a leaden lump settling in her stomach and staying there. She had a bad feeling about today.

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Waiting in the castle courtyard, 2B found herself counting down the minutes as they passed. Thirty minutes past ten o’clock. That was when Chara had told 9S they would arrive at the castle gates. The time was drawing nearer, minute by minute, second by second.

The plan was simple. 9S would meet Chara outside the gates, bring them to the courtyard, and close the gates behind them. Pinned down, they would make an easy target.

2B drew the Virtuous Contract from her hip, letting the artificial light from the luminous stones in the ceiling of the cavern catch its ivory-white blade. Life had been peaceful here, and it had been over a month since she’d last fought outside of playful sparring with Undyne, but it still felt natural to her. Combat models never truly forgot how to fight. Their bodies were wired for it. And Executioner models never truly forgot how to kill.

She’d hated herself for so long, hated her true designation, the letter that defined her purpose, but now she was thankful for the tweaks to her programming and design that set her apart from true Type-B’s, that let her so easily overpower and swiftly dispatch normal combat units. Those programs, those instincts, they would serve her well here. Soon that white blade would be dripping with Chara Dreemurr’s blood.

Pod 042’s communications antenna popped up from within its hull. “Incoming transmission from Emil.”

“Relay it.” 2B wrapped her visor over her eyes, and as her HUD appeared, a panel with Emil’s face on it popped up in front of her.

“Hey, 2B! It’s me, Emil!”

“I know.” 2B kept an eye on the time. 10:00. Thirty more minutes. “What is it?”

“So I woke up this morning,” Emil said, breathless, “and found a bunch of the swords I’ve been trying to sell went missing! I was wondering if you two could…”
“9S and I are busy. Besides, we don’t have the authority to investigate crimes. You should call the Royal Guard.”

“Well, I mean, it’s just that it’s kind of embarrassing… I sleep with one eye open every night, but someone still stole all those legendary swords I’ve been selling! I don’t really wanna file a police report…”

“Then hunt for the criminal yourself,” 2B suggested.

“You know what? That’s a great idea! Thanks, 2B!”

Emil disconnected, ending the call as abruptly as it had started.

2B began to practice with the Virtuous Contract, her blade cleaving the air again and again. After five minutes, she would switch to the Joyeuse, reacquainting herself with both swords’ weights in her hands, and then after five more minutes, switch again. The Virtuous Contract was lighter and faster, and since it had been her go-to weapon ever since she had first been sent to the field as 2B, it was the sword that fit in her hands the best, its hilt well-worn to the shape of her fingers. The Joyeuse, though, was heavier and had greater cutting and stopping power; even though it still felt unfamiliar to 2B, it had earned its place as her secondary weapon.

The right hand Alphys had repaired for her was still a little slower and its grip a little weaker than it once had been, but it was something 2B would have to learn to live with.

▫▫▫

Thirty minutes. Across town, King Asgore would be beginning his speech in just less than thirty minutes.

9S leaned against the great wooden gate barring the way to Asgore’s castle, arms folded over his chest. He could barely hear, through the thick oak door, the sound of 2B’s sword swinging. That girl and her swords, he thought, smiling. She’d never gotten comfortable with the idea of not having a weapon on her person at all times; even when running errands to the grocery store, she kept her swords registered to her NFCS and ready to deploy at a moment’s notice. 9S almost regretted not bringing his sword with him.

Of course, 9S didn’t need a weapon for what he had to do today. It was simple. Greet Chara, show them he was on the level, lead them into the courtyard, and let 2B slice and dice. Maybe he’d need to hack Chara to immobilize them so 2B wouldn’t have to work so hard. But it didn’t need to take more than a minute or so. Especially since 2B was designed to kill other androids. Even though Chara’s current stolen body was a combat-capable Type-B, they wouldn’t be able to put up much of a fight.

9S sighed. Chara cared a lot about freeing this kingdom, and maybe they were right that once a monster like Asgore or someone else absorbed seven black boxes, they’d be able to tear through the machine lifeforms still occupying the surface. After all, when 6E had absorbed Toriel’s soul, she’d been powerful beyond 9S’s wildest imagination. That was how powerful the union of just one monster’s soul and only one black box was. A monster with seven souls linked to their own could certainly keep the kingdom safe on the surface.

But 9S wasn’t going to let an innocent girl become the key to unchain this kingdom and its people. No, Chara themselves would usher in this new age of freedom, albeit not as they’d intended. It would almost be poetic.

The minutes dragged on. 9S busied himself with a few hacking games he’d installed to his system,
getting his practice in just like 2B was with her swords. But even so, he started feeling bored.

“153,” he asked, “can you scan the city and show me the positions of every black box within it?” At least he might be able to track Chara’s position and see when they were getting close. 9S was aware that a watched pot never boiled, as the saying went, but god, the wait was killing him.

“Affirmative,” the pod replied. “Scanning. Sending scan results to Unit 9S.”

A map of New Home appeared on 9S’s HUD, each black box signal represented as a soft red circle on the grayscale map. Of course, the northern part of the city where Asgore’s castle was featured a giant blotch of red—the six signals from the preserved black boxes Asgore had gathered, and the two from 2B and 9S. In the center of town, where City Hall stood, was one circle, which could only have belonged to 6O.

The tenth black box signal, which was definitely Chara’s, was in the northwest quadrant of the city. 9S expected it to be heading east, bringing Chara closer to the castle.

Instead, it was heading southeast, tracing the winding streets to City Hall.

With a curse on his lips, 9S rushed into the courtyard to get 2B.

At Asgore’s side, 6O stood in the green room, which contrary to its name, was not green. Seven members of the Royal Guard occupied the room as well: two tall, white-furred doglike monsters baring large, double-headed axes guarded the door leading to the podium where Asgore would make his speech; an insectoid monster with four spindly arms and bulbous, segmented eyes and another monster with a snakelike head and iridescent, blue-green scales stood at the other door; a tall, bulky creature made entirely of pink-speckled granite sat precariously on a low-slung couch and conversed with a small dog inhabiting a large suit of armor; and Undyne stood in the middle of it all, her slim and ornamented armor clinging to her wiry, muscular body.

Undyne introduced 6O to each of the other half-dozen members of the Guard. The snakelike woman was Snaca; the antlike man at her side was Formickey. The two black-cloaked dogs who would escort Asgore onstage were Dogamy and Dogaressa, who had currently become preoccupied with petting each other; the small dog with the large armor was their second cousin twice removed, Greater Dog, and the stone man speaking to it was Talus.

Undyne took a moment to brief the guards on 6O’s situation and issue them their orders, and for an instant 6O felt as though she were back on the Bunker, sitting at her terminal in Ops as the Commander gave her orders to the field units on the floor below. The wave of homesickness lingered, tightening its fingers around 6O’s black box.

“So you’re one of those robots from the surface, huh?” Snaca asked, her forked pink tongue flicking in and out of her mouth. “Shame they make you girls look human. Otherwise, you’re almost kinda cute.”

“Um… thank you?” 6O answered, still feeling jittery. Knowing that someone she’d once thought of as a lover wanted to hunt her down and kill her kept her feeling so nervous she could barely stand, even surrounded by all these monsters willing to protect her.

“Snaca, don’t be a dick,” Undyne scolded her. “I’ll throw you on desk duty so fast your fangs’ll fall out! When you, um, hit the chair! Because of how hard I’ll throw you!”

“Don’t worry your hairy little head, android,” Formickey spoke up, crossing all four of his arms over
his chest. “Snaca’s a little shit sometimes, but if Asgore told her to lay down her life for you, she’d do it.”

“We are all consummate professionals,” Talus chimed in.

“Let us hope it will not come to that,” Asgore spoke up in a deep, rumbling voice.

6O took to the couch, sitting gingerly next to Talus since there was nowhere else on the couch to sit. Greater Dog knelt down before her, and almost out of sheer instinct, 6O reached out and began to run her hand through its thick, fluffy coat of fur. At once, her apprehension began to melt away.

The dog leaned in closer, sniffed at her with a cold, wet, black nose, and licked her cheek. It tickled, and out of surprise, 6O let out a sharp, involuntary giggle.

Maybe things would be all right after all.

▫▫▫

2B rushed through the city streets, weaving through throngs of people, taking whatever means necessary to traverse the choked streets, whether that meant leapfrogging onto the hoods of cars which sat like islands in a sea of congestion, scaling the balconies jutting from the ramshackle skyscrapers stretching from floor to ceiling of the massive cavern in which the city had been built, leaping onto the rooftops of buildings that had yet to be built up to the ceiling and dashing across them.

9S was always one step behind her as she cut her way through New Home, his profuse apologies ringing in 2B’s ears. “I didn’t know they’d pull this on us!” he insisted. “I thought Chara trusted me!”

“It’s not your fault. Chara fed you false information. You had no way of verifying it.” 2B leaped from one rooftop to another, grabbing her pod by the arm and gliding until she touched down on a much less-congested street. This was past the Royal Guard cordon blocking traffic, which meant that City Hall was drawing closer. She took a moment to verify the direction of Chara’s black box signal via her HUD and took off.

“I thought I had them!” 9S vented. “Dammit! They played us like a damn fiddle!”

City Hall came into view as 2B turned a corner, sitting just a block away. The building was antique, much more lovingly-crafted in an ornate and decorative architectural style than the cobbled-together skyscrapers towering over it, all fluted marble columns and a shingled roof of oxidized green copper, an alabaster rotunda sprouting from its roof. Due to its status as a landmark, it was one of few parts of the city that hadn’t been endlessly built-up, and it sat there like a plot of land taken from a different era altogether.

2B spied a tiny silhouette on the roof, and as she ran closer to the hall, her legs pumping, synthetic tendons burning, their details came into greater view. It was unmistakably Chara—there were no other YoRHa androids to mistake them for in this place.

9S rushed up the steps to the front door, meeting a cluster of uniformed guards who immediately denied him entry. “Hey! We need to get in!”

“Are you on the guest list?”

“No…”
“Do you have a press pass?”

“No—Our friend’s in there,” 9S insisted, quickly losing his patience, “and she’s in danger!”

“We’ve checked the venue,” one of the guards assured him, a calm smile on their face. “It’s completely safe, so don’t you worry. Now run along and…”

2B grabbed 9S and pulled him aside before he could start anything. “Nines. The roof.”

The two of them ran out and began scaling one of the nearby buildings, the rickety fire escape clanking and trembling beneath their boots. 2B felt the pressure of seconds counting down in the sweat trickling down the back of her neck, eyeing the roof of City Hall as it grew smaller and smaller.


At last, an easy distance to jump from presented itself, and 2B launched herself off the fire escape, letting the wind buffet her as she fell, grabbing onto one of her pod’s arms to slow her descent as her boots touched down on the copper shingles. 9S touched down right behind her.

Chara stood on the roof, their arms crossed, their red-brown hair whipping in the breeze. As their black greatcoat flapped in the downdrafts which swirled around the towering, many-layered city of New Home, 2B spied two knives sheathed at Chara’s hip, adding to the two swords floating at their back. Of the two swords, one was short and black as obsidian, with a large, egg-shaped jewel at the base of its blade; the other was long and ornamented with gold, its silvery blade shimmering with a rainbow of hues like a puddle of gasoline, looking for all the world like the larger cousin of the Joyeuse 2B had with her.

“You couldn’t get through the front door either, could you?” Chara asked.

Chara spared no more time to gloat. They drew two daggers from within their cloak—one blade jet-black, the other coppery—and lunged forward, light on their feet as they rushed forward.

9S struggled to get a bead on Chara as they weaved across the roof. 2B readied her own blades and closed in on them. Daggers versus a sword. She had the advantage of reach, while Chara would be better served in close quarters. She’d fought Chara only once before—not even on the material plane. How would they fight in the real world, with a solid body?

“I knew you two would betray me. You didn’t think I’d tell you my actual plan, did you?” Chara blocked the first swing of 2B’s sword with their knives and slipped behind her, into her blind spot. “King Asgore is my father. I know him well enough to know how he treats the people he wishes to protect. He is confident enough in his own strength to feel they are best kept at his side,” they explained, darting away and maintaining their distance. “Ergo, I knew that if I said 6O would be in danger in his castle, he would feel convinced to bring her with him to City Hall for his annual speech.” Chara laid it out matter-of-factly, condescendingly, speaking slowly and carefully enough to make sure 2B and 9S—especially 9S—knew exactly how easily they’d been fooled.

“C’mon, 2B! Pin them down for me!” 9S called out as he scrambled to find the best line of sight to get a bead on Chara.

2B closed the distance between herself and Chara, the air whistling as her blades cut through it. They hadn’t been so fast when 2B had last fought them. Then again, Chara had been an older model—ancient, in fact—and a modern YoRHa Type-B was an upgrade in just about every way. “Pod! Suppressing fire!” she ordered.
“Engaging long-range offensive systems would cause unacceptable collateral damage,” Pod 042 warned her. “Proposal: Unit 2B should only utilize this unit’s support programs.”

“Give me a wire!” 2B set aside one of her swords, letting her NFCS carry it to her back, and grabbed onto the pod as its clamshell hull opened up. A bolt of yellow-white electricity shot from the pod, latching onto Chara’s collar and pulling them along; they threw off their black cloak and let the wire carry it through the air. Beneath the coat, Chara wore a long white jacket with tassled epaulets, dressed to the nines underneath, as if meaning to look their best for the occasion.

2B cut through the heavy coat—but as the coat blocked her vision and distracted her, Chara closed in, colored blades flashing and glinting in the faux daylight that shone from the ceiling. 2B noticed in the nick of time and locked onto Chara as they approached—

And vanished.

2B’s thought processes kicked into overdrive, time seeming to slow as the world struggled to keep up with her. She’d nearly forgotten. The same trick. How Chara did it in real life—a mystery. But it was a technique 2B knew how to beat.

She whirled around, swinging her sword, knowing that Chara would be behind her to deliver a killing blow—

They weren’t there.

Chara had already slipped out of range, swinging their daggers in a wide arc. But not at her.

They hadn’t been gunning for 2B. It had been a feint. Their real target was—

The coppery blade Chara wielded in their left hand tore a ribbon of blood from 9S’s arm, a scarlet arc trailing in the air. 9S stumbled backward, hissing in pain, then stopped.

He stopped.

Everything stopped. Arms, fingers, eyes, mouth. 9S froze in place—

And vanished, replaced by a pitch-black silhouette—as if there was a perfectly-empty, infinitely-deep, 9S-shaped hole in the universe itself. It almost hurt to look at.

2B forgot about Chara and rushed to the statuesque silhouette, grabbing at 9S’s arm. Her hand met something solid, but… not solid. An object that resisted, but still didn’t seem there. Like a shadow in three dimensions.

“Pod!” she barked. “What’s wrong with 9S?”

“Statement: Unit 9S is not moving,” Pod 153 responded.

“I can see that.” 2B gritted her teeth. “Why is he like… this?”

“He broke his oath,” Chara called out from across the roof as they rested against the side of the white stone dome. They examined their coppery dagger with slightly-amused curiosity. “And had to suffer the consequences.”

2B ran after them, closing the distance between herself and Chara and subjecting them to a flurry of blades.

Chara kept their distance, scurrying out of the way as 2B singlemindedly closed in on them. They
used the same copper-colored blade that had done whatever it had done to 9S to parry any strikes from 2B’s swords that came too close. “Such is the power of the Sword of Goujian: the blade that time forgot!” they shouted. They parried the next strike with their black dagger and vanished, reappearing a step away. “It lay unattended for over fourteen thousand years, yet never dulled or rusted! Those whose blood it tastes, too, become immune to the flow of time!”

“‘Immune to the flow of time?’” 2B swung both blades, Chara narrowly avoiding; the blades hit the roof and left parallel furrows in the shingles, sending chips of green copper into the air. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Drawing first blood sets the curse,” Chara explained, a grin lighting up their face, their red eyes sparkling. “and the second cut activates it. His pod had it right. Every part of 9S has stopped moving, down to the very last electron in the very last atom in his body. No chemical, mechanical, subatomic, or quantum reactions are possible. His constituent atoms cannot even reflect light!”

Blades met blades. “Bring him back!” 2B howled, her sword pulling sparks from the edges of Chara’s daggers.

“Relax, 2B. The curse will wear off in a few minutes. And 9S will be fine.” Chara darted away, dashing out of sight along the side of the dome. “Or maybe he’ll collapse into a pile of inert matter. You see, there’s a reason I don’t use this blade more than I have to. The effects of halting every single physical process in the universe can be… unpredictable.”

“I’ll kill you!”

Chara popped out from behind the rotunda, far out of 2B’s range. As they skidded to a halt, they drew back their arm and threw the copper-bladed Sword of Goujian at the void where 9S had been.

2B acted on instinct, and before the dagger could hit 9S, she leaped in front of it. The blade dug its way into her stomach up to the dagger’s ornamented hilt, and 2B felt the sharp pain overwhelm her processor as she stumbled, her boots catching on a patch of loosened shingles, and struggled to remain upright. Static danced before her ears and eyes, her vision going monochrome as fringes of color bled through the grayscale world.

“You knew that wouldn’t have hurt him, didn’t you?” Chara asked, their voice saccharine in its mocking lilt.

“Dammit… 2B struggled to take a step forward, her legs struggling to move as her body melted into a haze of pain. I… couldn’t help myself… Nines…”

She looked back at the shadow he’d left behind. Would he come back? Or had she lost him to something she couldn’t possibly have anticipated?

Pod 042 fired at Chara, but they easily avoided its gunfire, the bullets tearing through the green copper shingles lining the roof and throwing debris into the air. 2B watched Chara depart, powerless.

The Sword of Goujian vanished from 2B’s gut in a flurry of amber sparks, returning dutifully to Chara’s body; without anything to plug 2B’s wound, hot blood gushed forth and she fell to her knees, pressing her hand to her stomach to staunch the bleeding.

“Goodbye, 2E!” Chara shouted out. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I’m afraid I’ve got a world to save!”

Pod 042 let Chara run away, choosing instead to float to 2B’s side and steady her with its claws. “Severe injuries detected. Dispensing staunching gel.”
2B forced herself to her feet. “Chara!”

Chara glanced behind their shoulder as 2B struggled to run toward them. With careless ease, they drew the golden greatsword from their back and swung it.

2B ducked, or perhaps she simply stumbled and fell, and was glad she did.

The pressure wave alone from the mighty blade passed overhead with a deafening roar like the trailing sonic boom of a supersonic aircraft, scarring the ramshackle skyscraper walls which encircled the building with a perfectly-clean, perfectly-straight cut. The same fire escape 2B and 9S had ascended groaned and twisted as it broke away from the wall, crumpling under its own weight as debris showered down. The swing of that blade had left a glittering, rainbow arc in the air, suspended in the dust that hung in the air for a few fleeting seconds before fading away.

In the chaos, Chara vanished yet again, but did not reappear; 2B collapsed, lying prone as synthetic blood continued to leak from her wound.

9S… 6O… I couldn’t protect you…

Maybe I’ll join you, Nines, she thought as her vision began to blur, wherever you are…

“We’ve got one minute, Your Highness,” Undyne announced to Asgore.

Asgore cleared his throat. “Ah, it always does sneak up on you, doesn’t it?” He removed the ornamental violet cloak hanging from his shoulders, revealing a ceremonial uniform beneath it perfectly tailored to fit his massive build.

Hanging up the cloak, he took a glossy sable cape down from the rack and pinned it to his collar, striking a surprisingly dashing figure. “Take care, all of you,” Asgore said, adjusting his gold epaulets. “We have never had a major security incident during a State of the Kingdom address. I hope we will not have one this year.”

He patted 6O on the shoulder, smiling behind his beard. “And do not worry, little one,” he said. “Once this speech is over, you will never need to fear for your safety again. I promise you this as king.”

With that, Undyne escorted Asgore out, the two ax-wielding dogs stepping aside to let the king and his captain through, then following after him. Talus stood up and took a new position guarding the door.

6O kept petting Greater Dog, letting the feeling of its soft, warm fur calm her nerves. It was easier now to tell herself that everything would be all right. After today, she and 2B and 9S would live in peace down here with all their new friends.

Chara wrapped their visor around their eyes as they exited the roof and sneaked into City Hall. At this short distance, even without a pod to run scans, they’d be able to detect 6O’s black box signal—if she truly was here, as they’d predicted. They would have plenty of egg on their face if they’d been wrong the whole time and 6O had been safeguarded in the castle…

Sure enough, it wasn’t long until they picked up a blip on their HUD. Chara sighed in relief. They’d been right about Asgore. The old softy had thought the safest place for the poor girl was by his side,
of course, and Chara’s little act of subterfuge with 9S had only cemented the idea in Asgore’s head.

Poor 9S. He’d really thought he could outwit a master infiltrator. But he just didn’t have the face for it—you couldn’t pull the wool over a Type-C’s eyes when you wore your heart on your sleeve. No wonder 2E had kept having to murder him—the poor boy couldn’t keep his thoughts or emotions secret if his life depended on it, and it often had!

It was really too bad. Chara had seen so much of themselves in both 2E and 9S.

2E—she was a kindred spirit, an executioner, someone who knew Chara’s pain, who would understand if Chara ever talked about the pain they had felt when Echo had died by their hand. She ought to have felt the resentment and yearning for vengeance Chara had felt toward androids, toward humanity, toward YoRHa—Chara had thought they’d read that sentiment somewhere in her head so very long ago—but she did not.

9S, though, had, and Chara had felt so sure that he could see things their way if given just a gentle nudge. If he lived through the effects of the stopped time, perhaps 9S could still be made to see the light. Perhaps he could still have a place in the new world.

As the signal from 6O’s black box grew stronger and Chara reached the room where she would be waiting, Chara steeled themselves.

*Hate me for it if you like, Father, but I’m doing this for your own good.*

After today, the kingdom would be free.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, *those OCs sure do seem familiar...*
Chapter Summary

With 2B and 9S out of the way, Chara reveals their true plan and their intentions for 6O and the kingdom itself.

Chapter Notes

I already had most of this chapter written by the time I published the last one. This chapter’s been a loooong time in the making.

For all of you who wanted Chara to get beat the fuck down in the next chapter...

=)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Asgore cleared his throat. “My beloved subjects,” he began, leaning just a bit too close to the microphone and causing feedback, “I—er, oops, sorry.” He backed away. “I have good news to announce for this year’s State of the Kingdom address. Our wonderful royal scientist has made the Core twelve percent more efficient. We have begun to tunnel out more room in New Home for new arrivals from Snowdin and Hotland. Unemployment has reached its lowest point in three hundred years…”

6O was still petting Greater Dog—the dog’s furry head and armored suit resting heavy on her lap—when the green room erupted into chaos.

A white jacket capped with gold-tasseled epaulets fluttered through the air; a flurry of blades glittered. The four Royal Guards stationed in the room leaped into action against the intruder at once—Talus, the towering speckled-granite golem, swinging a heavy fist; Snaca, fanglike talons flashing as she lunged like an asp ready to bite; Formickey leaping in with four blades carved from solid white light in four hands. Greater Dog wrapped an armored arm around 6O’s waist and hoisted her off her feet, growling as it held her back.

Snaca’s arm twisted and bent like no humanoid arm ever could, coiling like a serpent around the intruder’s arm as the two grappled; the long, curved talons of her other hand, glittering with venom, clashed with a coppery dagger. The intruder struggled to wrench their arm free, writhing out of the way of Formickey’s whirling blades; an arc of blue ichor spurted from Snaca’s coiled arm as the intruder stabbed their blade into it. They slipped out of Snaca’s grip, vanished, and reappeared behind Formickey, planting a boot against his side and tossing him into the wall. Two strikes against Talus and the giant stone monster froze, turning jet-black like a shadow sculpted in the air; Snaca charged at the intruder with venom spitting from the pinkish apertures on her palms, only for a well-placed kick to throw her against the ceiling, leaving a shallow crater in the plaster and a crack running across the ceiling. She fell to the floor.
“Dammit, you useless jobbers!” Formickey cried out, picking himself up off the floor. “Greater Dog, go get help! As for you…”

The intruder tossed aside the two knives they’d been wielding—they vanished in flurries of amber sparks—and conjured a golden greatsword to their hands. As Formickey charged forward, the intruder thrust the greatsword against the floor. A titanic rumble shook the room, the shockwave from the sword’s impact tearing a hole through solid rock. As the hole opened up beneath him, Formickey stumbled and fell, hitting the edge of the hole and clutching at the splintered floorboards, scrabbling for purchase.

Greater Dog carried 6O across the room, past the silhouette that had once been Talus; as the guard’s armored shoulder brushed against the shadow, Talus’s speckled pinkish-gray stone skin flickered into view for but an instant before the monster crumbled into dust.

The intruder reached out, their hand lying on Greater Dog’s breastplate and stopping the dog in its tracks. With one fluid motion, they reached up, pulled the dog out of its armor—the suit of armor was otherwise completely empty, and without its occupant, completely fell apart, dropping 6O unceremoniously to the ground—and tossed the dog into the hole. It hit the floor far below with an audible, yet muffled yelp.

6O finally got a good look at the intruder. Straight locks of reddish-brown hair framing a pale face and a familiar YoRHa Type-B’s black visor. It was—

“Lucky?” she involuntarily squeaked out. Her breath froze in her chest, her black box whirring faster and faster by the second.

9S fell flat on his back, clutching the smarting wound on his arm. It stung. The cut was shallow but askew, leaving a flap of skin and bloody, exposed nerves underneath. He didn’t notice until long after he’d fallen that he wasn’t hearing anything. No smug gloating from Chara. No noise from 2B.

He pulled himself up, his head spinning, blossoming blood staining his sleeve. Static speckled his visual display. What was going on? One second ago, Chara had been right in front of him…

“2B…? What’s going…”

2B. Where was 2B? He shook his head, blinked, cleared the static from his eyes.

Lying on the roof. Blood dripping on the oxidized green shingles.

“2B… Oh, no… 2B, no…”

Dying? Dead? 2B?

9S stumbled across the roof, haphazardly kicking at loose shingles, dreading what he might find as he drew closer.

Pod 153 followed him. He hardly even noticed it until it spoke. “Statement: Unit 9S has been frozen in time for seven minutes and thirteen point five seconds.”

“Shut up!” he snapped, falling to his knees and grabbing 2B by the shoulder. Shattered copper shingles dug into his kneecaps. “2B, are you…”

He rolled 2B onto her back. She was limp; her head lolled on an unsupportive neck, her jaw slack.
Pod 042 began to rattle off ailments, but the words ran right through 9S’s ears, barely registering. It didn’t take him long to discover the problem on his own—a stab wound in her abdomen running right through to her back, still leaking. Blood smeared her pale skin beneath the black, form-fitting sweater, the same blood blossoming on the back of her bolero jacket and turning the blue velvet just as black.

How could Chara have done this? How could 2B have let them overpower her? How could 9S have let this happen? He’d been so stupid… so stupid…

“We are still imprisoned beneath this accursed mountain, as we have been for over ten thousand years. Though we will never stop dreaming of the surface,” Asgore said, repeating words he’d been practicing for nearly a month, “look at how we have thrived, even here! We have built cities and brought light to the darkness. We have made this prison a home. Think about what that says about us, about our people. About our families. Look at our resilience. Look at our strength. And take pride, my subjects! You built this kingdom. Parents. Teachers. Civil servants. Writers and artists. This kingdom is strong because you are all strong!

“We have grown immeasurably over the past year,” said Asgore, “in ways we could never fathom. While our war still rages with humanity, and while we still await the arrival of the seventh human soul needed to shatter the Barrier, we have learned that not all who live on the surface may be our enemy.”

Asgore could see a shift in the audience, an uneasiness sweeping over the crowd as if nobody seemed sure what he was going to say next and everybody wondered whether they would find what he said next comfortable.

Formickey pulled himself free and lunged at Chara, swinging his blades in long, sweeping arcs. “Android girl! Run for it!” he shouted at 6O. “Or do we have to do everything for you, dumbass?”

6O tried to pull herself to her feet, but her legs felt like jelly. It couldn’t be. Chara couldn’t be here. She couldn’t breathe. She could feel the warmth building up inside her, her components longing for fresh air to carry the heat from her organs out of her body, but—

Chara dodged the ant-man’s furious strikes, and then with a swing of their sword tore through his carapace, spattering the wall behind him with a sickly greenish paste. With an enraged roar and one final burst of strength, Formickey attacked; Chara sidestepped the wild and inaccurate strike with deft ease as Formickey collapsed to his knees, his black cloak pooling around him.

“D-Dammit…” he gasped, his mandibles clacking angrily as his body began to crumble. “Goin’ out… like a goddamn jabroni… The things I do for king and country…” His antenna crumbled into dust, cracks running through his shiny, chitinous carapace as he crumpled in on himself and collapsed just as his comrade Talus had.

Snaca pulled herself to her feet, hissing with anger. “For… Formickey…” She took a halting step toward Chara. “You ssssson of a bitch!” she screamed, throwing herself at them with wild abandon.

Chara glanced her way. Split in two by an errant swing of a sword, their visor fell from their eyes and fluttered to the floor.

Snaca stumbled to a screeching halt and fell on her backside, eyes wide with a mix of fear, awe, and
reverence. “Y—You… Princex Chara?”

“In the flesh,” Chara intoned, setting aside their sword.

The snake-woman began to laugh. “Talk about picking the wrong ssside…”

Chara ignored Snaca, laying their baleful scarlet gaze upon 6O. “There you are, 6O. What a thorn you’ve been in my side.”

6O couldn’t move. Every instinct in her body sent screaming messages through her circuits urging her to run, but her limbs had seized up. Chara’s glare, like the hypnotic glare of a basilisk, had paralyzed her.

“D-Don’t kill me…”

“Kill you?” Chara smiled. “Oh, no, 6O. Things have changed. I need you alive.”

“I do not know when we will be free. Perhaps it will be next year. Or next century. When one gets to be my age, one learns to be patient, and I urge you to be patient as well. But on that wonderful day the Barrier finally falls, the synthetic lifeforms we have learned to live with will help us form the staunchest of allegiances with their kin on the surface. We will no longer be the same overwhelmed, defenseless kingdom that was so easily routed and imprisoned by the ancient humans.”

Staunching gel on both entry and exit wound, smeared with shaking fingers, stopped the blood from flowing, but 9S didn’t have anything to seal 2B’s wounds. “Stay with me, 2B,” he murmured, his voice catching in his throat as he tried to ignore her ashen skin, the way her body moved under his hands without any resistance or agency.

If she died, time would reset again, wouldn’t it? And 9S would be erased. 2B would live with that weight on her conscience yet again. 9S couldn’t allow that. He couldn’t let 2B succumb to her injuries, no matter what.

What if she died and time didn’t reset? His teeth ground against themselves, his fingernails dug into his palms. Rage pumped through his systems, carried on his blood and in the electrical current running through his circuits. He’d kill Chara. Slowly. Painfully. He’d watch them lose everything they held dear before granting them the mercy of death. How dare they hurt 2B!

9S stripped off his vest, tore it into strips, and wrapped it tightly around 2B’s abdomen, encircling the wound and tying the makeshift bandage tightly.

2B… 2B… Don’t leave me, 2B…

He thought he could hear her breathing. Heartened, he loosened 2B’s visor and pulled it down.
2B...

A single millisecond-long cycle of 9S’s black box might have been an eternity.

2B’s eyes cracked open. Eyes like ice-cold steel. The most beautiful thing 9S had ever seen.

“Ni... nes...”

9S threw his arms around 2B, thankful beyond words to see her awake and alert. “2B! I’m so sorry...”

Not one to wallow in pain, 2B immediately tried to stand up, even with her injury, even with 9S still hanging onto her. 9S helped her to her feet, letting her lean against him. She clutched at her stomach, fingers tightening around the makeshift bandage beneath her sweater.

2B took a few halting steps. “Come on. Let’s go.” Her words were terse, hissed through gritted teeth. “Chara... I won’t... let them... hurt another soul...”

She collapsed, falling to her knees, dragging 9S down with her. She panted, gasping for air, her cheeks flushed with exertion, sweat beaded on her brow.

Pod 042 rushed to assess her condition. “Alert: Unit 2B’s coolant and electroconductive fluid levels are at dangerously low levels. This unit carries a severe risk of overheating until her blood supply can be stabilized.”

9S glanced at the puddle of blood oozing across the shingles of the roof. He’d known it had looked bad at first glance, but...

But now that he looked at it again, holy shit, that was a lot of blood.

2B shook her head wearily. “I’m sorry. This time... I was an idiot.”

“The self-repair nanomachines present in the bloodstream can metabolize any liquid substance. Proposal: Unit 2B must temporarily refrain from physical exertion and ingest any available fluids,” Pod 042 added.

“Nines...” 2B’s eyelids lay heavy, hooding her icy eyes. She planted the Virtuous Contract between two loose shingles and rested against it as it stuck firmly in the roof. “I’m glad you’re okay. I... I almost lost you again.”

There was a commotion from the far edge of the rooftop as a cluster of Royal Guards climbed onto the roof.

“You there! Are you two hurt?”

9S felt his own legs give out beneath him, his head still spinning.

“Our kingdom is strong,” Asgore said. “However long it takes to gather what we need to break the barrier, be it one hundred years or one hundred days—”

“The Barrier can fall TONIGHT!” a loud, clear, and disturbingly familiar voice rang out, carrying through the auditorium even without the support of a microphone.

Chara Dreemurr had stepped onstage, the sound of their footsteps on the oaken floorboards echoing.
Their long white jacket swirled around them, its hem curled around their ankles; a black knife and a copper dagger lay sheathed at a jaunty angle at their hip, and a long golden sword and a short black sword hung from their back.

6O was at their side, albeit not by choice, hanging with resignation from them as their arm curled around her waist. There was a blank, hollow look in her eyes Asgore recognized well as shock—he had seen that same look once before when Asriel had first found Chara in the rubble of the Ruins all those years ago.

6O’s blue eyes met Asgore’s, and the king found himself immobilized by guilt, the rest of his speech vanishing from his mind.

Murmurs had erupted from the audience, growing into a hushed cacophony. Chara stepped forward and addressed the crowd, raising their free hand in a grand salute. “Doubtless some of you may recognize me, subjects of the Dreemurr dynasty—it is I, Chara Dreemurr, the long-prophesied Angel of the Underground, returned to you at long last!”

A hush fell over the crowd, silencing the susurrus.

“As an ancient human king once promised to return to his kingdom when it needed him the most, so too have I…” Chara hefted 6O, jostling her. “And with the final soul needed to destroy the Barrier and free our people in tow!”

Asgore clasped his paw over the microphone and turned his head to face Chara, his eyes wide with surprise. “Um… Chara,” he said in a low whisper, “what are you doing?” He glanced at the three of his guards who’d joined him onstage.

Undyne conjured a spear, but Asgore waved her away. He couldn’t allow violence to engulf this venue. He would defuse this situation peacefully. After all, Chara was his child. He would deal with this issue himself. He had to.

Chara flashed a grin at Asgore, then pulled 6O closer even as she tried to squirm out of their grasp. They stepped to the edge of the stage. “It pains me to say this,” they called out, addressing the crowd, “but King Asgore, my father, has been hiding a dreadful secret from you all! His faltering heart and will summoned me, dragging me from the peace and tranquility of the grave to set right what he made wrong!”

Chara drew a black cube from within their jacket, the cube’s surface glittering with starry lines of white light. “We all know that this is the soul of a human. Because this is what Asriel Dreemurr tore from my chest on the morning of my death on that fateful, horrible day so many years ago! But from whence did this soul come? Observe…”

They held the cube to 6O’s chest, letting it sink into her body. Asgore felt his stomach twist into knots. No… It couldn’t be…

The crowd gasped.

“The black box unit of a YoRHa type android resonates just as a human soul does, and responds to the unique properties of a monster’s soul just as a human’s soul does. It is a coincidence so astonishing it could only be fate—that these mechanical beings could bring us salvation.” Chara shot Asgore a menacing glare. “King Asgore knew this! He knew this and hid it from you all, even as he welcomed into our kingdom the same androids who held the key to our salvation within them!”

“I—I did not!” Asgore insisted, aware of how petulant the words sounded as they came from his
mouth. “My subjects, use your reason. Do not be led astray by these inflammatory lies—”

Chara turned to face the crowd once more. “You deserve a strong king. One who will claim victory at all costs! One who will sweep the Earth and render it clean, and spread the banner of our monstrous kingdom from sea to shining sea, pole to glittering pole, to every last corner of our beautiful, blessed Earth! Not this shadow of a man—who has made fools of you all!”

Then Chara brandished their black blade, leveling it at Asgore’s heart as they looked up and stared him dead in the eyes. There was a hatred in those scarlet eyes Asgore had only ever seen once before—yesterday. This was not the child he had once known and loved. “Father, as the Dreemurr family line’s sole living heir, I invoke the laws of your ancestors and make my claim for the throne. Yield it peacefully—or I will best you in combat and take it from your gormless, feckless, traitorous paws!”

Such a ritual was known only in ancient history. Asgore had been king for as long as the kingdom had been imprisoned; the last time anybody had challenged the king in combat for the throne had been in the days of his parents and grandparents. Chara, of course, adored ancient history, and of course, knew all of the old and long-obsolete bylaws.

Asgore’s mouth gaped open in shock. “Ch—Chara, how… how could you…”

He realized too late that last night, when 2B had made her intentions clear, she had been seeing Chara for who they truly were—while Asgore had been blinded by the past. Guilt seized his heart as he realized that he had made 2B promise not to kill Chara. In doing so, Asgore had brought this on himself.

The audience erupted into whispers and murmurs anew: some angry, most confused.

“A-Asgore!” Undyne cried out. “What the hell?” She conjured a spear again—but again, Asgore held out his hand to stop her.

“Captain,” he said, his words clipped and terse, “My child has a right to challenge me in ritual combat.” The best way to handle this was to play by the rules. Flaunting tradition and decorum would not serve him well in the court of public opinion, poisoned as the well had already been by Chara’s inflammatory statements, and Asgore was loath to think he might be an unpopular king.

“King Asgore—!”

“King Asgore, will you take responsibility and give me your crown?” Chara shouted out, the venom in their voice tearing their throat. “Or will you stand by your lies, fight, and let me best you? Or will you slink away like a coward, clasping your crown to your chest as a thief clutches his ill-gotten spoils? One thing is certain, Father! From this day forward, whatever your actions here, you have failed this kingdom, and will be forever regarded as an enemy of the people!”

Asgore swallowed a lump in his throat and took a deep breath. He knew he was being goaded. But there was no way to win in this situation. Not unless…

Not unless he…

Could he do it? Could he do this to his own child?

Kill his own child?

The guards whisked 9S and 2B off the roof and brought the two of them to a triage station just
outside City Hall. A healer had immediately tended to 2B, closing the wound in her abdomen and back, although little could be done with healing magic for her internal injuries. Within minutes they’d hooked her up with an intravenous solution to replenish her bloodstream, as directed by Pod 042.

9S, meanwhile, found himself interminably questioned regarding the shockwave that had rocked the surrounding buildings, and while he’d tried to explain himself as best he could, nothing he said seemed to be good enough, and everyone kept interrupting him to ask him more questions. It was as if everybody in the world was only half-listening to him, and it was as maddening as it was utterly surreal. 9S was used to being an elite soldier, outranking most other people he encountered on missions solely by virtue of being part of YoRHa’s chain of command and essentially being able to do as he pleased as long as he did his work properly.

And then, all of a sudden, the questioning stopped. The Royal Guards left him and 2B alone, drawing around a small portable television as if it were magnetic and they were iron filings, constantly tweaking the primitive aerial for a better signal.

Curious, 9S drew closer, his ears picking up the sound of the most ubiquitous and annoying voice in the entire kingdom.

“Beauties and gentlebeauties, this could possibly be the most utterly dramatic news update in this program’s history! This is Mettaton, reporting live from MTT News. I am here at City Hall as an embedded journalist, here to report that for the first time in millennia, an official challenge for the throne in ritual combat has been issued to King Asgore Dreemurr!”

The tiny cathode-ray tube television had a snowy, static-speckled picture and muted colors, but displayed the action on stage clearly—or, at least, as clearly as it could with Mettaton’s rectangular body taking up a quarter of the screen. King Asgore stood next to his podium, towering over his challenger. Yet even through the primitive television screen 9S could make out the challenger’s identity.

“This extraordinarily well-dressed challenger claims to be the reincarnation of Chara Dreemurr, thought by some superstitious oafs to be the ’Angel of the Underground.’” Mettaton did air-quotes around the phrase. “Among the ’Angel’s’ grievances, they claim that the androids we have welcomed into our kingdom possess human souls and that King Asgore knowingly suppressed this information. In the interest of due diligence, of course, we will be investigating these claims in detail and completely objectively tonight during MTT Nightly News at Eleven.”

“That’s bullshit!” 9S exclaimed. Several of the guards murmured in agreement with him, but some had less heartening grumbling for him to hear and began to eye him suspiciously.

“I am receiving an update from our resident historian on the nature of the ritual. The last person to challenge a king in ritual combat was King Telgore Dreemurr, King Asgore’s own father, who forcibly overthrew his father, the then-king Telmarin Dreemurr. If Chara Dreemurr successfully challenges King Asgore for the crown, it will mark the second use of such a ritual in lieu of the typical method of succession in a row.”

Dammit… This is bad. Chara told me they were planning a coup, but I didn’t imagine… 9S held onto 2B, clutching her by the shoulders as her head hung against his chest. The paramedics had insisted he let her lie down. He’d told them all in no uncertain terms that they could pry him off of 2B if they liked, but not if they enjoyed having hands.

“I will now be taking viewer questions regarding this unpresidented development, so call or text 555-METTATON with your question, or message me on UnderNet, and I myself will answer it on air. Ooh! We have one already!” Mettaton’s face lit up. “’Dear Mettaton, why is this stupid ritual
still considered a legal form of succession?’ Excellent question, catgirlNyaa_5063! Never underestimate the capacity for government incompetence! There are tons of stupid and outdated laws that are still on the books but never enforced! For example, did you know it is still illegal to grow water sausages and sell them as ‘all-natural organic corndogs?’”

9S peeked at the screen. At least 6O seemed to be unhurt—Chara was keeping her alive. Dammit, they’d even lied to 9S about that! Captain Undyne and two other guards stood at the ready, waiting in the wings. Why weren’t they doing anything? Why were they just standing there and watching?

“‘Dear Mettaton, did you just confess to a crime on live television?’ What a stupid question! I never—This just in, my lawyer has advised me not to answer this question. Moving on. ‘Dear Mettaton, I am a big fan.’ Aw, thank you! ‘What does this mean for the androids currently living in Snowdin? I can vouch for their characters personally. They are model citizens, just like me and my brother.’ Well, CoolSkeleton95, this is indeed a sticky situation for them! Should Chara Dreemurr become king, I cannot imagine they wouldn’t demand arrests for our android citizens immediately and have the Royal Guard hunt them down like dogs!’ Mettaton chuckled. “You’d better get that voucher ready!”

9S felt the heat of half a dozen pairs of eyes homing in on him and 2B. An oppressive wave of hostility filled the air, the kind he hadn’t faced in months. His fingers curled around the hilt of 2B’s sword, finding its weight and balance and the well-worn leather wrapped around the hilt comfortably familiar in its similarity to his own sword.

“It seems the challenge is about to begin in earnest, dear viewers. I will do my best to provide nothing but the best commentary for this historic occasion!”

▫▫▫

Asgore steeled himself. “Chara Dreemurr, my child… I accept your challenge. But only on one condition.” Asgore let his eyes meet poor 6O’s again, his gut churning, his heart leaden in his chest as he saw the fear in her eyes. He had seen that fear in so many others’ eyes before he had snuffed out their lives. Just once… just this once… he could save one child.

“Oh?”

“Hand over that girl to Captain Undyne,” he said.

Chara smirked. “See how much he treasures the life of one of our sworn enemies!” they shouted out to the crowd. “King Asgore would choose a foreigner over one of his own in a heartbeat!”

They released 6O, all but shoving her toward Undyne; the captain barely managed to cast aside her spear in time to catch her without accidentally impaling her.

“Is that good enough… Father?” Chara asked.

Asgore nodded, accepting the weight of his decision. After Chara’s cruel and all-too-public rhetoric, the events of this day could very well leave him a pariah for staking his life on that poor girl and her friends. But it was worth it—it was worth losing the trust of his own people—if an innocent life could be spared. That was what Toriel had taught him the day she had left him behind.

He was ready.

He was ready at last to catch up to her.

“Undyne…” He spoke in a low voice, fighting down an apprehensive quaver. “Take that girl
someplace safe."

“But—”

“That is an order,” he snapped.

He could see the anguish on Undyne’s face and knew that what she was seeing was tearing her apart inside. That girl didn’t know the meaning of the phrase ‘back down.’ Asgore had learned that, having trained her and sparred with her—taken her under his wing and all but raised her—since she’d been nothing but a dirty urchin who’d barely come up to his knee.

Asgore growled. “Should anybody intercede on the king’s behalf in such a duel, the king must forfeit. Do not let your heart lead you astray.”

Undyne winced as if wounded, then bowed. “Yes—Your Highness,” she choked out, forcing herself to retreat against every instinct in her body.

Chara snapped their fingers, irate. “While we’re young, Father…”

Asgore nodded and swept his paw across the stage; at his command, a ring of scarlet flames surrounded himself and Chara, a waist-high partition dividing the world into two realms. Outside was the kingdom he had served for thousands of years; inside was a realm with only one rule: survive alone, on one’s own strength, on one’s own wits. This would be their arena.

A trident built of roiling scarlet flames materialized at Asgore side; his fingers curled around the shaft. The apprehension evaporated from his mind, lightening his burden and bringing strength anew to old, worn, weary muscles that had not seen true combat in millennia.

“I shall duel you for the future of this kingdom,” Asgore told Chara. “I will defend my crown and my sovereignty to my last breath.”

“Then the first act of my reign will be to kill the greatest traitor our kingdom has ever known.” Chara sprang into a fighting stance. “Enough talk! Have at you!”

Chapter End Notes

Me, reading comments on the last chapter: *hums "Last Surprise" from Persona 5*
Chapter Summary

Asgore confronts Chara over the future of the kingdom.

Chapter Notes

(musical accompaniment)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gerson Boom was old. Older than Asgore. Maybe older than Asgore’s father. Save for Asgore and his wife, Gerson was the only other monster alive who had seen real sunlight, the last lingering remnant of the last generation of monsters to live with hope. He was a wizened old turtle, so ancient that his wrinkles had wrinkles, yet here he was, still Captain of the Royal Guard—a position he had held since the war.

Wrinkling his beak, Gerson shuffled on his stubby feet and stood in the throne room. He cleared his throat, coughing out phlegm into a handkerchief. “Ya wanted t’ see me, Gorey?”

No one in the kingdom save for three people called Asgore ’Gorey.’ It was his wife’s pet name for him. One of his wife’s pet names for him. When Gerson used it, though, there was a bit of a gently mocking lilt to it, meant in jest but never in disrespect.

Asgore nodded. “I have been… consulting with my wife.” His mouth was dry with apprehension.

“Yes, I’m sure you have.” Gerson tucked away his handkerchief. “Finally ready to make a kid, eh?”

Gerson let out a wheezing laugh as Asgore felt the blood rush to his cheeks. “I, er, meant ’consulting’ as in ’talking,’ Captain.”

“Sure, sure.” Gerson winked.

“I wish for your advice.” Asgore took a deep breath. “Gerson, my friend, we have been down here for nearly four thousand years. Do you miss the surface?”

Gerson shrugged. “Of course. But what can ya do?”

“What… can we do, indeed.” Asgore tugged on his beard, aware he was stalling for time. He didn’t want to admit what he wanted to admit.

“Well, if even one human falls into the mountain, you could take the poor sod’s soul, fly past the Barrier, and collect the other six.” Gerson rocked on his heels, his hands behind his back, surprisingly limber for somebody of his advanced age. “Then ya break the
Barrier, and that’s that.”

“But… Tell me. Even if I were to claim that power… do you believe humans would allow us to peacefully live on the surface? Or do you think they would simply move to exterminate us yet again?”

Gerson pondered the question. Asgore could almost see the ancient gears in his head turning. “I mean… you’d be all-powerful, wouldn’t ya?”

“Would I? What if humans, too, have grown stronger over the millennia? What if humans have grown so strong and have developed so much powerful magic that they would be as gods to us?” Asgore felt an invisible vise squeezing his chest. It hurt to confess such cowardice.

“You think they could grow like that?”

“We are in shackles. There are limits on our strength. But humans are free. They have nothing binding them. The more my wife and I think about it, the less confident we feel that there is any point in returning to the surface.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean, big guy.” Gerson glanced sideways. “When ya put it like that, it kinda sounds like we’re better off down here. Humans would just kill us again as soon as we popped our heads above the ground.”

“Tori and I have decided as much ourselves.”

“Better not risk it, right?” Gerson shrugged. “Like I say. If ya can’t be with the one ya love, love the one yer with.”

“So you… agree with me, Captain?”

“Yep. No point in pining for the surface. We’ve got to make this place our home.”

Asgore nodded. He wanted to be a good king, a king people loved, a king who had the trust and respect of his people. Sometimes that meant doing what the people wanted, and sometimes it meant doing what was best for them. The hard part was knowing which was which.

If Gerson could understand, everyone could understand.

“Coward!”

Chara struck first; Asgore expected it. What he did not expect, though, was how fast his adopted child was. But Asgore, though his great stature and ample belly belied it, was quite swift on his feet as well.

A black sword adorned with a blazing fire opal swung through the air with a bitter wind in its wake; Asgore tangled it in the tines of his trident, twisting it out of Chara’s hand. He kicked it away, letting it skip across the floor and skitter over the flaming border of the makeshift arena.

Whatever epithet Chara had been planning to shout next died on their tongue.

“You did not think I would make it easy for you, did you?” Asgore asked.

“You know…” Chara held out their hand; the black sword reappeared in it with a flurry of amber
sparks. “For a second there… Yes. I did.”

Chara lunged at him again; much to Asgore’s surprise, though, Chara vanished in midair before their attack could land.

Chara’s voice came from behind him now.

“Liar!”

Asgore was fast enough to whirl around, swatting Chara out of the air like a gnat; they hit the floor hard enough to bounce, oaken floorboards shattering beneath them. Chara was outmatched—not once in their life had they ever seen Asgore fight, and while they hid their surprise well, it was visible on their face for a split second as they picked themselves up, swatting errant flames off their ornate coat.

That coat. White, long, decorated with gold filigree and piping, tasseled epaulets swaying on the shoulders. Asgore remembered buying that jacket for Chara—on the first anniversary of the day they had fallen into the Underground. It had been the closest thing they had to a birthday since they had remembered so little of their past.

Chara struck again, tangling their black blade in Asgore’s trident. Once again, Asgore tried to wrench the sword out of Chara’s grip; this time, though, Chara let go of the sword of their own volition, springboarding on Asgore’s trident as it stuck into the floor and using it to launch themselves high into the air.

“Traitor!”

Chara swung their outstretched leg downward in a sweeping axe kick; Asgore blocked the kick with an upraised forearm, released his hold on his trident, and drove his free fist straight upward into Chara’s abdomen.

Under the extreme force of Asgore’s mighty fist, Chara shot up to the ceiling like a rocket in flight, their back arching as they slammed against one of the large recessed lights which shone down on the stage; glass shattered and rained down like snowflakes as the light flickered and died, allowing the scarlet flames circling the stage alone to cast their wavering and unsteady light.

Chara slammed into the floor face-first, then slowly staggered to their feet. Blood streamed from their nose, from their forehead, and from one eye that was now squeezed shut, a scarlet stream like tears cutting down their cheek. They grinned, blood shining on their teeth. “So this is the real Asgore.”

Asgore yanked his trident free of the floor, twirled it, and hit the butt of the shaft against the floor, banging it like a judge’s gavel. “The real Asgore does not indulge in such violence. This is what I am when I must defend innocent life.”

Chara laughed, their shoulders shaking. “You didn’t see it that way when you killed the first six, did you? Their lives didn’t mean anything to you but the means to an end!”

Drawing a black knife from their side, Chara vanished; senses heightened by adrenaline, Asgore pinpointed where they reappeared and parried blow after blow, again and again, from the left, from the right, from above, below, behind.

“It wasn’t until now—that victory was in your grasp—that your conscience returned to you! Is that what you want everybody to believe? Or is it more likely that you never intended to free your people at all?”
One swing of the black sword made it past his defenses. A single strike from a single blade, yet it drove into his left shoulder with enough force and in just the right place to completely deaden his left arm. The pain was enough to nearly force Asgore to his knees—but he remained standing, albeit swaying.

With an artful flourish Asgore reduced his trident to a flaming sword, blocking and parrying Chara’s subsequent attacks even as one of his arms dangled limply at his side. The air burned as his fiery sword cut swaths through it, leaving the acrid scent of burnt ozone as flames danced.

Chara dodged a swift strike Asgore had put all of his strength into, retaliating with a spinning butterfly kick into Asgore’s chest; as Asgore stumbled back under the force of the impact, Chara ricocheted off, spinning through the air, and drew the massive golden broadsword they had kept at the ready on their back.

Asgore blocked their downward thrust, but was buffeted by a wave of air pressure that hit him like a solid rock wall. In the wave’s wake, the air pressure in the room dropped dramatically; Asgore felt his ears pop painfully. The floor splintered beneath him, oaken planks shattering like glass; flames flickered and danced in frenzied spasms before the air balanced out.

Chara landed and swung the golden blade again—That was one of the ones they’d brought with them into the mountain, wasn’t it? Chara had said its name was Caladbolg, hadn’t they?—and while Asgore parried the strike, and the next one, and the next one, each one sent him reeling. This was a violent force the likes of which Asgore had not felt since the war, though he often remembered the feeling in dreams. It was the power of a human warrior with overwhelming intent to kill.

“For centuries, stringing the kingdom along, giving your subjects false hope for a day of reckoning that you never intended to see to fruition!” Chara bellowed, their strikes chipping away at Asgore’s strength and endurance little by little. “You would rather let them all rot in blissful ignorance! I see you, Asgore Dreemurr! Your cowardice, your lies, your treason! I will end it all! I will end it all here! All of it! I have come as the Angel you put your hopes in! Not to deliver you—but to judge you! YOU WILL END! YOU AND YOUR LIES! JUST AS YORHA DID! JUST AS ANDROIDS WILL! JUST AS MACHINES WILL! THIS CANNOT CONTINUE! THIS CANNOT CONTINUE! THIS CANNOT CONTINUE!”

Asgore found a gap in Chara’s defenses as they ranted and raved, sweeping them off their feet with a wave of flames. Chara wasted no time regaining their footing and rushing forward.

The next strike from Asgore’s sword burned away Chara’s right eye, the same eye that had begun over the course of the battle to weep bloody tears. Chara screamed in gut-wrenching agony, the sound piercing Asgore’s ears, the wailing so profound in its expression of pain Asgore felt as though he had lost a part of himself.

“THIS WILL NOT CONTINUE!”

Asgore struck again, wanting only to end the battle posthaste and put Chara out of their misery; with a riposte Asgore would have been proud of in any other circumstance, Chara ran him through.

Letting a howl of agony tear itself from his throat, Asgore staggered back, letting the blade pull away from his gut, loosing a shower of blood. He clutched at the wound, blood seeping between his fingers and staining the white fur of his paw deep, dark red. His vision began to blur; the room began to spin; the dancing of the scarlet flames separating him and his opponent from the rest of the world became slow and languid.

But he stood firm, ignited a fire in his paw, and drove it into the wound, burning it closed, ignoring
the fresh wave of unfathomable pain, the gut-churning stench of burning fur and seared flesh that filled his throat with bile.

Asgore spat a wad of blood and bile from his mouth, letting it sizzle against the scarlet flames.

He had taught Captain Undyne many things. But she had taught him something, too. Something more important than anything she had ever learned from him.

“You are going to have to try harder... than that,” Asgore wheezed.

Undyne felt like a coward and a failure as she ran out of City Hall, but Asgore was right. There was nothing she could do to help him. Couldn’t interfere. Couldn’t intercede. Couldn’t fight on his behalf.

She could do as she was told and keep 2B’s friend safe. Mission accomplished. Now what?

“Undyne! Undyne!”

Alphys struggled to push herself through the throng of people who’d gathered, panicked, in front of City Hall. Crowds did not part so easily for her as they did for Undyne; Undyne slung 6O over her shoulder, freeing one of her arms, and did what she could to shove people aside and grab Alphys’ scaly hand.

The two of them stood in the middle of an empty street, simple cordons and guards standing at attention to block out the crowds gathering on the periphery. “Th-Thanks, Undyne,” Alphys gasped. “This is i-insane!”

“You don’t have to tell me. You all right?”

Alphys rested her hands on her knees, panting from exhaustion and stress. “J-Just a little claustrophobic, I guess... What are we gonna do now?”

Undyne gingerly sat 6O on the ground. She was limp and pliable, her breathing shallow, her eyes wide and glazed. “Hey, Earth to 6O.” Undyne laid a hand on her shoulder with a firm grip and gave her a gentle shake. “You okay?”

“Sh-She’s in shock, Undyne,” Alphys said.

“Can androids go into shock? Why would you program a robot to do that?”

“You’re asking the wrong p-person!” Alphys pushed her askew glasses up her snout. “C-C’mon, let’s get her to my lab. I’ll run a f-full diagnostic.”

Undyne nodded. “Sounds good.” She took 6O yet again and swept her off the ground, one arm wrapped around her waist, the other winding under the crook of her knees. “Let’s go to the castle first, though. We’ll check in with 2B and 9S and let them know what’s going—”

“Get back! If you touch a hair on her head I’ll kill every last fucking one of you!” 9S’s voice rang out. Undyne spun off in the direction of his voice, Alphys waddling behind her as fast as her little legs could carry her.

9S stood in front of a cluster of Royal Guards, brandishing a white sword in one hand while 2B slumped over in his other arm. One of the guards stepped forward, hands raised in a gesture of peace.
“Everyone calm down. Let’s not do anything rash.”

“You heard the TV. These **androids** have been lying to us for months!” one of the guards protested.

“We don’t know that for sure! Besides, these guys haven’t broken any laws!” The guard who’d stepped forward turned around, putting herself between 9S and the others. “C’mon, guys, whatever happened to due process?”

“They’ve got human souls! That’s a crime!” one of the other guards piped up.

“W-Well, how do we **know** what Chara showed us was real?”

One of the hostile guards grabbed the interceding guard by the wrists. “You’re calling the Angel a liar, are you?”

Undyne composed herself and strode into the scene of the altercation. “What’s going on here?” she shouted out, her booming voice echoing through the town square.

The guards snapped to attention and saluted. “Captain Undyne!” they all shouted out in a single voice.

“At ease. Explain yourselves.”

“We’re going to arrest these two,” one of the guards said, his voice echoing under his helmet. “For unauthorized possession of human souls.”

“We can’t arrest them on speculation!” the guard who’d stepped out protested. “Captain, talk some sense into—”

Another guard spoke up. “That girl you’ve got there is an android, too, isn’t she?”

“Quiet!” Undyne barked. “I don’t recall ever seeing an arrest warrant for these two.”

“Chara Dreemurr said—”

“Last time I checked,” Undyne said, fiery fury welling up in her chest—her hands were shaking, her fingers starting to grip 6O a little too tightly—“Asgore was still our king! And he gave me a direct order to keep this girl and these people safe! And I’m giving you all that same order!”

The guards seemed to come to their senses, albeit some of them grudgingly so. 9S relaxed, lowering 2B’s sword. “Thanks, Undyne,” he sighed.

“Least I could do,” Undyne said, flashing him a toothy grin. “I don’t let my own go around acting like thugs.”

It was then that Undyne finally noticed the weariness in the two androids, 9S’s bloodstained sleeve, 2B’s wan complexion and lidded eyes.

“What the hell happened to you guys?” she asked.

“Chara happened,” 9S said, all but growling.

Undyne felt the bottom of her stomach drop out. If Chara could kick these two’s asses, then…

No. Asgore was **way** tougher than he let on. If anybody could give Chara the beating he deserved, it would be him. “G-Guess you two ain’t so tough after all, huh?” she quipped, trying so hard not to
sound nervous that she actually sounded more nervous.

2B stepped forward on shaky legs her pod clutching her shoulder to help her remain upright. Undyne noticed that a paramedic had hooked an IV into her forearm, and wondered if that did an android any good. If Pod 042 was letting it stay in there, it couldn’t have been doing any harm. “I-Is 6O… okay?”

Undyne nodded. “A little shaken up, but that’s it.” She gingerly set the girl on her feet; 6O managed to stand unassisted, but Undyne let her hands hover around her waist just in case she stumbled and fell.

6O immediately glued herself to 2B, burying her face in her chest. 2B staggered backward, remaining on her feet only because 9S had rushed in to grab her. The three of them huddled together. It was almost cute enough to make Undyne forget that the very kingdom itself was in peril.

“Well, aren’t you lucky,” she muttered at 6O.

▫▫▫

Asgore fell to one knee, exhausted. Yet even then, he refused to surrender, nor to show Chara any quarter.

“Do you yield, Father?”

“Never.”

Chara stepped back. “Do you know why I beat you, Father?” they asked, trying desperately to regain their composure. “Love,” they said, “is scarce. A limited resource to be protected and hoarded more than even gold. Forge it into a blade and it is stronger than the strongest alloy. Ruthlessness sharpens it… and kindness blunts it. And your blade… it has no edge. Your kindness has left you impotent.” They lowered their sword. “You cannot stand. You cannot fight. Give up already!”

“You could chop off my arms and legs and pin me to the floor with that sword of yours…” Asgore panted, “and I would still not give you my crown. And as long as I will never give up, you will never defeat me. Even if you slay me, you will derive no satisfaction from it. The crown you are so eager to wear will hang from your neck like a lead weight.”

“You’re selfish.”

“I want what is best for my kingdom.”

“So do I.”

“You are foolish and immature. Our kingdom ill needs a savior such as you.” Asgore took a deep, shuddering breath, ignoring the horrible pain engulfing his body, and made his ultimatum. “Chara, if you wish for my crown, you will need to chop off my head. Nothing less will do.”

Chara froze. “I am trying to spare your life, Father!” they hissed through grinding teeth.

“Think you I wish to be spared?” Asgore asked. The fire in his eyes and fury in his voice as he spat out the words was enough to make Chara reel as if struck. “To what end? So I may see a world ruled by rage?”

“N-No,” Chara retorted, stumbling over their words, fear evident in their wide eye and sweat-slicked brow even though they had the upper hand by far. “B-Because I love—”
“The time for you to say such things to me has come and gone, my child,” Asgore snarled. “Your deeds have said what your words never could.”

Chara glanced to the side, peering over the ring of scarlet flames at the crowd that had watched with bated breath the barbaric spectacle of succession. Their eye flicked back and forth, back and forth, from king to kingdom and kingdom to king. “Father… All I want is the power to do what you’re too afraid to do! If you surrender, I won’t—”

“I’m sorry,” he said to Chara. Asgore bowed his head, his insides heavy like cooling lead. “I never realized how utterly I had failed you as a father. I never allowed myself to realize, Chara, how sick you were.”

Angered by Asgore’s final barb and recovering their lost nerve, Chara drew back their sword to swing a mortal blow, gritting their teeth in a wide, mad, feral parody of a grin.

“Do it.” Asgore felt hot tears rolling down his cheeks, wetting his fur and dripping to the scorched and singed floorboards below. He placed one paw on the floor, another clutching his aching heart, and forced himself to his feet, then opened his shirt, baring his chest, letting his snow-white fur spill out. “Make the foundation of your kingdom the senseless execution of a tired, defenseless old man.”

Worn, weary, tired, Asgore closed his eyes and put himself at Chara’s mercy, and with one final wish he begged the universe to keep Undyne safe as she carried out the last order from him she would ever receive. And with that…

He accepted his fate.

*Have I done well?*

*Did you see the girl I saved?*

*Did I do the right thing?*

*Wherever you are… wherever you have gone… are you watching, Toriel?*

*I miss you.*

*Every day since you left, I have wished you would return.*

*To teach me the error of my ways.*

*To help me be strong enough to do the right thing. As you always did.*

*I do not know where you are. Whether you are even still alive or not.*

*I wonder, then, Toriel… my darling… my love… will I see you again?*

Toriel… I love y

(Chara watched their father crumble to dust before their eye. Even they were shocked by what they had done.)

It hadn’t had to come to this. Asgore could have seen reason and abdicated quietly. He could have done the right thing at first glance. If he had only cooperated with Chara, Asgore would be alive at this very moment and his people would be free, and none would ever have to know of his
impropriety. But Asgore had forced Chara’s hand.

It was all Asgore’s fault. But it hadn’t had to be this way.

_How does it feel?_ a familiar voice asked Chara, so soft and quiet it was almost as imperceptible as a whisper on the wind, yet maddeningly recognizable. Chara had heard it before, but not in a long time. _To watch someone you love die by your own hand?_

As Chara pushed aside their emotions and stormed off the stage, they thought they heard the sound of mocking laughter ringing in their ears.

Undyne pushed aside the guards clustered around the tiny portable TV. “Make way! I gotta see Asgore tear that creep apa—”

The image on the screen was fuzzy and speckled, Mettaton’s body taking up a full quarter of the screen, the action far in the distance on the stage like a school play being watched from cheap seats.

What Undyne saw looked just as fictional as any play.

On the screen, Asgore was tiny; his foe was tinier; the blade between them tinier still.

Something protruded from Asgore’s back. Undyne’s brain wouldn’t let her comprehend what she was seeing at first. Something sharp and silver and covered in scarlet streaks. It couldn’t be what it looked like. It was impossible.

Asgore slumped over, his head hanging low, reaching out, laying a paw almost tenderly on Chara’s shoulder, brushing their cheek.

And he collapsed.

And turned to dust.

Dust.

But that couldn’t be possible. Asgore couldn’t be Dust.

An empty suit fluttered to the floor, and pouring from its sleeves and collar as it made its descent was a torrent of Dust.

Onscreen, Mettaton shifted uncomfortably. “_Um… Well then… I—I think I can speak for everyone when I say that I did not see that coming…_”

Undyne’s heart pounded in her chest with the force and ferocity of a jackhammer, beating against her ribs. Her fingertips began to tingle, her breath short, the gills on the sides of her neck gaping and flapping. Her heart felt too big for her chest.

She wanted somebody to say they hadn’t seen what she had just seen. _Anybody._

Asgore was
Undyne did not have a mother or a father. She had nothing and nobody and no one except for her fists and her feet and, on occasion, her teeth.

Because she was alone, she had to be the strongest. She had to find the strongest people in the kingdom and surpass them.

Her first target was Gerson Boom, the Hammer of Justice. Gerson had once been Captain of the Royal Guard, and legend had it he had fought in the war all those years ago. He was old and he had always been old—he had, in fact, been born already wrinkly and crotchety with a pipe in his gnarled beak, or so they said—but he was tough as nails and always beat up the bad guys, and that made him Undyne’s idol.

Undyne had learned a lot from him just by following him around. She learned that it was important to be loud and make noise, so everybody knew you would be there for them when they were in trouble. She learned that the best heroes never gave up and never backed down, no matter the odds. She learned that the best way to beat a bad guy was to beat him so bad that he wouldn’t even think about hurting people anymore.

Undyne would follow Gerson around every day. As she grew older and taller and stronger, she started helping him, although sometimes she was a little overeager. But Gerson always appreciated her help, even when she accidentally beat up the mailman.

Eventually, Gerson had nothing left to teach Undyne. Her next teacher would be King Asgore Dreemurr.

Undyne was fourteen when she met Asgore. To say she sneaked into his castle and challenged him to a fight to prove that she was the strongest monster would not be accurate. She barged into his castle and challenged him to a fight, leaving a trail of battered and concussed guards in her wake.

Asgore dodged every single blow she threw at him with ease. In fact, he didn’t even fight back at all. He simply waited until she had tired herself out, which took an entire afternoon.

As Undyne lay there in the courtyard, the grass tickling her skin and her aching, bruised muscles, she felt so humiliated she started crying. To have trained so hard and come so far and been defeated so easily…

Asgore stood over her and crouched down, his eyes bright, a smile on his face. “Oh, goodness. Oh, dear! D-Do not cry, little girl. I—I did not hurt you, did I?”

“Only my pride,” she sniffled.

Asgore laughed. “What a spirited little girl you are! Where are your parents?”

“Don’t have ’em.”
“Oh. What is your name?”

“U-Undyne, Mr. Asgore, Your Highness, sir. I—I’m gonna be the—the strongest monster ever…” It sounded stupid when she said it.

“Oh… what a wonderful dream! Would you like to know how to beat me?”

Undyne looked up at his big bright eyes, reached up, and took his paw.

From that day on, Undyne learned to fight from King Asgore himself. Through nothing but guts, grit, and sheer never-say-die determination, Undyne learned to hone her natural magic into lightning just as Asgore’s magic manifested as flames, and Asgore showed her how to mold that raw power into spears and swords and anything she could imagine.

One day, during practice, Undyne finally managed to force Asgore off his feet. Watching him stumble backward and fall over, his eyes widening in shock, Undyne felt horrible—afraid she had hurt him—and turned away.

But she looked again…

And she had never seen a wider or brighter smile on his face. Asgore was beaming. He even began to laugh. Undyne had never seen anybody so proud to lose a fight.

Asgore did more than train her. He was always there for her. He bound her wounds. Treated her when she was sick. Offered her a bed until she could afford a place of her own—he would have let her stay in the castle well into adulthood, but Undyne had been too prideful to accept such an offer. He cried when she passed her entrance test for the Royal Guard, and cried harder when she made the rank of Captain. He wasn’t just a father figure to her.

Asgore was her father.

Undyne pulled herself away from the television, her open hands with their numb fingers curling into fists as the weight of what she had seen finally bore down on her. A growing rage began to course through her veins, boiling her blood.

“Oh, no…” The words fought against her as she tried to force them through her throat, squeaking out of her mouth. “Asgore… No…”


Familiar voices slipped past her as if they were coming to her from a million miles away. She felt a soft, scaly hand clasp around one of her fists—but only barely, as if Undyne’s scaly skin was covered in a thick layer of cotton that deadened her sense of touch.

Undyne pulled herself away, the numbness in her body giving way to searing, suffocating ire, and she began to storm past the crowd gathered there on the side of the street, her boots stomping against the ground with nearly enough force to put cracks in the asphalt. A wicked, jagged spear flared to life in her hand, coalesced from ragged and writhing bolts of lightning that curled like angry eels in her iron grip.

“Chara…” The name scraped against her throat. “Chara Dreemurr!”

“Undyne, stop!”
A hand clenched around her arm, firm and strong enough to stop her in her tracks. It wasn’t one of her subordinates. It definitely wasn’t Alphys.

Undyne wrenched herself free. “Stop?” she repeated, whirling around to unload the brunt of her rage on the unlucky soul who’d tried to subdue her.

2B stood before her, her glare icy. Despite her injuries, she’d managed to force herself to her feet and anchor Undyne, if only for a moment. “We’ve been overpowered. If you throw yourself at Chara head-on, you’ll only waste—”

“You want me to stop?” Undyne retorted, only further incensed by 2B’s cold logic.

Alphys stepped up next. “U-Undyne, you saw what Chara’s capable of! You can’t—”

“They cut Asgore down like an animal and you tell me to STOP?” Undyne howled, shoving 2B off her feet and throwing herself down the street, sparks flying from her spear as its tip dragged across the ground. The rest of the guards rushed forward to subdue her, two pinning down her arms, two on each leg, and one pushing her to her knees. “No one stops! It’s way too late to stop!” she screamed, squirming as she struggled to tear her subordinates off her. “NO ONE STOPS!”

It was at that moment that the crowd gathered in front of City Hall parted, and a lone figure stepped out.

Chara Dreemurr.

King Chara Dreemurr.

The look on the bloodstained face of the regicidal, patricidal bastard—more demon than angel—was blank and dispassionate. Did they feel anything? Anything at all about what they had just done—the sin they had committed?

Spurred by a loathing stronger than any she’d ever felt before, Undyne tore herself away from her captors, a ragged cry tearing itself from her throat, a ragged, jagged spear of writhing lightning blazing to life in her grip, tendrils curling from the shaft around her arm as arcs of lightning sparked across her body.

“CHARA DREEMURR! I’LL KILL YOU!”

Chara drew the long golden broadsword from their back, and with not a trace of emotion in their face, swung the sword with only one hand. The arc of a rainbow lingered in its wake.

Undyne felt the air pressure drop; a gust of wind blew toward Chara, ruffling their hair. Undyne could see the rolling blast wave approaching her like the blade of a swinging axe, nearly invisible and sparkling in the air like thin, flawless crystal.

In that moment, Undyne realized that to Chara, she was as much a match for them as she had been to Asgore when she had first challenged him. A new gulf existed between king and captain, and because of one foolhardy decision—a decision to rid this world of the most heinous villain it had ever seen—Undyne would not live long enough to ever bridge that gulf.

Regret clouded her heart, mind, and soul. This was the end, and it would be sudden, painful, and utterly inglorious.

Alphys…
I'm sorry.

I didn’t mean to leave you alone like this.

I wish I c

There was a black blur in front of her; a flash of gold and silver.

With an opulent longsword of her own—a sword that could have been the lesser sister of Chara’s golden blade—2B stood in front of Undyne, her blade catching the shockwave and parrying it. Sparks flew from the blade where metal met steel-sharp air.

The shockwave broke across 2B’s blade like waves across the prow of a ship, shattering the silence with a roaring, deafening boom; all were thrown back into the maelstrom.

In that moment, when Chara saw the shockwave from Caladbolg meet the Joyeuse 2B wielded, they saw something they could not explain.

It was like a phantom behind the android: indistinct, barely visible tendrils of thin fog that were the same icy blue-gray as her hard, cold eyes curled around her and unfurled behind her like…

There was one symbol that was truly inescapable in the Underground. The Delta Rune, a symbol said to date back to prehistory, which also served as the crest of the Dreemurr family. An orb between two wings and three triangles beneath it, the middle triangle inverted.

According to legend, an “angel” who had seen the surface would one day descend from above and bring freedom to all who were trapped underground. This long-foretold angel was what the wings on the Delta Rune were said to represent.

As 2B struggled against the shockwave and was thrown backward by its force, the strange winglike aura around her vanishing as quickly as it had appeared, Chara wondered…

Was the angel one of life, meant to liberate the monsters down here by tearing apart the Barrier?

Or an angel of death, fated to free all dwelling in this mountain from their mortal coils?

No matter. She couldn’t keep up with the sheer force. She was still standing, leveling her blade at Chara with icy eyes, but her legs were buckling. Chara stepped forward as she collapsed in front of her friends, taking a deep breath to regain their bravado. If 2B were an angel, then Chara would be the slayer of angels.

A chill ran up their spine. The voice that had been whispering, screaming, and laughing in the back of their head grew louder until it drowned out their own thoughts… and Chara felt themselves move, unbidden, guided by an invisible will.

Chapter End Notes

"What did it cost?"

"Everything."
I believe it's now time to show off a little something I commissioned a friend for not too long ago:

Art by: Patrick Robinson
Chapter Summary

After Chara's ascent, a young woman awakens in a white void with no memory of how she got there... or who she is.

Chapter Notes

(musical accompaniment)

When she woke up, she stood in a white void. The floor beneath her, forming a tight corridor in the emptiness, was a flat and featureless gray. She looked around, blinking a few times to see if clearing her eyes would make any details of her surroundings clearer. It didn’t. There weren’t any details.

She looked down at herself, holding out her hands. Her body flickered rapidly, appearing translucent against the featureless floor. Form-fitting black clothes and a short-cropped blue jacket clung to her body.

She plucked at the collar of the jacket. There was a tactile sensation there, a feeling of something beneath her fingertips, but it was hollow and indistinct.

Odd.

Maybe she was dead.

“Well, that should do it. Diagnostics look fine. Boot sequence passed...”

A voice carried through the void, echoes fading into the still air. The voice of a young man—scarcely more than a boy—that was to her ears maddeningly familiar in its tone and cadence. She wanted to call out to it but wasn’t sure what to say.

Boot sequence. Was this a computer program?

“2B, how are you feeling? We had to do some repairs and—”

Repairs? To what? This place?

Who was this man speaking to? She looked around, glancing over both shoulders in turn, but saw no one else in the vast wasteland.

It must have been her he was speaking to, then.

2B.

She rolled the name around in her mind. It sounded odd but felt right.
“Can you hear me? 2B?”

2B tried to speak up, but her voice only ran through her mind.

“Yes. I can hear you—”

There was a name she wanted to say, but it vanished as soon as she got to it. A weight settled in her chest.

The voice’s owner did not seem to have heard her. “C’mon. Open your eyes. Say something. 2B…” His voice faltered and cracked a bit at the end, and 2B felt a twinge of sympathy. Whoever this man was, he obviously cared about her. Did the strange force squeezing her chest mean she cared about him, too?

2B rubbed at her eyes, but nothing changed.

“I’m here. Can you hear me?”

The voice did not return.

As an overbearing silence settled over the void, 2B decided to walk down the narrow corridor that stretched out in front of her. The path began to widen.

“Um… 2B? I… I couldn’t sleep.” This wasn’t the young man. It was a young woman’s voice, soft, high-pitched, and hoarse. “Is it okay,” she whispered, “if… if I just sleep next to you tonight?”

This was a voice she recognized, too. Someone she’d wanted to protect…

2B went on, picking up her pace, striding through the empty landscape. The corridor began to twist and turn at perfect right angles, depositing her onto larger squarish platforms of the same featureless material. White cubes, textureless and devoid of any markings, littered the floor. 2B ran her hand across the edge of one and felt nothing but a gentle resistance pushing back on her fingertips.

“Please wake up soon, 2B. Nines isn’t the same without you. And I miss you too.”

This was the voice of a much younger boy, still a child. Nines… was that the name of the young man? Or the girl?

2B must have been asleep—and she must have been asleep for a long time. That made this…

What was it called when you saw and heard and felt things while asleep?

A dream?

2B kept going. With every new voice she heard, she felt something intangible return to her, although she couldn’t put her finger on what it was. Nevertheless, the pressure she felt building in her chest felt oddly intoxicating, and despite its discomfort, she craved more of it.

“Good morning, 2B. Still asleep, I see? I do hope you are comfortable, my child.”

That voice belonged to an older woman. Soft, soothing, calming, but with an unsettling air of false cheeriness. She was trying to convince 2B everything was okay.

No, she was trying to convince herself. Deep down, she was afraid for 2B.

A chill ran up 2B’s spine. What did the older woman know that 2B didn’t? Her breath halting in her
throat, 2B picked up the pace, going from a loping stride to a brisk trot.

“2B… don’t get mad at me, but I—”

It was the young man again. He sounded even more distressed before. Almost as if he was shivering, barely able to keep his teeth from chattering.

“I hacked into your systems and copied over a bunch of your combat programming. I need to be strong enough without you…”

The tight, viselike pressure squeezing 2B’s chest became a sharp ache. She could hear the fear in his voice. He was afraid for her, but not only that—he was afraid for himself. He was doing things he knew he shouldn’t be doing out of desperation.

He was in danger. And he needed her to be there for him.

Combat programming, he mentioned. That meant 2B was a warrior.

She had to get out of here. So she could fight for him. So she could look after him. Stop him from doing something foolish.

(He was always doing something foolish.)

2B started running. There were no forks in the path ahead; as much as it wound around and around, 2B could do nothing but follow it. Follow it she did.

“Can you hear me? We want you to wake up…”

The child again. More frightened than before. Did all of the people here depend on her?

And how long had she been asleep? How was time passing in this vacant, colorless netherworld?

“I brought you a Lunar Tear from the garden, 2B.”

It was the girl again. The one who hadn’t been able to sleep. 2B could hear her sniffing back tears.

“Do you like it? Remember when you found that desert rose for me after 27O dumped me? Haha… I guess that was the other 2B. Sorry.”

The other 2B? What did she mean by that?

“2B, please, say something. I—I’m sorry. I’m sorry I let you get hurt.”

The young man again. He was choking up—2B could tell he was trying with all his might not to cry. She could almost see his silver hair, his blue eyes… and wanted to see a smile on his face again.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t—we couldn’t fix you properly,” he said. “I-Is that what’s wrong?”

2B felt her blood run cold. He thought it was his fault. That somehow, she’d been damaged—severely, severely enough to bring her here and keep her trapped—because of something he’d done, or maybe something he hadn’t done, and it was tearing him up inside.

(Because I was always there for him, no matter how much it hurt.)

2B picked up speed, the pressure in her chest growing stronger and stronger, her breath growing shorter.
They needed her. They all needed her. She couldn’t keep them waiting—

2B felt her feet slip out from underneath her. She fell forward, clumsily windmilling her arms in a vain attempt to steady herself and right her footing. Her head slammed into one of the cubes scattered across the void, and as the sharp pain ran from her forehead to the back of her neck, throwing her thoughts into disarray, static danced before her eyes.

She hit the floor hard, wincing as echoing waves of pain ping-ponged through her head, hissing short, sharp breaths through gritted teeth. She shook her head.

She told herself she had to keep going. She told herself to stay determined.

But something kept 2B from standing up, deadening her legs.

“Good evening, my child.”

The old woman again. She sounded much calmer now, her voice still a bit saccharine and syrupy. 2B wondered… was this woman her mother? Did 2B have a mother?

“I wondered if you might like it if I read that story you like to you,” the woman said. “Here we are. Chapter one…”

2B wanted to lie there and keep listening, but the old woman’s voice began to fade away before she could begin the story.

The ache in her chest grew sharper and stronger, nearly unbearable.

(Don’t leave me alone.)

“H-Hey, 2B. N-Nice to, uh, see you again?”

This was a new voice. Quiet, timid, a little nasally. This girl stumbled and tripped over every other word she spoke.

“I—I really hope I didn’t m-mess up repairing anything. You were in p-pretty bad shape. Oh, and Undyne says hi.”

Undyne.

2B closed her eyes and tried to focus on that name, tried to put a face to it.

Something came to mind. Blue and red.

And anger. Boundless anger. Fury in a single yellow eye.

(We first met three times. Once, she hated me enough to kill me. Twice, she loved me enough to kiss me. The third time, she became my best friend.)

A fragment of a memory. 2B had leaped in front of someone, a sword in her hand.

She had felt something strange welling up inside her. Something she couldn’t explain. Something that told her, not in words, that she would be strong enough.

But the pain had been like nothing else.

“She can’t be here, but she’s trying to keep you guys safe,” the timid girl said. “She’s doing her
best, so hang in there.”

Doing her best. That was right. Undyne always did her best. Whatever she had to do, she gave it her all, never backed down, never went easy.

2B forced herself to her feet. She wouldn’t wallow here. Her friends wouldn’t want her to. Alphys had worked hard to fix her, and she would make sure none of that work would be in vain.

She could see their faces in the fog that had once been her memory.

Steadying herself with her hands planted on the scattered cubes as she willed her legs to move, 2B pulled herself forward.

A field of black monoliths drew nearer, all of them floating in a regular grid half a meter off the ground, casting soft shadows on the floor. As 2B stumbled along, she reached out for the monoliths, leaning on them to keep herself upright. As she passed them by, fragments of sights and sounds fluttered through her mind.

“You can’t hear me right now, can you, 2B?” The girl from before, the one who liked flowers. She was whispering into 2B’s ear, wherever she was. “I, um... Well, if you aren’t listening, I shouldn’t be so nervous. I... er, um, n-n ever mind.”

2B closed her eyes and sighed. It was obvious what the girl wanted to say. Why not just say it?

(All those times 6O had come crying to me over her latest bad date, she really wanted to ask me out, but lacked the courage.)

(I knew but was afraid to acknowledge it.)

(At all, anyone who got close to me suffered for it.)

“Hello, 2B! It is I, your favorite skeleton, Papyrus! I heard you were having trouble waking up, so I made a special meal just for you! It’s spaghetti made with the hottest peppers I could find! Here, have a bite!”

At that, 2B couldn’t help but smile. What a shot in the dark.

Everyone had their own way to try and bring her back, didn’t they?

Revitalized, 2B started running through the forest of monoliths, her legs pumping, her muscles straining, stumbling a little at first before regaining her stride.

The silver-haired young man’s voice echoed through the void again. He was close to tears, hardly able to contain the sobs wracking his body. “2B, p-please, I—I don’t know how many more times I can—This is all my fault. I’m so sorry. I miss you so much. I need you. I need you so much. 2B, just please say something, anything, let me know...”

2B sped up. It was going to be okay. She wasn’t going to let that silver-haired boy with the blue eyes suffer anything.

He was lost without her, and she was lost without him. But they would find each other soon enough. She was going to see his smile again.

“2B... I do not know what might be wrong with you, but I know you are trying very hard to come back to us. Do not give up, my child. You must stay determined...”
2B wouldn’t leave Toriel alone, either. That poor old woman had lost so much already—she adopted everyone who came her way, even someone as wayward as 2B had been so long ago—even though so many of them departed as suddenly as they came. She would not lose another child. 2B would make sure of it.

No more heartache.

“2B, I can’t stand it anymore. Wake up! Just... please, please, 2B, show me there’s somebody in there. Show me I haven’t lost you.”

He began to wail. Her Nines, her precious Nines, her little brother, crying his eyes out.

“I—I can’t make it on my own. I can’t be strong like you.”

His agonized sobs cut through 2B like a knife. “Do you blame me? Is that it? Is that why you won’t come out? Is this all my fault? Answer me! Answer me, damn you! Just open your fucking mouth and SAY SOMETHING!”

2B sprinted across the impeccably-organized rows of black monoliths, pushing herself to run faster and faster.

“I’m coming for you, Nines!”

This maze had to have an end somewhere, an exit somewhere, something somewhere to take her home. Everybody who loved her had worried about her long enough.

She was coming back for everybody. But especially for 9S, who needed her more than anybody else.

The endless rows of monoliths fell away as 2B rushed down a narrowing corridor floating in the vast white emptiness, rushing toward—

A dead end.

The flat gray floor came to a dead stop, hanging over an endless chasm.

No.

2B skidded to a halt just before the corridor did, staring down at the infinite white depths.

It couldn’t be.

She couldn’t have come this far for nothing.

Everyone... Everyone who needed her... She couldn’t wait here another moment!

But where could she go now? What way was there but back?

“Who are you?”

This voice did not echo through the void from a nebulous source, as the voices of the others had. This one came from directly behind 2B, cold and flat, with an unfriendly iron edge to it. But it was her voice nonetheless.

2B looked back over her shoulder as a silver-haired woman in an ornate black dress leveled a white sword at her, her mouth drawn in a stern frown. Underneath her snowy bangs, a black blindfold covered her eyes.
“You. Identify yourself.”

2B slowly turned around.

“I’m… 2B?”

_Normally, we would call you something else,_ somebody said, _their stern and officious voice drifting through 2B’s mind, but for this mission, your designation will be 2B._

The other woman was nonplussed, swallowing a knot of surprise as her hidden eyes met 2B’s. “I find that hard to believe.” She took a step forward, keeping the tip of her blade aimed squarely at 2B’s chest. “YoRHa Number Two, Type-B is _my_ designation.”

Then… if this woman was 2B… who was _she_? Had those voices _not_ been calling out to her after all? But the ache in her heart when she heard all those people had felt so real… and she knew their names… and she could almost see their faces if she just _focused._

‘No. I—I’m 2B, too.’

“What are you doing here?”

2B paid the abyss stretching in all directions beneath her a passing glance.

“Just passing through.”

“But you have nowhere to go.” The other 2B took another step forward, her sword held out; as the tip of the white blade came nearer, 2B stumbled backward, feeling her heels slip on the edge of the precipice behind her. “Our kind never do.”

As the words left the other 2B’s mouth, a wave of static swept through 2B, a pulsing, throbbing ache pounding in her head. An unfamiliar memory drifted through her mind—one that felt more real than anything else in this blank, featureless world.

She was kneeling over Nines, laying her gloved hands on his cheeks and slowly, softly, as gently as she could, lowering them to his neck, her thumbs slotting neatly into the contours of his throat as though they belonged there. A crystalline growth crept across his soft, fair skin, glittering in the daylight; his eyes burned scarlet, the glow an unmistakable death sentence.

His voice was a pitiful, agonized squeak. “2B… you have… _to do this for me_...”

She closed her eyes and squeezed until she felt the mechanisms in his throat begin to give out. It was easy like she’d done it dozens of times before; but hard because she had never wanted to do it again. Nines gasped for breath and gurgled helplessly beneath her as his components began to overheat, his writhing growing weaker and weaker beneath her until eventually, he went limp.

2B brought her hand to her face in a fruitless attempt to staunch the flow of tears streaming down her cheeks, her other hand clutching at her chest.

“It always ends like this,” the other 2B intoned, stepping closer. “We have nothing and nobody. We long for comfort only from the ones we destroy; we have no solace but to scream and cry out… in silence.”

“No.”
2B shook her head.

“I have people… people who need me…”

“We are alone. We are *always* alone.” The other 2B’s blade drew closer, its tip lightly brushing against 2B’s throat. “Nobody needs us. We prefer it that way.”

2B resisted the urge to take a step backward, knowing nothing but an empty abyss waited behind her. “It… doesn’t have to be that way.”

The other 2B’s face, stoic and blank, showed no sign that she had heard anything.

“You don’t have to be alone.”

2B stood up, wiping away her tears, and offered her hand to the other 2B. “You’re the *other* 2B, right? The one from the surface?”

The other 2B flinched.

“Come with me.”

“There’s no point in going on.” The other 2B gestured with her sword to the dead end lying behind 2B. “Surely even *you* can see that.”

“There’s always a point in going on.”

The other 2B stared at 2B’s hand.

“We’ll find another way out.”

Silence and stillness filled the void.

“You want to see *him* again too, don’t you? Come with me.”

Dropping her sword at last, the other 2B reached out and took 2B’s hand, threading their fingers together.

The next thing 2B knew, the other 2B had wrapped her arms around her, burying her face in her shoulder and sobbing. 2B cradled her head in her hand, and as the two mirror images embraced, one faded away, relieved at last of eternal agony and an impossible burden.

Once the ghostly, insubstantial body of her doppelganger had disappeared, 2B stood alone. With a resigned sigh, she turned back to face the end of the line and wondered what to do next.

As if on cue, the corridor behind 2B that had once been a dead end lengthened, joining to an island far off in the distance. Heartened, 2B ran across the bridge.


2B had work to do.

“I’m coming, everyone! I won’t leave you to struggle without me!”
In the center of the isle, a wisp of pale bluish flame hung in the air. 2B slowed her pace as she approached, reached out for it, and let the wisp curl around her hand. It was hot but did not burn her.

2B stared down at the fluttering tongue of flame as she cradled it in her hand like a baby bird.

“Is this… the way home?”

The fire answered. She heard it in her own voice.

_This is your determination._

_This is what allows you to cling to life._

_This is what allows you to remake the world again and again and again._

Down here in the Underground, that simple word, _determination_, seemed to have almost arcane connotations, intoned like the name of an ancient, long-lost magical art.

“The resets… this is why they happen?”

_All souls have determination. Most, merely a spark. Yours carries a flame._

“What is it? A blessing? Or a curse?”

_A blessing._

_Those you love are ephemeral._

_They die by your own blade._

Toriel staggering backward with blood gushing from her throat. 2B hadn’t known any better; had mistaken her overprotective frenzy for aggression.

In the next life, 2B welcomed her embrace.

_(She was kind to me when I still thought I was beyond kindness.)_

Undyne crumbling away with hate in an eye that had turned jet-black, furious to the end. She had taken from 2B what was most precious to her, and 2B had paid her back in full.

In the next life, 2B dated her.

_(Just once. And we were better off as friends.)_

Nines. Where to begin with Nines? Nearly fifty times he had died by her hand. Because she followed orders. Because she had no escape. Because it was for the greater good.

But in the next life, he lived. 2B made sure of it.

_(I would throw myself into Hell itself to protect him.)

_(I have.)_

_But with determination, you can restore those who die by your hand to life. You have the power to save what you destroy._
“But I can’t reset again. I can’t erase so much. The friends I’ve made… the family I’ve found… I can’t bear to start from scratch again.”

A fragment of memory came to 2B.

I was weak and tired. I felt as though every bone in my body was broken. The slightest movement was agony, yet I could not lie still. We had been routed, we had all incurred severe damage, and with our tails between our legs, we ran to the only part of the kingdom we knew would be safe.

It wasn’t until we were on the boat back to Snowdin that Undyne finally broke down under the weight of her loss. I had never seen her cry before, and felt the overwhelming urge to comfort her, to staunch her tears as if I were stemming the flow of blood from a fresh wound, because she cried the same way I did.

Those were the tears you cried when you couldn’t keep putting on a strong face for the world.

Not knowing what else to say, I told her what I could do for her. That if I were to die, time would be reset to the day I had first entered the mountain, nine months ago. Everything that had occurred in that timespan would be undone, good and bad alike, and everybody’s memories would be erased, save for myself and 9S…

But Asgore would still be alive.

I asked 9S to back up his memories to mine, took Undyne’s wrists, and guided her hands to my neck.

I gave her my permission to kill me.

She looked me in the eyes, horrified, and her hands slipped away from my throat just as gently as my consciousness slipped away from me.

That is the last thing I remember.

The flame spoke again.

Did you think that was all you could do?

It has felt like a curse to you only because you have used your determination purely out of desperation.

You have never honed it as you hone your blade.

You have never studied how to anchor yourself in the river of time and command its eddies and whorls around you.

With time, you could make it a sword that would never dull or a shield that would never break.

2B seemed to remember Flowey once mentioning that he could travel through time, but that she had somehow stolen that ability from him. If anybody could teach her how to use this power, it would be him. It was enough to make 2B almost barely regret having killed him—although she doubted any circumstance in the world would have convinced Flowey to be so altruistic.

“How would I learn that?”
With time.

It was a cheeky, infuriating non-answer, the kind that drove 2B crazy, so she decided not to continue that line of questioning.

“Where did this determination come from?”

When you crossed the Barrier, something within it resonated with your soul.

A small piece of magical energy from the Barrier, the remnant of an ancient ritual performed in the days long before history when men still knew magic, left another fallen child and bound itself to you instead. The Barrier saw you and made its choice.


The Barrier marked each one who fell in its own way, but none the way it has marked you.

For in you, it saw your secret anguish.

The endless spiral you relived, day in, day out.

And it granted you your heartfelt wish to break it.

The wisp of bluish flame curled up in 2B’s palm, feathery tongues of flame fluttering against her skin. 2B curled her palm into a fist, letting sparks fly between her fingers, and closed her eyes.

“You have wandered long enough.”

That voice did not come from the flame in her fist. 2B whirled around to face its source and saw a hooded figure flanked by three others on each side, seven in all. Chains bound their bodies, wrapping and criss-crossing around their arms, binding their chests, threading between their fingers, dragging behind them.

The central figure spoke in a low, gravelly voice. “Your time in this netherworld is at an end, 2B.”

“And we need you,” one of the other hooded people said, “to free—”

One of the others elbowed them in the side. “Quiet, Orchamus. 2B, your friends need you. It is time to return to them.”

The man in the center of the lineup stepped closer reached out, and laid a gloved hand on 2B’s forehead, the metal chains crossing his palm in an X cold against her skin. “The connection is strengthening. Soon, your soul will return to your body. Stay determined. The azure spark you hold in your hand will carry you to the end, but only if you accept it.”

Commencing System Check
Memory Unit: Green
Initializing Tactics Log
Loading Geographic Data
Vitals: Green
Remaining MP: 100%
Black Box Temperature: Normal
Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
2B opened eyes that felt as though they had not been opened in years, fighting every step of the way. It was like trying to operate unoiled machinery. Not that it made much of a difference—they were barely anything to see. Wherever she was, it was dark.

“N…”

Her voice came out a hoarse and raspy whisper, her tongue lying thick and heavy in her parched mouth.

“Nines…”

Pod 042’s synthesized monotone voice greeted her as it hovered over to her. Its flashlight cast long shadows around the room, providing at least some light for 2B to see by. “Good evening, Unit 2B. You have been inactive for forty-seven days, ten hours, twenty-three minutes, and fourteen point five seconds. Proposal: run an intensive data consistency check to ensure all subsystems are properly functional.”

2B wiped the gummy, caked-on rheum from her eyes and sat up, propping herself up with her elbow. She was lying in a queen-sized bed under a thick, soft layer of blankets. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom pervading the room where the light from her pod didn’t reach, she noticed she had been brought to the spare bedroom in Toriel’s house. What’s more, at some point she’d been dressed in her pajamas—to make her more comfortable, probably, although 2B wouldn’t have noticed either way. (Nevertheless, it was still a thoughtful gesture.)

“Hello, Pod,” she croaked, patting Pod 042’s shiny silver hull as it hovered in front of her. “I missed you.”

“This unit was also distraught in Unit 2B’s absence.”

2B rubbed her eyes again. “I didn’t mean to make you worry. I—” She lost her train of thought as the rest of what Pod 042 had said sank in. “Forty-seven days?”

“Affirmative. Unit 2B fell offline on July 27, 11945, at 11:13 AM. It is now September 12, 11945, 9:36 PM. Repairs to critically-damaged motor and life support systems were completed on August 6; Unit 2B was subsequently rebooted, but remained unresponsive in low-power mode until now.”

An entire month and a half. No wonder 9S had started to lose it. She had to see him at once. 2B willed unused joints and servos into action, pulling off her blankets and swinging her legs over the side of the bed. Her entire body felt stiff. “Pod 042, is 9S here?”

“Negative. Unit 9S departed with Pod 153 twenty hours ago to gather data. This support unit will send a message and inform him of your recovery.”

“You let him leave?” Judging from the last outburst she’d heard, 9S was on the verge of a
breakdown, if not in the *middle* of one. The idea that he could be off on his own doing god-knows-what set 2B’s teeth on edge.

No matter. As soon as Pod 153 relayed the message to 9S, he’d drop whatever he was doing and head straight home.

If he could.

2B stood up. As she did, she noticed something brush against her cheek and fall to the floor. She crouched down to pick it up.

A Lunar Tear, its ivory petals still faintly shimmering. 2B held the withering stem between her thumb and forefinger. She’d have to thank 6O for that.

Speaking of which… was she okay?

And Toriel, too. And Asriel, and Alphys, and Undyne. Were they all safe?

“Pod.” She coughed into her hand, her voice still hoarse. “I need a thorough debriefing. What’s the situation?”

Before Pod 042 could answer, the door to the bedroom swung open, bathing the room with light.

2B was far too groggy to prepare herself for what happened next. Before she could react, she found herself lifted right off her feet and smothered under the softest, firmest hug she had ever gotten as Toriel buried her snout in her shoulder, one paw cradling the back of 2B’s head and the other supporting her waist.

Toriel was too busy crying to say anything at first; as for 2B, she was rendered mute by the sheer pressure exerted on her body, the fact that she’d somehow ended up with a mouthful of Toriel’s ear doing little to help matters.

“Oh, 2B! My child! We’ve all been so worried! Please, tell me you are feeling okay! Is there anything I can get you? Food? Water?”

“Mmph.”

“Oh.” Toriel let 2B down, stepped back, and tried to fix 2B’s hair. “I am sorry. I just…”

2B tried to clean the fur out of her mouth. “N-No, I understand. Are you in any danger—”

With reckless abandon Toriel hugged her yet again, once more smothering her, this time burying 2B’s face in her shoulder. “Oh, goodness!” she sobbed. “We were all so frightened for you, but we knew you would never give up! Please, dear, if there is anything I can get for you—food, water, a change of clothes, run a bath—do speak up!”

“Mmph.”

Pod 042 circled the two of them. “Observation: Unit 2B is currently unable to speak. Proposal: remove blockage from mouth.”

Toriel set her down yet again. “Ah, once again, please accept my apology. I have simply been…” She sniffled, her face scrunching up.

The next time Toriel tried to hug her, 2B managed to muster enough agility to dodge.
2B cleared her throat. “Water would be fine. But in the meantime, I need to debrief—”

“2B? Is that you?”

_Oh, no._ 2B thought as 6O careened into her and began bombarding her with kisses, covering both her cheeks and her neck, and actually managing to plant a few on her lips (and an equal amount of kisses, which 2B assumed were by accident, on her nose, forehead, and ears) as well. The next thing she knew, 2B had fallen over back onto her bed, 6O’s onslaught tickling her skin so much that she couldn’t help but laugh so hard she couldn’t move, let alone breathe.

Toriel cleared her throat. “Ahem. I-If you two are going to… erm, um… conduct yourself like that… I believe I shall escort myself out,” she told 2B, shuffling out of the room. “Pod, if you would be so kind as to grant them their privacy?”

As soon as the door swung shut, leaving the two androids alone in a pitch-black room on top of what must have been the warmest and softest bed in the world, 6O let go of 2B. “Um… s-sorry, 2B. I guess I got a little carried away. Are you okay?”

A few residual laughs forced their way out of 2B’s system as she caught her breath. Her chest hurt, but it wasn’t the kind of pain she would normally be concerned about. It was a bit like the fresh, exhilarating ache that came after a strenuous workout. She wondered how red her face must be. “I’m fine, 6O,” she said. “As you can see, I’ve survived worse.”

6O laughed and hugged 2B again. “I know! It’s just that… I thought I’d lost you, back when—when the Bunker—a-and then I found you… and then—and then—I thought I’d lost you again!” she cried out, gratefully running her fingers through 2B’s tangled hair as tears of relief rolled down her cheeks. “I—I know you p-probably didn’t think you mattered s-so much to me, but—it took so long to fix you and even then you wouldn’t wake up! 9S and I were both starting to think we’d never hear your voice again…”

“It’s okay,” 2B told her, patting her on the back as she cried onto 2B’s nightshirt. “Everything is going to be okay. At least you didn’t try to throw a lamp at me this time.”

“I—I’ll try to remember to do that next time,” 6O said, hiccuping. “I know how much you value consistency.”

“Speaking of consistency…” 2B said, “it’s been a while since our last regularly-scheduled contact, hasn’t it? Operator 6O, tell me what’s been going on while I was away.”

“There’s the old 2B! All business, all the time!” 6O reached out and turned on the lamp at 2B’s bedside.

Now that she could get a good look at her, 2B noticed that 6O was wearing her hair down in lieu of her usual braids, letting long, rail-straight locks flow over her shoulders. It was a jarring change, and if 2B hadn’t heard 6O’s voice first, she might not have even recognized her—YoRHa reused faces often, and units rarely experimented with their hairstyles.

“Are you _sure_ you want to know _right now_, though?” 6O asked.

“Are things _that_ bad?”

6O wrapped her arms around 2B, nuzzling her neck. “It’s just—wouldn’t it be nice to just… enjoy not _worrying_ about anything for a few minutes?”

“No,” 2B said. “In fact, I’d worry more if I thought you were afraid to tell me what’s going on.”
What could have been going on while 2B had been inactive? Was Chara still king? Did Toriel and Asriel know what had happened to Asgore?

“Afraid? No, no, I’m not—Well… um… things aren’t really good…” 6O admitted, “but we’ve been taking care of ourselves well enough. Emotions run a little high sometimes, but that’s the worst of it.”

“Oh. Good. And 9S? Has he been holding up?” 2B already knew the answer, but wanted to hear it from 6O. If she didn’t confirm what 2B had heard while asleep, then 2B would know that 6O wasn’t being honest with her.

“Well… he’d stay by your side all the time for the first week after we finished your repairs. At night, he’d sit next to you and hold your hand until morning. It was really cute…” 6O sighed, holding 2B closer, her cheek pressing against 2B’s. A faint floral scent clung to her soft skin. “But after a while, it really started to get to him, seeing you like that,” she told 2B. Her hand rested on top of 2B’s, fingers brushing softly against and lightly tickling her skin. “I mean—it got to all of us, but especially him…”

Poor Nines. It was easy to see why he’d blame himself—he’d fallen for Chara’s machinations hook, line, and sinker, but he’d been one hundred percent confident he’d outfoxed them… and 2B had trusted him completely. 2B and everyone else.

He had to have blamed himself for all of it—for Chara to deal such a debilitating wound to 2B, for Chara to get their hands on 6O, for Chara to kill Asgore and nearly kill Undyne—

And for 2B to leap ahead and take the blow.

2B had hardly known what she was doing—only that something deep inside her was telling her she would survive it.

_Nines, you idiot, self-loathing is my job._ 2B closed her eyes and bowed her head, clasping 6O’s hand in hers and wishing 9S could be here at her side as well.

“So he started spending more and more of his time outside,” 6O said. “He wouldn’t tell us what he did while he was away, and he never came back with any serious injuries, but… he’d always come back really exhausted.”

That seemed to fit the tone of 9S’s increasingly-desperate outbursts, or at least, the ones 2B had heard while she’d been trapped inside that netherworld.

A chill ran up her spine as 2B recalled that 9S had mentioned something about loading Type-E protocols from 2B’s own operating system into his own.

She sat up, her eyes flying open, all but throwing herself out of bed.

“2B?” 6O asked. “I-Is something wrong?”

“I need to see 9S. _Now._” 2B stood up and started rooting through the bedroom for her clothes. She didn’t have a moment to lose.

Because 9S had done something extremely dangerous and incredibly stupid.
Consumed with guilt and hatred, 9S sets out on his own and strikes back against Chara's regime.

Even after 9S had opened his eyes, he still had trouble understanding what had just happened.

There had been—a gust of wind, like all the air pressure in the city just dropping in an instant, he’d felt his ears pop—

There had been a deafening boom. The ground had shaken.

“2B!” 6O shouted out, clinging to his side.

2B. Where was she? She’d been right here next to 9S just a second ago—

There she was, standing in front of Undyne. *(No one stops—but here, now, despite her best intentions, Undyne had.)*

2B stood like a crumbling colossus, swaying on weak and unsteady legs, her arms crossed and her golden sword braced against her forearm in a defensive reverse grip.

Across the street—

Chara Dreemurr.

Even at this distance, 9S could see a flash of shock in their single remaining eye.

2B shifted to a combat stance, shifting the grip of the sparkling Joyeuse as a kaleidoscope of colors danced on its blade and leveling its tip at Chara.

Chara took a step back, their own massive gold sword falling to their side.

“Nines… Undyne…” 2B huffed, her breathing shallow despite her defiance, “*take 6O… and run.*”

“2B, wait!” 9S let go of 6O. “*You can’t—Not alone!*” She was still weakened from the stab wound in her stomach—even with the entry and exit wounds sealed, there was still internal bleeding to be concerned with, and the blood she’d lost wasn’t anywhere near being fully replenished, never mind what might have happened when her sword and body had absorbed the brunt of that shockwave.

2B looked back at him, her weary face framed by wild and disheveled snow-white bangs, and smiled a shaky and confident smile.

She made a single half-hearted lunge forward before every part of her body went limp.

9S and Undyne caught 2B as she collapsed, still conscious (but barely). Pod 042 was
already rattling off diagnostic errors in its impeccably monotone voice, mentioning disruptions in her circulatory system, multiple hairline fractures running through her chassis, and a dozen other points of failure at such a rapid pace that its voice began to overlap with itself.

Emboldened, Chara strode across the street, hefting their blade. 9S grabbed his own, some small part of him hoping maybe he could parry the next strike without being torn nearly to pieces, but as he raised his blade a burst of static and a flurry of error messages ran through his HUD, accompanied by a wave of stinging pain that engulfed his body from head to toe and brought him to his knees. Whether it was a side effect of whatever that cursed knife had done to him, or simply bad timing, 9S felt helpless in a way he hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

9S would never forget what Chara had said as they’d stood over him and 2B, ready to end all of their troubles with a single casual swing of a sword.

How they had looked away, their eye meeting 6O’s fearful gaze and the cold and stern grit in their face—so much like Commander White’s infamous glare, 9S had observed—melting away.

And spoke four words that changed everything.

6O…

It’s

me—

Lucky!

As 9S puzzled over this bizarre statement, Chara doubled over, groaning and clutching at their head, their fingers digging so deep they left welts in their skin. 9S’s first thought was that Chara had been infected with a logic virus—but as scarlet as their eye was, there was no bright red light in their pupil that would indicate that affliction. This was something else—their stolen body’s original consciousness reasserting itself, maybe?

“I… I don’t know how long I can stay in control. You guys… 6O, 9S, 2B…” Chara’s voice was soft and weak, their breathing shallow. There was a quaver in their voice as it cracked and broke. “Run—while you still can…”

They had run.

For the next forty-seven days, 9S would run.

▫▫▫

For the past forty-seven days, 9S had been running.

Running first to collect the materials to help Alphys repair 2B—not the best materials to work with, admittedly: pale imitations of YoRHa android components fabricated in secret and under cover of darkness—and trying to ignore how sacrilegious it felt to cram substandard parts into 2B’s body and pray for a miracle.

Running next to gather data on Chara’s new regime—its strengths, its weaknesses—houndedy all the while by the king’s Royal Guard, who could no longer be placated, even as Undyne did her best to
run interference using her position as Captain. With no backups and no wealth of replacement parts to rely on, a tapestry of scars grew on his body as a testament to the risks he took and the battles he fought.

Running *now* to run *away*, because gazing at 2B’s face, soft yet blank, warm yet cold, living yet dead, day after hopeless day, had become to 9S a kind of personal hell.

“Pod, scan for black box signals again.”

Pod 153 took a few minutes to run its scans. 9S stuffed his hands into his pockets as he waited. “*C’mon... C’mon...*” He tapped his boot on the ledge and stared down at the cluttered street twelve stories below, lit by the glow from streetlamps as the luminous stones set into the ceiling of the cavern far above dimmed to approximate encroaching nightfall.

Everything looked more or less the same as it had two months ago. 9S wished he could say he could almost smell a moral rot pervading the air that had taken hold of the city ever since Chara Dreemurr had murdered their father and taken control of the Underground. But he *couldn’t*. The city still smelled like a million different kinds of food and a little bit of garbage, same as it always had.

Things had seemed much simpler back on the surface. In war, you *knew* your enemy. Sometimes you gained ground, sometimes you lost ground, sometimes you got stuck in a stalemate, but machines were always machines and androids were always androids.

Down here, though?

Some monsters who’d spent their entire lives as subjects under King Asgore fell in line under Chara without question, many praising them as some sort of “angel” figure; some monsters did so grudgingly, muttering their reservations under their breath even as they bent their knees; some snarled in defiance; and others just... carried on as if nothing had changed, whether out of denial or resignation.

9S wanted to grab some of these monsters by the shoulders and shake them until he could hear their brains rattling in their skulls. Didn’t they know who their *enemy* was?

Pod 153 let out a soft chime, breaking 9S out of his reverie. “Scan complete.”

At last, the results of Pod 153’s scan popped up on 9S’s visor. Nothing new—two black box signals in the Ruins, one black box signal on the rooftop where 9S was currently standing, and one black box at the castle where Chara sat on their ill-gained throne.

The six signals from the black boxes Asgore had harvested over the centuries were *still* gone.

9S had noticed it the first time he’d poked his head out of the Ruins, about a day after he and Alphys had finished their repairs to 2B.

Undyne had been the one with the plan, which had taken both 9S and Alphys by surprise. 9S would use Pod 153 to scan for the black boxes and point out the location of the six to Undyne. Undyne would creep into the castle (easily enough with the rank and security clearance level afforded to her as Captain of the Royal Guard), steal the six black boxes, kill Chara stone dead with extreme prejudice, and take all seven souls to shatter the Barrier and free the kingdom. Toriel could take the throne if she liked, everyone could move to the surface and relieve the kingdom of its overcrowding problem, and (while there were still plenty of dangers on the surface, even though 6O had said the machine network had been severely crippled) everyone could live happily ever after.

But wherever Chara had hidden those black boxes, they weren’t showing up on scans anymore.
9S had tried again and again. He had tried running scans from various vantage points throughout the kingdom. Every time, he’d come up short, much to Undyne’s mounting frustration. (“I’m sick of having to pretend to lick this bastard’s boots, Nines,” she’d hissed at him one night during a clandestine meeting.)

He couldn’t fathom how the signals had vanished. Had Chara removed the black boxes from the stasis tubes Asgore had been keeping them in, effectively taking them off of life support and reducing them to inert hunks of machinery? (Too risky—what if they couldn’t be powered back on when the time came to use them?) Or had Chara figured out some way to cloak the unique signals they emitted? (Unlikely—not without Alphys’ willing help, and most certainly not in such a short time frame.)

Nothing made sense.

And of course, 9S couldn’t spend nearly as much time as he’d like getting to the bottom of this mystery because—

“You there! Stand up! Put your hands above your head!”

9S sighed.

Because this happened.

This was the normal routine. Go out, do some research, get caught, run back home.

Still, nineteen hours outside of Toriel’s house before getting spotted was nearly double his previous record for excursion lengths. Time to go home—

For what?

So he could spend another few days sitting next to 2B’s bed and waiting for her to wake up?

9S had to accept the truth. Every time he’d hacked into her, had laid her systems bare, he’d searched for some spark of awareness inside her, some sign that there was still capacity for thought behind blue eyes he hadn’t even seen for nearly 50 days. But he’d never found anything. He had to face facts—the lights were on, but there was nobody home.

2B was gone. And as much as Chara had struck the final blow, 9S shouldered the blame as well—for being so cocky and self-assured, for always getting himself into trouble, to always force 2B to leap headlong into danger to protect him—

But she wouldn’t come to his rescue this time. And that was his fault.

His fingers were starting to feel itchy again anyway, the combat protocols he’d copied off of 2B’s comatose body and installed to his own operating system sending anticipatory tingling through his skin. He’d never felt so ready for a fight. He knew androids were programmed to love combat, even ones like him, but this—it was on a different level altogether.

He wanted to make these bastards pay.

He’d kill Chara, even if it meant dying in the process, even if it destroyed the kingdom’s last hope for breaking the Barrier and leaving this wretched mountain. *Fiat iustitia, et pereat mundus.*

9S glanced over his shoulder. Just one member of the Royal Guard in a dark gray cloak, clasping a cutlass in a shaking hand. He’d come up the stairwell to the roof and was now blocking the door—if
9S wanted to get down, he’d have to choose between the stairs or jumping off the side of the building. The guard was trembling, a nervous grin stretched across his wide, sallow amphibian face. He probably wasn’t as alone as his demeanor let on, unfortunately.

9S stood up straight, lowered his hood, and pulled off the simple mask he’d been using to hide his face (these days, it was dangerous to go around baring a human face in the kingdom), hooking it onto one of his belt loops.

“I said hands above—”

“Yeah, yeah.”

As he raised his hands, 9S used his NFCS to summon a sword to each one—in his right hand, his own sword, the Cruel Oath, its black hilt and coppery blade as familiar as an old friend under his curling fingers; in his left hand, 2B’s sword, the Virtuous Contract, registered to his NFCS in her stead.

The NFCS, or Near Field Combat System, varied in its permissions between YoRHa models. Non-combat models, such as Type-D and Type-S models, were allotted a single weapon registered to their system at any given time. Type-O models, who never even left the Bunker, had no NFCS installed at all. Most combat models, like 2B, could use their NFCS to store and carry two weapons simultaneously.

9S had hacked into his own systems and boosted his NFCS’s range to hold up to six weapons at a time.

This way, he had thought as he’d transferred combat data from 2B’s body into his own and taken her swords, you’ll still be with me, 2B.

But up here, he still felt so alone.

His reflexes and the strength of his synthetic muscles heightened by the Type-E combat protocols augmenting his Scanner protocols, 9S whipped around and with a single blow tore the cutlass from the guard’s slick, webbed hand. His second blade trailing behind the first cut the monster across the chest, easily penetrating his cloak but meeting unexpected resistance beneath.

He may have had the instincts of a combat model now, but 9S still had the keen eyes of a Scanner, and beneath the torn cloak he saw…

“What the hell?”

The cloak sloughed off the froggish guard’s shoulders to reveal what looked suspiciously like heavy armor intended for YoRHa combat units. But that was nuts, because first off, where the hell would anyone down here get their hands on YoRHa combat armor, and second, all YoRHa combat units were female—so why was this armor tailored to fit a short, slightly-doughy frogman?

Alphys must have snatched the blueprints while Pod 042 and 153 had been feeding her information on android construction, probably out of nothing more than curiosity. It seemed Chara’s regime had forced her into building these suits for its jackboots.

Well, that was great.

The frogman’s mouth twitched again, then shot open, a long pink tongue whipping out from the gaping pink maw and hitting 9S square in the chest with all the sting of a whiplash, tearing away a part of his coat as it came free with a sickeningly wet sucking sound. As 9S reeled back, the guard’s
tongue wrapped tightly around his right wrist, cutting into his skin—and then the frogman leaped a full five meters up into the air on thick, springlike legs and sailed over the edge of the roof.

The slimy, sticky tongue went taut. 9S chuckled and raised the Virtuous Contract, ready to bring it down on the poor bastard’s tongue and cut himself free. “Dumbass!”

It was then that 9S’s feet left the roof and he careened to the edge himself, tumbling through the air as the tongue tying him went slack. The froggish guard lay on the wall of the skyscraper below—for a split second until 9S swung through the air, then he was above—hands and feet splayed and stuck to the rough bricks as if glued to them.

9S felt himself swing in an arc around the guard, the wind rushing in his ears, his hair and coat flapping. “Pod! Target and fire!”

Pod 153, though struggling to keep up with him, heard 9S’s command and opened fire, its bullets glancing off the frog guard’s armor at first but soon reaching his head and shattering it like an overripe melon. The rest of his body crumbled to dust, leaving nothing but an empty suit of armor that fell to the street below.

The tongue wrapped around 9S’s wrist crumbled into dust as well. He had little time to celebrate his freedom, though—his angular momentum was still carrying him through the air. As he careened through the air he held up his arms and braced himself, squeezing his eyes shut.

9S crashed through a window and tumbled through a long hallway, skidding on a rough carpet until he came to a stop, littered with chips of broken glass. He stood up and dusted himself off.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up as a chill ran down his back, and 9S stepped to the side just as a broadsword swung down to cleave him in two.

So there were Royal Guards down here, too.

9S ran the first guard through with one sword, lifting them high into the air and letting them slide down the blade before their body disintegrated and their armor fell to pieces, his muscles burning under the strain of the guard’s weight.

Undyne had made 9S promise not to kill any monsters, not even ones loyal to King Chara. Monsters were still monsters, after all, no matter who they bowed to.

Fuck that.

Chara had taken 2B away from him, and with each passing day, it became clearer that she wasn’t coming back. Not only did Chara deserve to die, but the lives of anyone who bent their knee to them didn’t mean a damn thing to 9S either. He’d slaughter all of them if he had to, no matter what Undyne said.

And if 2B really was gone for good, then 9S wouldn’t stop once he’d finished dealing with these guards. He’d cut a path of destruction right to Chara’s castle and make Chara’s death slow and painful, no matter how many stupid magic swords they’d collected—and damn the consequences, damn whatever fate awaited this kingdom next! 2B had been his older sister, his rock, his everything—and 9S was going to take everything away from Chara!

The remaining guards fell back as gunfire rang out from behind 9S and bullets whizzed over his shoulder, glancing off their armored chests.

“Observation: enemies appear to be wearing equipment designed to imitate YoRHa heavy armor,”
Pod 153 offered. “While less resilient than authentic armor, the utility of long-range combat systems is highly reduced.”

“No, really? I hadn’t noticed!” 9S gritted his teeth and plunged toward the other guards as they blocked the open stairwell at the end of the hallway. C’mon, Alphys. You must’ve built some fatal flaw into these things in case I ran into them, right?

Throwing out his hand, 9S hacked into one of the guards’ armor, overjoyed to find not a single firewall or other defensive measures in the suit’s software components. How could he have ever doubted that Alphys would give him a backdoor? Deactivating the environment sensors in the guard’s helmet and leaving them deaf, blind, and dumb until the suit rebooted gave 9S a delightfully sadistic rush.

“Pod! Blade!” 9S barked, grabbing Pod 153 by its arm as a short, broad energy blade projected in front of it, tearing through the blinded guard’s armor like a hot knife through cold butter. The other guard came up behind him; Pod 153 slammed into the side of their head with a mighty crack as it continued to travel along its arc.

As the stunned guard reeled, 9S grabbed them, pulled them in front of himself like a living shield, and hurried down the spiral stairwell, his loud footsteps echoing across the walls. How were there so many enemies here waiting for him? Had he been tailed here without realizing it? They must have followed him here and set up an ambush behind him…

“You won’t get away with this!” the captive guard bellowed in a thin and reedy voice, squirming under 9S’s grip. “Mark my worms!”

“The phrase is ‘mark my words,’ pal,” said 9S.

“I know what I said,” the guard retorted, yanking off his gauntlet and throwing a handful of worms in 9S’s face.

And handful was the right word, 9S realized as he wiped the slimy, dirt-covered invertebrates off his face, the guard slipping out of his grasp. The guard’s right hand was missing, more pinkish-gray worms pouring from his wrist and writhing in a puddle on the floor.

“Ugh… eew… oh, god… fuck…” 9S moaned as he reeled back, spitting out dirt and writhing earthworms that had gotten in his mouth, brushing off the worms stuck to his skin—there was one trying to worm its way under his visor, even!

“You get ’em, Jim!” one of the other guards came out.

The rest of “Jim” the guard’s armor collapsed, revealing underneath an enormous segmented worm covered in smaller worms that had approximated a humanoid shape, its skin a translucent pinkish-gray with twisted organs visibly pulsing beneath it.

The giant worm moved with astonishing swiftness, wrapping itself around 9S’s legs and chest and pinning his arms to his sides. As Jim reared back his head, a circular mouth wide enough to fit 9S’s entire head inside and lined with blunt, bumpy “teeth” opened up at the front of his featureless “face.”

For the first time in his life, 9S realized that earthworms actually had fine, bristly hair covering their slimy bodies. He probably would have found it an interesting factoid for him to remember later if a giant worm wasn’t about to grind his head into a pulp.

“You’re one ugly motherfucker,” 9S gasped, cringing as more tiny worms carried themselves off of
Jim’s main body and began wriggling into his coat.

“I’ll make you eat those worms!” Jim boasted, just before Pod 153 hit him with a barrage of bullets and tore his head to shreds, killing him instantly and freeing 9S.

With the earthworm monster dispatched, 9S shrugged off his queasiness and swapped to the Joyeuse, a much heavier sword with greater cutting power, and hurried down the stairs. One of the two guards standing in his path raised a long poleaxe, but before they could strike, 9S buried the shimmering blade of the Joyeuse in their torso and wrenched it free with a shower of blood that almost immediately dried into fine white dust as it made contact with the air.

Conjuring an old and rusted black spear he’d found deep in the kingdom’s unexplored caverns, 9S planted it against the stairs and vaulted over the still-standing guard in front of him, slinging the spear like a javelin to impale another guard waiting on the landing below through the chest, then grabbed the guard he’d landed behind by the arm, twisted their elbow, and shoved them over the railing. They let out a trailing scream as they fell down the stairwell, their armored body occasionally colliding with the railings below with thud after thud until finally, with a sickening and meaty crack, they hit the ground floor.

9S’s next enemy was waiting for him on the next landing, optical sensors blazing green under a hooded red cloak, scaly claws and a lashing reptilian tail poking out from the cloak’s decorated hem, and a long and barbed harpoon in the guard’s hand with a long chain dangling off its end.

His next weapon to deal with this foe was a rusty single-edged greatsword, nearly as long as he was tall, its bronze blade wickedly-curved in what felt like a sinful scream captured in metallurgy. 9S prepared to tackle the last guard blocking his path to the ground—

That was when every muscle in his right arm burst into flames at once.

9S screamed and fell to his knees, letting go of the sword and clutching at his elbow where the pain was most intense. The burning feeling—white-hot, as if molten iron was coursing through his veins—traveled from his wrist up to his shoulder.

“Alert: Muscle structure of Unit 9S’s right arm has become inoperable due to extreme overuse. Proposal: avoid further combat and seek repairs immediately.”

9S gritted his teeth. It hurt so bad he could barely even breathe, could barely even think.

Was it the Type-E protocols he’d installed? Trickling him into pushing his body beyond what it had been designed to handle? He’d been warned that Type-S models had weaker endoskeleton and chassis construction than combat models, let alone Type-E’s, and weaker muscles as well—

The enemy he’d been about to slay drove their barbed javelin into 9S’s shoulder, the pain of the blade piercing his flesh mingling with the burning agony infesting his muscles.

9S planted his boot on the guard’s chest and shoved them back, then grabbed the javelin’s wickedly-hooked blade with his free hand and snapped it in a tightening grip, the fragments of the blade lacerating his fingers; letting his injured arm hang at his side, he grabbed hold of Pod 153 and tossed himself over the railing. The hovering pod allowed him to slow his descent enough so he would float gently onto the concrete floor far below, landing right next to the guard he’d thrown to their death.

The sound of his remaining foe’s clawed feet stomping on the stairs as they descended on him echoed through the stairwell, pounding in his ears like a migraine set to a beat. Before the guard could catch up with him, 9S pulled up his hood, put his mask back on, and bolted out of the building.
The streets were as chaotic as ever, and even more so once 9S had hacked the traffic lights and brought the entire block to a gridlocked standstill; it was easy to get himself lost in the crowd and stay that way until, a few blocks away, he found a suitable alley to duck into and lay low.

9S caught his breath and pulled off his mask, yanking the fragment of the blade from his shoulder—it had stuck in his chassis but hadn’t pierced it—and cradling his still-throbbing, still-burning arm. He slumped against the dirty brick wall and curled into a ball, trying to massage the pain out of his arm and plucking out any errant worms still stuck to him. His flesh felt tender, almost spongy under his touch—the muscles were tearing away from his chassis and drifting unmoored beneath his skin—literally coming apart at the seams. The rest of his body ached, too, and he wondered if his legs might be the next parts to go. If so, the Royal Guard wouldn’t need to work very hard to catch up with him.

He hacked into himself, deadening the pain receptors in his right side to dull the pain and disabling the motor systems in his arm so he wouldn’t accidentally put them under any further strain. Oh, man, Nines, you fucked up bad, he thought. 2B… if you were still around, you’d scold me and call me an idiot. But then we’d limp back to safety, and when we were out of harm’s way you’d hug me and tell me you were glad I was safe. That’s how it’d go… if it was the two of us.

If you were still around…

One lonely night, in an attempt to comfort him, Toriel had told 9S a story about a princess who had once been cursed to fall into a deep sleep. The princess had remained in such a state for one hundred years before true love’s kiss had awakened her at long last.

Although he’d felt a little silly, 9S had given it a try, waiting until everybody was asleep before creeping into the bedroom, brushing the hair out of 2B’s eyes (so the first thing she saw if she awoke would be her brother and not her own bangs), whispering “I love you, 2B” into her ear just for good measure, and laying a soft, gentle kiss on her lips.

Nothing had happened.

Maybe “true love” only referred to romantic love. Maybe the love a boy had for his sister just wasn’t “true” enough.

Or maybe it had just been an asinine, insipid story for children.

“Pod,” he said, his voice hoarse, his throat tight and scratchy, “search for and play back a recording of 2B’s voice.”

“Statement: search results indicate the presence of 1,502 results within audio mission records. Proposal: narrow search terms.”

“Find…” 9S took a deep breath. “A few months ago, I said to her, ’I can really be an idiot sometimes.’ And then she said…”

“Searching.” Pod 153 waited a few seconds. “Record found. Beginning playback.”

“Yes,” 2B said, her voice—stern, but soft—reproduced with almost-perfect fidelity by Pod 153, “but you’re my idiot.”

9S had felt his black box grow hot in his chest when she’d said it. She’d acted like she hadn’t said anything afterward—just an awkward slip of the tongue from a woman who still couldn’t bear to admit how much she loved him, who’d still shouldered the burden of her misdeeds on her own—but 9S could never forget that moment.
His chest contracting, his throat tightening, hot tears welling up in his eyes, 9S buried his face in his sleeve.

“End playback,” Pod 153 said, its normal voice restored.

“Play it again.”

“Inadvisable. The psychological effect of this recording seems to have the opposite of its intended effect. Proposal: seek out Doctor Alphys for emergency repairs—”

“Play it. I want to feel like… like she’s still here…” He could barely stop shaking. “Please, just… Just…”

A pair of cold mechanical arms wrapped around 9S’s waist as Pod 153 pressed against his chest. “Emotional instability detected. Implementing regulatory procedures. Statement: there, there.”

“Oh… Oh, geez. 9S curled up and wrapped his own arm around the pod in turn, hardly able to breathe, let alone speak as he cradled its hard, sleek black hull. This was what he was now: so fucked up he needed his pod to give him hugs.

“Incoming transmission from Pod 042.”

9S swallowed the lump in his throat and squeezed his eyes shut, fearing the worst. This is it. She finally shut down. I’m sorry Alphys and I couldn’t fix you properly, 2B… I’m sorry I got you into this mess… I hope I’ll see you again soon. Wherever you are.

If he had to make his last stand here, then he would make it here and take as many of Chara’s goons down with him as he could, and even Chara himself if he could. And he would hope that wherever he went when he died, he would find 2B’s spirit and they could stay by each others’ sides forever.

But if this really was his last day… he wished he could spend it at 2B’s side.

“Unit 2B has successfully rebooted,” said Pod 153, “and is now fully conscious.”

9S seethed. “Those bastards… I’ll make them all pay—”

9S’s ears caught up with his mouth.

“Wh… what?” he asked.

“Repeating message: Unit 2B has successfully rebooted and is now fully conscious.”

“W—Well, don’t just—” 9S wormed his way free of Pod 153’s grip, his black box hot and fluttering in his chest as he leaped to his feet. “O-Open up a communications channel!”

Pod 153 lifted itself up, hovering at eye level. “Connecting.”

9S couldn’t believe it. He was almost afraid to feel happy. But 2B was back. She was back. Just when he’d given up hope, just when he’d lost his faith—

“Message forwarded from Pod 042. Unit 2B is currently occupied. Proposal: leave a message.”

“Occupied?” 9S felt like somebody was playing ping-pong in his chest, back and forth, back and forth. Was 2B okay or wasn’t she?

“Statement: Unit 2B’s attention is currently being monopolized by Operator 6O and Pod 042 has
explicit orders not to disturb them. Pod 042 will relay any message from Unit 9S at the earliest
opportunity. Proposal: leave—"

“All right, all right!” 9S snapped, feeling just a little jealous that 6O got to be the first person to see
2B up and about. “Start recording! I—oh, god, um—”

“Recording initiated.”

9S took a deep breath. “Um—2B, I—”

What would he say? What could he say?

He’d been so sure he would never see 2B again that he’d been willing to throw his life away. He
was…

“I—I’m a fucking dumbass, 2B. I’m on my way home right now. Don’t worry about me. I—I’ll see
you soon, and—” He was going to cry again. Weird how every emotion could make you cry in just a
little different way if you felt it strongly enough. He’d started to think he would never be happy
again, but here he was…

9S let the tears fall as he blubbered out the rest of his message. “And, 2B, I—I love you so much.
I’m so glad you’re okay. I love you. I love you and I’m sorry—Y-You know what, let’s save all that
shit for later. I’m coming home, 2B, so—so just sit tight and… S-See ya soon!”

Wiping away his tears, 9S felt almost giddy as he left the alley. 2B was back, and he was going to
see her again soon! All he had to do was make it home in one piece—not hard if he was quick on his
feet and didn’t overexert himself —and then…

He heard the sharp sound of a bladed weapon cutting through the air just a second too late; a slender
javelin with ridged barbs on its blade cut through his calf and shin, burying its tip in the concrete. 9S
struggled to remain upright as a lingering jolt shot through his leg and glanced over his shoulder. A
long chain trailed from the end of the javelin up to the same red-cloaked Royal Guard thug he’d run
into in the stairwell. The crowds readily parted around 9S and his mysterious pursuer.

9S reached for the javelin and pulled it out of the ground, trying to slide it out of his leg—but the
barbs on its blade dug painfully into his flesh.

“Sure did a number on my boys, android.” The attacker lowered their hood and flung aside their
cloak, revealing beneath it a snake-woman with iridescent scales wearing a heavily-modified suit of
YoRHa armor (sans sleeves, for some reason, letting scaly, lithe arms glisten in the streetlights). A
black blindfold was wrapped over her eyes like a parody of a YoRHa visor.

Her forked tongue flicked in and out of her mouth as a long, muscular tail undulated behind her, and
with an artful flourish, she bowed. “Lieutenant Snaca of the Royal Guard. I’ve been looking forward
to meeting you, 9S!”

9S snapped the javelin in two, allowing him to grab the end with the barbed blade and yank it out of
his leg from the other direction; blood soaked his pant leg as the tunneling wound bled freely, but at
least now he wasn’t pinned down.

Self-preservation instincts overcoming the dregs of his last combat high, 9S booked it, ordering Pod
153 to lay down suppressing fire behind him as he ran. But Snaca closed the distance between the
two of them with astonishing speed and coiled a limber, snakelike arm around his neck, choking him.
9S felt his trachea close and struggled to breathe, stale, hot air building up in his chest as his organs
tried in vain to vent waste heat through his lungs.
Pod 153 floated nearby, wringing its claws in vain. At such close quarters, it couldn’t target Snaca without putting 9S’s own safety in jeopardy, and with Snaca’s flexible arm choking him, 9S couldn’t issue any commands to it.

Snaca’s other arm curled around 9S, the curved, fang-like talons capping her fingers framing a gaping pink mouth set into the palm of her scaly hand and dripping with venom. The hand, like the head of a cobra, reared back, letting 9S get a good look at its gaping gullet as it prepared to strike.

9S braced himself as best he could. Even if this snake had real venom in those fang-talons, it couldn’t actually do anything to him, could it?

Then again, some organic substances were said to have weird effects on android physiology. He’d once heard a rumor that if an android ate any part of a mackerel, for example, some unique chemical in the fish’s flesh would immediately congeal all of the blood in their body and kill them within minutes.

The one thing that would be for certain was that this would fucking hurt.

“This,” Snaca hissed, her forked tongue tickling his earlobe, “is for Jim—and all the other patriots you’ve murdered!”

She plunged her talons into 9S’s left arm, letting blood gush from the thick puncture wounds in his forearm.

As error messages flickered across his HUD, 9S stared at the bleeding holes in his arm, dumbfounded, a haze engulfing his mind that deadened the pain to a dull throb. The blood and coolant running from his wounds began to bubble and fizz, whipping itself into an almost-pinkish froth as it trickled down his arm.

In spite of himself, in spite of the muscular coils crushing his windpipe, 9S almost giggled. His blood was fizzing up like a can of soda someone had shaken up. And all the pain was fading away and he felt... good, somehow, soft and warm and cozy and good as his eyelids grew heavier and his vision grew fuzzier and grayer and his legs began to wobble beneath him; he felt like he could fall asleep right here…

2B… I have to get back… to 2B…

But... just a... little nap first... might... be... nice...

It’s... almost... my bedtime... anyway...

Before his eyes fell completely closed and his systems overloaded (but in such a soft and fuzzy way), 9S glanced to the side and thought he saw, mingled in the crowd, a familiar flash of red hair and blue scales. His spirits lifted even as he sank into unconsciousness.

Un... dyne...

Did you come here to save me?
Chapter Summary

As Undyne learns of her role in Chara's plan and grapples with her conflicting duties to her friends, her loved ones, and her kingdom, she finds herself in the throes of a crisis of faith.

Chapter Notes

All right, we're caught up with 2B and 9S, let's see what Undyne's up to...

Nothing calmed Undyne’s nerves quite like piping-hot sea tea (although people gave her weird looks when they saw her putting the normally-chilled drink in the microwave and nuking it to her preferred temperature). A glass of slightly-luminescent filtered marsh water, flavored and garnished with mint, was the signature drink of Waterfall, and with a steaming mug of the stuff clutched in her hands, Undyne finally safe.

Gerson bit into a crab apple, his beak cutting a neat wedge out of the tiny, sour fruit. “You’re givin’ me a weird look here, Undyne.” He squinted at her. “Looks like… there’s a lot on your mind. And it’s not something you can tell your girlfriend.”

“Yes, Alphys has enough on her plate,” Undyne admitted. “She’s anxious enough about her own problems; I don’t want to throw mine on top of all that.”

Gerson nodded. “Well, grasshopper, what’s wrong?”

“It’s…” Undyne tried to collect her thoughts, taking another gulp of boiling tea and letting it scald her gullet. “Ugh. I just…”

For years, Captain of the Royal Guard had been Undyne’s dream job.

Now it was a waking nightmare.

She stepped into the throne room—as always, half-expecting to still see Asgore there watering his flowers or taking a tea break in the corner—and as she crossed the threshold, felt a chill run up her spine as her chest contracted around her heart and lungs.

Chara Dreemurr lounged on the throne, one leg casually crossed over the other, their jeweled black sword resting in their lap. As always, a surprisingly-modest tiara encircled their head—Asgore’s crown was too big to fit their human-sized head—and a floral eyepatch that looked like it had been plucked from Asgore’s own garden covered the grievous burn that had taken their right eye.

Undyne had heard jokes about people wanting to murder their own bosses her whole
life, but had never understood them until now.

Since the day Chara had struck down Asgore, she’d had half a mind to quit, and another half a mind to murder Chara on the spot, and those two halves warred with each other every time she looked them in their stupid, smarmy face, but both of her go-to solutions presented a whole host of problems she was doing her best to keep in mind.

One, if Undyne left the Royal Guard, whoever moved up to fill her position might actually do their job the way Chara wanted it done instead of the way it was supposed to be done, and if Undyne wanted to keep her friends safe—if she wanted to keep this kingdom from transforming into something nauseating, something she wouldn’t recognize as home—that couldn’t happen.

Two, Chara was fucking terrifying. Their host of magical swords notwithstanding, sometimes Undyne wondered if maybe they had taken Asgore’s soul for a power boost, because something radiated off of them that made Undyne, despite herself, want to run away as fast as she could. It was something that made her feel sick and weak and powerless and not herself.

“Well, Captain…” Chara cleared their throat. “Do you know why I’ve called you here?”

Undyne felt her spirits sink. After what she had done on the day of Chara’s coronation—

*The day Asgore was murdered—*

Chara had every reason to fire her—execute her, even. Had they finally brought her here to do that to her?

(“Fire you?” they had asked her, the day after their coronation when they had called her to the throne room for the first time. “Why on Earth would I fire the strongest and most capable captain the Royal Guard has ever had?”)

“No, sir,” she answered.

“By royal decree, the possession of a YoRHa black box is a crime.” Chara lazily picked at their fingernails. “As I understand it, none of the people in this kingdom charged with that crime have been apprehended as of yet.”

“Look, those things could be anywhere in the kingdom. Doing a thorough sweep takes time—”

“And you have had time.” Chara stood up, their royal robes, violet with ornate gold trimming, swirling around their thin body. “World enough and time, Undyne.” They stepped down from the throne. “I gave you an opportunity I thought was quite magnanimous, especially given your previous insubordination and your, I can’t help but suspect, loyalty to the ancien régime. Retrieve just one black box—not even all three of them—and I would let you take the seven souls and destroy the Barrier. I would let you become the god of the new world. But it feels to me like you’re dragging your feet. Don’t you even want freedom?”

Of course she did. *No one* wanted to be stuck down here forever. But killing good people just to escape wasn’t something Undyne could stomach. How dare Chara needle
But why was Chara giving her this ‘opportunity?’ What was in it for them?

“We’re doing our best,” Undyne insisted. A flat-out lie. It was all she could do to not spit it out at them like a curse. *I’ll retrieve a black box from your disemboweled chest cavity,* she raged in her head. She just needed to find out where Chara was hiding the other six, then she’d kill them in their sleep and rip out that black heart of theirs.

“Undyne? You all right, kiddo?”

At the sound of Gerson’s voice, Undyne felt her composure return to her; closing her eye and taking a deep breath to calm her nerves, she forced herself to focus on where she was.

As if it wasn’t bad enough having nightmares at night—now she had them during the *day.*

The back of Gerson’s little shop in Waterfall was a safe space. It always had been. Undyne still remembered being ten years old, standing in this very room, the warped and waterlogged wooden floorboards—salvaged from a sunken human ship, or so the legends said—creaking as she excitedly rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet and awaited her first day of “hero training.” She tried to focus on those days. This was a place where she was supposed to feel like she could do anything.

“Yeah,” Undyne muttered. “I’m fine.”

“It’s about work, I bet,” Gerson guessed. “New boss must be a real pain, I’d imagine!” He let out a wheezing, bitter laugh.

Undyne could only sigh.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to make light of this.” Gerson took a sip of his tea. “Y’know… I’m surprised you haven’t quit.”

*Me too,* Undyne wanted to say. “Someone’s gotta keep the Royal Guard honest,” she replied.

“Honest, eh?” Gerson shrugged. “Pretty noble of you.”

“Yeah,” she said.

Undyne had a lot of pride wrapped up in the Guard. She couldn’t stop Chara right now, but she *could* keep a leash on the people in her ranks who supported them. She wouldn’t let the Royal Guard she had idolized, the Royal Guard she had clawed her way to the top of through sheer grit, turn into a bunch of thugs at the beck and call of a megalomaniac. No matter what Chara did, no matter how zealously this kingdom took to their twisted ideals, she’d keep its soul intact so that when Chara’s reign came to an end (soon), things could go back to normal.

“Your best needs to be *better.* Undyne…” Chara stepped down from the throne, their footfalls echoing through the silent hall of the throne room. “I need you to understand the gravity of our situation. The human race is long extinct. Now even YoRHa is destroyed, and with it, every android who possesses a black box… save for our little fugitives. Do you *realize* that, Undyne?”

“That… That’s…” She knew about the logic virus from 6O, but surely if 6O and 13B—Chara—had been spared its ravages, there could have been others. “You don’t know that for sure.”
“We can’t just wait until someone who deserves to die falls down here, Undyne. That was what Father wanted to do, and his reluctance would be our downfall.” Chara sighed. “I know it must be hard for you. I know 2B and 9S were your friends. But this is our last chance. If we do nothing, our race will outgrow our prison and suffocate to death within a generation. We hold the weight of the world on our shoulders, and it’s a burden we can’t afford to cast aside.”

Chara stepped closer, close enough to for Undyne to punch them if she wasn’t rooted to the spot. “Or is the looming extinction of monsterkind not enough incentive, Undyne?” they asked, a quiet fury building up in their voice. “Are you not concerned that our kingdom will die in darkness? Do you need the stakes to be more personal?”

“That’s not—”

“What would the children think, Undyne, the ones who follow you around and cheer for you, if you were stripped of your rank and ejected from the Royal Guard? Or is there something else you’d rather lose? Or someone else?”

You bastard! Undyne wanted to shout. It was bad enough that Chara could threaten her job or her life—if she were pressed to give those up for a noble cause, she could. Papyrus, though? Alphys?

Undyne knew she wasn’t the only one being pressured like this. Alphys wanted to resign as Royal Scientist, but Chara had threatened to prosecute Undyne for her actions on the day of Chara’s coronation if she did; the poor girl couldn’t sleep, could barely eat, and her scales were losing their luster under that kind of stress. If Chara was using Alphys to threaten Undyne now… well, wasn’t that poetic?

Undyne wasn’t sure she was being honest with Gerson, or with herself. The truth was—there were a lot of different parts of her tugging in different directions.

She wanted to stay in the Royal Guard because if she didn’t, who knew what hell someone like Snaca could unleash if she was bumped up to fill Undyne’s position?

She wanted to stay in the Royal Guard because kids looked up to her and she didn’t want to betray them and break their hearts.

She wanted to stay in the Royal Guard because she’d paid with blood, sweat, and tears to get that position and she wasn’t going to let some scrawny usurper force her to give it up.

She wanted to stay in the Royal Guard because it gave her the opportunity to guide its investigations away from her friends and keep them safe.

She wanted to stay in the Royal Guard because it kept her close to Chara, so she would finally be able to kill the shit out of them when the time came.

She wanted to stay in the Royal Guard because she wanted to have a hand in freeing her people—saving her people.

She wanted to stay in the Royal Guard because she was altruistic, because she was selfish, because she was prideful, because she wanted the glory, because she wanted to be a hero, because she wanted to save her kingdom, because she wanted to save her friends…

But she couldn’t be all those things at once anymore. She couldn’t do what was best for everybody and what was best for herself at the same time. She couldn’t save her kingdom from its encroaching
extinction and save her friends at the same time.

And it was tearing her apart, eating away at the core of her self just as surely as Chara’s piercing scarlet glare did.

Holding her tongue and swallowing her rage as Chara threatened her loved ones, trying not to glare at Chara and clench her fists so hard they bled, was the hardest thing Undyne had ever had to do. Yet still, something slipped out. “After what you did to Asgore, how dare you take the moral high—”

Chara stepped back, crossing their arms and raising an eyebrow as Undyne struggled to tame her tongue and contain herself. “No, Undyne. By all means, finish that sentence.”

Undyne bowed her head. “No, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

Chara reached out and laid a hand on Undyne’s shoulder. “You have to believe, Undyne, that I didn’t want to kill Father.” Their voice had dropped to a tender whisper. “If it had been up to me, he would be spending his retirement in a lovely garden right now. But he forced my hand.”

You chose to kill him, bastard, and everybody knows it. Undyne shook her head. She could feel the ache in her chest growing stronger and harder to ignore, the way it always did whenever someone brought up Asgore.

“You have to understand. Asgore would have let his own people rot to spare his guilty conscience,” Chara insisted. “He never had any intention of following through on his plans and you were all going to burn for it. He couldn’t face the truth and do what needed to be done.”

“That’s not true…” Undyne brushed Chara’s hand off her shoulder none too gently, betraying her true feelings. “Asgore would have—”

“If he’d wanted to free you, he could have taken one of the black boxes he’d collected at any time and harvested the rest from the surface, then broken the Barrier. He could have freed you all two hundred years ago if he’d wanted to.” A single tear dripped down Chara’s cheek, even as their fist trembled at their side. “I loved him dearly, Undyne, believe me,” they choked, their emotional display seeming almost genuine, “but he betrayed his people—he betrayed you—and I couldn’t forgive him for that.”

Undyne recoiled, as if Chara’s words had wounded her. There had to be a good reason for Asgore’s inaction. He couldn’t have been so cruel. That wasn’t the Asgore Undyne knew! She couldn’t believe he’d just lie to his kingdom, to his people, to her like that!

“Undyne… Captain Undyne…” Chara leaned in, wrapping Undyne up in a tender embrace, and laid a hand on her cheek.

Undyne could feel her breath freeze in her lungs as icy tendrils of fear wrapped around her heart. She tried to quell it. She was Undyne, dammit, the strongest monster in the kingdom! She couldn’t let this—this murderous usurper—give her a panic attack! She was supposed to be better than that! What would 2B think of her if she could see her like this? What would anyone think of her?

“I need you,” Chara said, “to be the hero this kingdom needs. The hero this kingdom deserves.” Chara leaned in closer, the petals of the flower covering the burned and
scarred part of their face where their right eye had once been tickling Undyne’s cheek. “Prove to me…” they whispered in her fin, “that you will make a beautiful god.”

Undyne wanted to free her people. She wanted to free her people! But…

She thought she’d known what heartbreak felt like before. She knew now. That feeling you got in your chest when a girl you’d been dating for months decided not to show up for dinner without even texting you and left you waiting in front of a basket of breadsticks all by your lonesome was nothing compared to facing the slow collapse of everything you believed in.

All she’d ever wanted to do was beat up the bad guys and protect the good guys. Why were things so complicated now? Why couldn’t things be simple, the way they’d been before Undyne had ever met 2B and 9S? Why did they have to be the root of her problems, when they were all such good friends?

And why…

Why would Asgore…

How could Asgore…

“So… you need my advice? Or just a shriveled old shoulder to cry on?” Gerson asked, sliding a box of tissues across the table. “I’m always here for my star pupil.”

Undyne grabbed a fistful of tissues and scrubbed away her tears. “I guess… I wanna talk to someone who knew Dad.” She struggled to force out the words—they caught in her throat. “Chara… says so many horrible things about him. Things I can’t believe. That couldn’t be true. But their followers just repeat them like they’re the gospel truth! It’s not fair!”

“Well… I dunno how much of what that little shit’s been saying was true. But Asgore was a complicated guy. It’s easy to see why people might think less of him if they don’t know him well.” Gerson took a long, slurping sip of his tea, emptying the glass and leaving cloudy ice cubes to clink together like dice. “After we’d hollowed out the mountain and built up Home, he took me aside and admitted that it would be too dangerous for us to leave—the humans would just slaughter us if we did. I agreed with him. It took a pretty brave man to admit that—that we had to stay in our prison if we wanted to survive.”

Undyne reeled.

So Chara was… telling the truth?

That Asgore never intended to free us?

Her fingernails dug into the table.

It took a ‘brave man’ to keep us locked away in here?

He wanted to protect us from humans… but…

Gerson fidgeted, tucking his neck a bit into his shell. “But then, after his kids died, he changed—announced the whole ‘war on humans’ bit, got all fire and fury. You should’ve heard the speech.”

(“Rise, my people! Take your sorrow and turn it into anger! Our kingdom thirsts for the strength of its people! Glory to monsterkind!”)
“The old queen wasn’t the only person who thought he was being a damn fool for that,” Gerson admitted. “I felt a little betrayed, too, to be honest. It felt like a desecration of Asriel and Chara’s memories. Lost my faith in the man—ended up resigning on the spot.”

“But was he lying all along?” Undyne shouted out, not realizing until the words had left her mouth and rung through the humble shack that she had shouted them.

“Simmer down, kid.” Gerson shrugged and sighed. “Truth is… I dunno. These eyes can see the flaws in a gemstone, but not what’s in people’s hearts, and… really, I dunno if I knew Asgore’s heart as well as I thought I did. I like to think he came to his senses in the end. Remembered who he used to be, where his loyalties were. Not to monsters or humans… there’s more to the world than that.”

Undyne felt as though she’d been socked in the gut. To think that all this time, the only person who seemed to really want to break the Barrier was Chara—her sworn enemy, the killer of the man who had loved her like a daughter…

She couldn’t stop crying. She emptied Gerson’s box of tissues and it still wasn’t enough. All she could do was just sit there blubbering.

“Whoa, whoa, hey, Undyne—kiddo, you all right?”

I don’t understand, Asgore. I don’t understand anything anymore. I don’t understand Gerson, I don’t understand you, I don’t even understand me…

Gerson slid off his chair and circled the table, taking to Undyne’s side, wrapping leathery claws around her hand. “It’s gonna turn out okay, kiddo. That girl Asgore handed over to you before the duel… she all right?”

Undyne wiped her eye on her sleeve. “Yeah.”

“Good. You make sure she’s okay, okay? As long as you and her stick around, old Gorey ain’t gone from this world.”

Undyne nodded. Her final order from Asgore. As long as she followed it, a part of Asgore would live on.

“Y’know… I knew Chara, too. And Prince Asriel—I was his godfather. They hung out a lot here in Waterfall, actually. Buncha troublemakers. Royal pains in the ass, y’know?” A grin cut across Gerson’s beak. “Honest, I’ve been keepin’ a lower profile since Chara’s coronation, just in case they see me and remember the spanking I gave ’em when I found the brat trying to steal a bunch of old weapons from the Royal Guard’s armory.” He burst out laughing. “That kid and their swords. Obsessed with ’em. Gave ’em weird names and everything.” Gerson shivered. “Creep.”

That kid and their swords.

Chara let Undyne go and turned around, walking back toward their throne. “That is all. You are dismissed. I wish you happy hunting!”

Undyne caught her breath. “Wait, sir.”

Chara paused. “Yes?”

“Let’s say I fail. Let’s say I try to apprehend one of the androids and we end up killing each other.”
“Well,” Chara admitted, stroking their chin thoughtfully, “2B and 9S can be quite lethal adversaries…”

“You can’t just let any monster absorb the souls. Most of them couldn’t handle the determination.”

“Of course… you would be familiar with Alphys’ research, wouldn’t you?” Chara glanced over their right shoulder, remembered they couldn’t see out of that eye, and turned around to face Undyne. “Yes, it’s true. A monster of royal blood—or someone like you, who worked so hard to attain the same heights of magical power—would have to absorb the souls. And monsters like you are a rare breed. What would I do if I didn’t have you?”

At last, Undyne understood why Chara had spared her. Why they continued to allow her to serve as Captain of the Royal Guard. Gotcha. I’m too valuable for you to threaten, you fucking bastard. Try hurting Alphys or Papyrus if I don’t obey—I dare you. And try hurting me if Alphys hands in her resignation. We’ll wipe that smug grin off your face just like Asgore wiped off your eye.

Chara brandished their black sword. “This,” they said, “is Mourning Star, also known to some as Wormwood. When it grows sufficiently hungry, it can absorb the souls of its foes. If a living host for godhead is unavailable, this sword will do just fine. ” They gave the sword a few experimental swishes through the air, letting the giant fire opal at the base of its blade catch the light and sparkle with dazzling colors. “In many ways, a sword would be the ideal god. It does whatever you command without the slightest hesitation or protest. It never complains about your will, merely… follows it. Perfectly.”

“Oh, yeah? So why not just use Mourning Wood or whatever in the first place?”

Chara sheathed the blade. “I…” They closed their eyes and took a deep breath. “Would much rather have a carrot compelling me to greatness than a stick punishing me for insubordination, wouldn’t you, Captain Undyne?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.” Undyne made a perfunctory bow and retreated from the throne room as quickly as she could.

She wouldn’t realize it until long after she had exited the castle, but she didn’t take a single breath until she had returned to the bustling streets of New Home and headed off for Hotland. Her hands were shaking, her breath was short, and by the time she reached Alphys’ home to convalesce, her scales glittered with a sheen of sweat that had not come from the oppressive heat and humidity of Hotland alone. The castle that had once been like a second home to her was now a prison.

“Swords with weird names, huh…” Undyne took another sip of tea to calm herself down. “Does ’Mourning Star’ ring a bell?”

“Mourning Star… Mourning Star…” Gerson mumbled, tapping on his forehead. “Sounds familiar. Describe it to me.”

“Chara’s got it. It’s black. Kinda short. Big fiery jewel at the base of the blade—”

Gerson clapped his hands, the sound reverberating through his tiny abode. “I thought that trinket looked familiar!”
Undyne stood up, gripping the table. “You know it?”

“Know it? I know the guy who forged it!” Gerson answered, a strain of enthusiasm in his voice like a strain of rare jewels running through common earth as his scaly, leathery, wrinkly neck rose out of his shell. “Well, knew—he died during the war—but yes! That thing,” Gerson said, growing increasingly animated as he indulged in his archaeological passions—he always got so excited about treasure-hunting—“was supposed to be the ultimate weapon.”

“And that was a… you know, they were just calling it that for show, right?” Undyne asked. As if that magic god super-sword Chara had used to put 2B in that coma wasn’t bad enough…

“Nope, it was supposed to be the real deal.” Gerson’s tone changed from whimsical to morose. “King Telgore Dreemurr commissioned it during his reign when the hostilities between humans and monsters began to rise. But when war finally broke out, Asgore was king, and he forbade the sword’s use. When we lost the war, it was lost to the surface.”

“Why didn’t he let anyone use it?” Another example of Asgore being too soft to do what it took?

No, she couldn’t think like that. That was how Chara thought, and she couldn’t let them poison her against—

“Do you know how Asgore claimed the throne from his father?” Gerson asked.

Undyne shook her head.

“Of course. Ancient history. Well, King Telgore was a hothead, a warmonger. He knew a war was brewing, and he wanted to be the one to start it. So he had a contingent of the Royal Guard capture a family of humans who’d built a home in neutral territory and bring them to him. He killed them one by one with the Mourning Star, personally, and took their souls. The idea behind the sword was that once it had taken the souls, anyone could wield it and command that power—king or commoner. But…”

“But?”

“Telgore took the sword, admiring the glow from the five souls imprisoned within its eye as he wrapped his paw around the hilt.” Gerson’s leathery beak wrinkled into a bitter, sardonic grin. “And he died. Instantly. Big, eight-foot wall of solid muscle one second… a six-inch pile of salt the next. The souls the sword absorbed vanished into who-knows-where—maybe the sword ate ’em or somethin’. Turned out, wielding that thing still took a kind of strength the old battleax just didn’t have.”

There it was. At last, Undyne understood everything perfectly. So that’s why Chara’s saving that sword as a last resort. That’s why they’re trying to groom me into being their ‘god.’

They know that if they use the sword and it kills them, we’ll be back at square one and our people will be doomed.

That means I…

I have to find out what they did with the other six souls and take them for myself.

Or else I’ll have to…

“Magic swords. Pretty to look at, but never trust ’em,” Gerson scoffed, fiddling with a jeweled ring on his scaly, wrinkled finger. “If King Chara the Magnificent keeps playing with that stuff, well…”
who knows? Maybe you’ll have a new boss soon enough.”

Undyne let out a nervous laugh.

“Say, ain’t the Captain of the Royal Guard next in the line of succession? Considering, uh… y’know… Queen Toriel and Prince Asriel are long gone.” Gerson chuckled, wiggling his eyebrows. “There’s a certain joy, Undyne, in bein’ your own boss…”

Undyne felt her phone buzz in her pocket. “S’cuse me.” She fumbled with the phone and checked her recent messages. A couple of texts from Alphys—mostly frustrated emoji-spam (Undyne wasn’t the only one whose government job had gotten a lot tougher in the past month)—and a few selfies from Papyrus… and an update from the Royal Guard.

_Fugitive sighted in Hotland. Positive ID as 9S._

Undyne sighed. _Dammit, Nines, you don’t know what ‘low profile’ means, do you?_ Then again, it wasn’t like she was one to talk, considering how naturally grandstanding had always come to her.

That was the _second_ worst thing about this whole situation. She had to be all _clandestine_. It _sucked._

All right, Undyne. _Think tactical. How can you get them off his back without… getting them off his back?_

She sent the guards her commands. _Follow at a distance, but do not engage. Fugitive is definitely armed and dangerous._

_There you go, Nines_, she thought. _Don’t say I don’t stick my neck out for you, kid._ Now she had to catch up with whatever team was going after him and find some way to let him slip through their fingers with…

What was that phrase Alphys kept using again?

Right, right. _‘Plausible deniability.’_

Undyne stood up, shoving her phone back into her pocket. “Thanks for the tea, Gerson.”

“Always a pleasure to have ya, kiddo.” Gerson reached out and gave her a hug. He barely came up to her chest. “Ah, I remember when you were as tall as me. Time really does fly when you’re an old coot. Take it slow while you can, and…” He gave her a comforting squeeze, sending a little jolt of warmth through Undyne’s heart. “Stop by whenever, ya hear?”

She patted his head in return. “Will do, _sensei._”

As Undyne left Gerson’s humble abode, walking through his cluttered and treasure-laden shop on the way out—Emil was there in his ridiculous little cart and greeted her with the same frozen stone smile as always—she wanted to believe her conscience was clear now, that her resolve was stronger than ever.

And she _did_ feel better. A _little_ better.

But there was still turmoil in her heart, and her head was still pounding with ebbing and flowing waves of grief and hatred.

_I won’t let Chara break me_, she had kept telling herself these last few weeks, but as she struggled to keep her composure on her way to rendezvous with the Royal Guard, she wondered if maybe Chara
already *had*—and she was just too proud to admit it yet.

- Commencing System Check
- Memory Unit: Green
- Initializing Tactics Log
- Loading Geographic Data
- Vitals: Green
- Remaining MP: 49%
- Black Box Temperature: Normal
- Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
- Activating IFF
- Activating FCS
- Initializing Pod Connection
- Launching DBU Setup
- Activating Inertia Control System
- Activating Environmental Sensors
- Equipment Status: Green
- All Systems Green
- Combat Preparations Complete

Although he passed his system checks with surprising ease, consciousness did not come so easily to 9S. His eyelids still felt like lead weights; his eyes burned like someone had filled his tear ducts with battery acid. His mouth felt numb, like it was filled with cotton—heh, cottonmouth, that was the name of a snake—and his entire brain seemed to be pulsing against his skull.

A friendly face swam in front of him. Brilliant scarlet eyeshadow over a yellow eye. Auburn hair tied back in a thick and unruly ponytail with a shock of snow-white bangs falling over blue scales.

Actually, 9S noticed as his vision sharpened and the staticky snow faded away, the face he’d **expected** to be friendly was anything but.

Undyne looked haggard, her scaly skin dark and dull and grayish beneath her eye (so bloodshot the yellow sclerae had taken on an orange tint) and eyepatch, accentuating gaunt eye sockets and transforming her face into a weary death’s-head in the low lighting of… wherever 9S was.

Where **was** he, anyway? There were bars behind Undyne. A prison cell? His arms had been pinned behind his back and a pair of metal cuffs bound his wrists. He was on his knees; Undyne was crouching down in front of him.

“Undyne,” he croaked, trying to smile. “A-Are you here to—”

She slapped him across the face.

9S squeezed his eyes shut as Undyne’s open palm stung his cheek. **“Ow! What the fuck, Un—”**

She slapped him again. Same hand. Same cheek. More pain. 9S bit his tongue.

“What am I gonna **do** with you, Nines?” she hissed.

“For starters,” 9S said, swallowing a little bit of his own synthetic blood as he pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, “you could stop slapping me…”

“I **told** you not to kill anyone. I made you **swear**, made you put your hand over your goddamn black
box and swear you wouldn’t just go around killing people—”

“It was kill or be killed!” 9S protested. “What about your end of the bargain? You’re supposed to keep your stormtroopers in line!”

“Shut up, you moron!” Undyne dropped her voice to a whisper, her voice quiet but just as furious. “You don’t think these rooms have cameras and microphones?”

“I just broke my arm and got poisoned. Sorry for not thinking straight.”

“You don’t think these rooms have cameras and microphones?” Undyne pressed her hands to her temples and squeezed her eye shut. “I know the Royal Guard is your enemy now, but a lot of the people in it are still my friends.” Her mouth was a taut, thin-lipped grimace as she hissed at him through gritted, yellowed teeth. “I’m not supposed to let you go? You’re a cop killer now. You’re lucky Lieutenant Snaca even let me throw you in this cell. I had to pull rank and everything, and she looked pissed enough to mutiny right there. You probably won’t last another hour in here before somebody drags you out and lynches you. And Chara’s breathing down my neck enough as it is—if I let you out of here…” She buried her face in her hand. “Please tell me some good news, Nines. Say you picked up the rest of the black boxes on your scans or something.”

9S took a deep breath. “No news on the black boxes,” he admitted. “But 2B just woke up.”

Undyne pulled her hands away from her face, and there was the slightest hint of a smile there now, a little glimmer of brightness in her worn and weary eye, but it soon faded. “Bet she’s wondering where you are right now.” She sighed, her gaze flitting across the cell but refusing to center on 9S. “Guess I’ve got no choice but to spring you out of here… and take my lumps.”

9S slowly began to realize just how deeply he’d fucked up. He hadn’t just hurt himself—Undyne was in a truly unwinnable situation here, and it was all his fault. “Undyne…"

“I’m sorry,” he wanted to say, but it didn’t feel like enough for what he’d done.

She conjured an electric spear, stray arcs from its shaft drifting close enough to 9S’s body to numb his skin, and laid its blade against his cheek as she rose to her feet, the molded lightning of the spearhead sending waves of static and distortion through his visual processor. “Well. Let’s put on a show.” There was no friendliness in her voice, just a cold, iron bite. She sounded almost like 2B had back in the bad old days.

9S tried to rise on unsteady feet, still reeling a bit, pins and needles running up his legs. His right arm was still immobile, and his left still felt prickly and weak from Snaca’s poisonous bite; both were bound behind his back, straining his shoulders. The idea that he could possibly even pretend to overpower Undyne in his condition was laughable, but he could probably still make it look convincing if she played along.

Undyne snapped her finger and a spear shot up from the floor, catching on his hood and lifting him off his feet. He dangled in the air, the electrical radiance from the spear running up and down his spine and deadening his arm and legs.

Okay… Not exactly the show I thought we’d be putting on, but…

Undyne punched him in the stomach. 9S felt all the breath vanish from his lungs as his visual display flickered and jumped, and as his back collided with the spear shaft holding him aloft, his handcuffs broke apart under the impact. He wheezed and coughed as the pain sank through his skin, throbbing all the way down to his chassis.
As 9S struggled to catch his breath, Undyne cracked her knuckles and laid into him again. “This is for Jim, you murderous bastard!”

9S retched and gagged from the blow, spitting out a wad of blood mixed with spit and letting it dribble down his chin. Undyne dispersed the spear holding him in the air and let him collapse on numbed and limp legs that immediately buckled beneath him.

Undyne crouched down and took a fistful of 9S’s hair, tugging painfully on his scalp as she lifted up his head. “This cell has one loose bar—third from the left. You can jiggle it free and slip through the gap. Just wait a few minutes ’til the coast is clear so we don’t run into each other.”

9S nodded.

“Got your pod in a Faraday cage down the hall,” she whispered in his ear. “Weapons, though—Snaca took ’em as trophies. Don’t try to get them back, just get out of here before something happens that I can’t bail you out of.”

He nodded again. “Got it.” He felt dirty for having to leave behind not only his own swords but 2B’s as well. “And, um, I’m…”

“You can rest a bit at Alphys’, but don’t stay there any longer than an hour;” Undyne added. “Gerson or Papyrus could offer you a safe haven for a couple hours, maybe, if you need it, but if you linger anywhere, you’re gonna get more people hurt.” She let go of 9S and stood up.

Clutching at his stomach and gritting his teeth as his sore abdomen protested every movement he made, 9S sat up. “Got it. Undyne, I’m—”

She kicked him, the toe of her boot slamming into his chin and snapping his head back, leaving 9S sprawled on the cold concrete floor.

“One more thing,” Undyne said, glaring at 9S as she towered over him, her mouth twisting into a bitter scowl. “When you get back to 2B and 6O… don’t ever poke your head out of the Ruins again until this is all over. Stay there and stay out of trouble. And don’t ever talk to me again.”

The words hit 9S like a knife to the gut, almost more painful than the beating Undyne had just handed down to him. “Don’t ever…” he parroted.

“I’m done with you, 9S. You crossed a line today that I can’t ever forgive you for.” Undyne crossed her arms. “From this point on, if we ever see each other again, it’ll be as enemies. I’m having a hard time justifying not killing you right now, in fact.”

9S hung his head and looked down at his boots as the weight of Undyne’s harsh words rested on his shoulders. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I bet you are,” Undyne scoffed. “I’m letting you go for one reason and only one reason—I don’t wanna hurt 2B. That’s it.”

Undyne turned her back on 9S, slid the barred door open, walked into the gloomy hallway, and slammed the door shut, leaving 9S alone.

Chapter End Notes
I really haven't taken a lot of time to explore Undyne, even though she's one of my favorite Undertale characters, so now she gets a full chapter to herself!

...So I can tear down everything and everyone she believes in and leave her a complete wreck torn apart by her competing ideals.

Oh, yeah. We're in Yoko Taro territory now.
[E] Out of the Frying Pan, Part I

Chapter Summary

Awoken at last, 2B sets out to find 9S, while 9S puts his own plan to escape into action.

Chapter Notes

HEY it's been too long since the last chapter because of a whole bunch of bullshit getting in my way, thanks for your patience! (Oh and also I wrote another fic in the meantime which you can check out here if you haven't seen it yet)

In the words of our lord and savior, Big Boss... "Kept you waiting, huh?"

There might be more than a week between now and the next chapter, too, but not because of any sort of bullshit, just because I'll be officiating a family member's wedding and that's kind of a big deal.

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And thanks so much for over 5,000 hits, too! I kinda feel like a broken record now, but I love you all so much, thanks for reading and commenting and giving kudos and everything else. This fic is such a bright spot in my life and most of that is all thanks to you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And, 2B, I—I love you so much. I’m so glad you’re okay. I love you. I love you and I’m sorry—Y-You know what, let’s save all that shit for later. I’m coming home, 2B, so—so just sit tight and... S-See ya soon!”

Pod 042 stopped the recording as it followed 2B down the hall. “Playback ended. Would Unit 2B like to replay the message?”

“Why didn’t you tell me when he called?” 2B snapped as she pulled a long black greatcoat over the outfit she’d hurriedly thrown together.

“Unit 2B was with Operator 6O. Queen Toriel informed this support unit that it was impolite to interrupt two young adults when they share an intimate moment together.”

2B rolled her eyes. “Call him back.”

“Connecting… Message forwarded from Pod 153. Unit 9S is currently occupied. Proposal: leave a message.”


“Response: the Virtuous Contract is currently registered to Unit 9S’s NFCS.”
“Okay. What about the Joyeuse?”

“That weapon is also registered to Unit 9S’s NFCS.”

“Both of them?” she asked, incredulous.

“Unit 9S has heavily modified his own systems.”

Of course, he had. 2B sighed. No weapons here—then she’d just have to procure something to fight with on her way to meet up with 9S. To make matters worse, she couldn’t find her visor either, limiting her ability to efficiently receive data from her pod. She felt lucky she still had clothes.

Toriel caught up with 2B, concern writ large on her face. “Oh! 2B, dear, are you sure you are fit to go out? It is quite late,” she said, stifling a yawn as if to prove her point, “and after what you have been through, a bit of rest might …”

“I’ve been resting for the past forty-seven days,” said 2B, ignoring how paradoxically tired she felt as she worked the last bits of the stiffness out of her arms. “I’m fine.”

“Well, um… I suppose that’s true…” Toriel said, seemingly unconvinced, her kind eyes still giving 2B a skeptical dressing-down. “Yet… you were very badly injured—er, damaged—when you were brought here, and…”

“Unit 2B has experienced a decrease in speed, strength, stamina, and reaction time due to the poor quality of the materials used for repairs,” Pod 042 stated, “but remains within accepted parameters for a Type-E model. Unit 2B is combat-ready.”

Pod 042 was, of course, blunt as ever—not willing to mince words. 2B had to admit, hearing the phrase ‘the poor quality of the materials used for repairs’ put a knot in her stomach and made her feel that she had somehow become weak, defective—6E’s words from that horrible night so long ago, that horrible night that had never happened, that horrible night 2B had made un-happen, echoed through her mind, sending a shiver up her spine.

Let me erase your defective heart from this world.

“I’m fine,” 2B insisted, more to convince herself than Toriel.

“It is dangerous out there,” Toriel warned 2B.

“All the more reason to bring 9S home,” 2B insisted. “He’s going to hurt himself.”

Toriel let out a resigned sigh. “So I have told him. Time and time again. I had forgotten how difficult it is to care for a child when he already sees himself as an adult. That, I suppose, is why older sisters like you exist, 2B.”

2B understood how one could find Toriel’s propensity to see anybody younger than one thousand years old as a child as irksome. That, compounded by his growing frustration and guilt over 2B’s condition, must have been what had driven 9S off.

“Oh—before I forget…” Toriel rushed out of the room and came back with a large bundle inexpertly-covered in crumpled scraps of leftover holiday wrapping paper. “Doctor Alphys told me to give this to you once you woke up.”

2B accepted the unwieldy mass of gift wrap. Once there had been a time when she hadn’t cared
much for gifts—no one had ever been close enough to her to give one, except of course for 9S, and... she had usually repaid his kindness by betraying him to her duty. But things were different now, and she held onto the mysterious package with no anxiety or apprehension.

She tore off the wrapping paper, uncovering a sleek black buckler with a long and broad blade slung underneath it. When she affixed the buckler to her forearm, the blade ran parallel to it, tucked under the metal shield; with a simple squeeze of her fist, the blade swung around like an enormous switchblade, its polished metal surface catching and throwing the lamplight bathing the room.

Toriel looked crestfallen. “Oh... I thought it would be... a nice sweater, or something. Although it was a bit too heavy for that...” She coughed into her sleeve. “A sword is nice, too, I suppose,” she muttered, her voice dripping with disapproval.

Pod 042 inspected the blade as 2B swung it back into its idle position with another gesture.
“Analysis: this weapon's design appears to have been inspired by the heat saber included in YoRHa flight units’ weapons loadout. However, without a power source, its cutting power is greatly reduced.”

2B noticed a bundle of wires tied up and tucked away beneath the long, slim buckler that housed the blade. Perhaps this blade was meant to have a power source, but Alphys hadn’t finished it yet. She tested the blade’s unfolding mechanism a few more times, making sure to keep the swinging blade clear of anything (or anyone) it could hit by accident (Toriel made sure to keep her distance, eyeing the sword warily). The way the blade responded felt surprisingly responsive for something so... analog.

“Seems I’ll be able to take care of myself just fine,” 2B said.

Toriel cleared her throat. “If you are done waving that thing around...” She handed 2B an envelope. “This came with it.”

2B slid her finger along the envelope’s edge and pulled out a folded sheet of paper covered with Alphys’ cramped, messy handwriting.

*Hi 2B!*

*This is for you when you wake up. It was inspired by one of my mecha shows—I let Pod 042 download it from my server so you can watch it whenever you want =^.^= Or maybe you and Undyne and Nines and 6O and I can all meet up and watch it together? I know you’re not super into cartoons but you’ll like this one, I promise. The main character is just like you!*

*Anyway, this is part one of the 'Celestial Being' set. I'll have the rest finished by your birthday—and I won’t spoil anything, so no asking for details!*

- Alphys ≥7≤

2B re-folded the letter and slipped it into the pocket of her coat. “Get some sleep. I’ll take care of Nines.”

Toriel gave up and hugged her. “Good night, then, dear. I will see you in the morning. And you and 9S had better come home in one piece. If you do not, I...”

“Trust me,” 2B answered, grateful that Toriel was being a little bit gentler now with her impassioned hugs and was allowing her to breathe and speak unimpeded. Toriel’s strong, yet soft embrace, warm as sunlight and as inviting as a clean bed, was so much easier to bask in when 2B didn’t have to worry about her spine breaking.
“I love you.”

“I, um… I love you too,” 2B responded, letting go and expecting the queen to do the same. Truth be told, though, if it hadn’t been for 9S, 2B would have liked to keep holding on. Time hadn’t passed much for her while she’d slept, so of course, she couldn’t miss Toriel as much as Toriel had missed her… but all the same, 2B was grateful to see her again.

Toriel didn’t let go.

“Just give me a minute, dear,” she said.

2B gave her a minute, soon becoming aware of a soft, high-pitched whine that at first she worried was being produced by her own black box before realizing it was coming from Toriel.

“We’ll be back,” 2B assured her, knowing all too well Toriel’s history with her adopted families leaving her behind.

Toriel didn’t let go, and 2B began to feel impatient. Hugs could wait. Right now, she had an obligation to fulfill.

“Excuse me,” she finally said, her tone a little sharper than she’d intended. “Nines needs my help.”

“Oh! Right. My apologies,” Toriel said, finally letting go, planting one last kiss on 2B’s forehead before drawing back, a little sheepish smile on her face. “But you will owe me quite a hug when you two return.”


With that out of the way, 2B left the house and made her way through the corridor leading to Snowdin, feeling the air grow colder as the warmth from the Ruins leaked through the door up ahead.

“Hey! 2B!”

She threw up her arms just in time to catch a bundle of fur that shot out from the shadowy end of the corridor and all but leaped into her. “2B! You’re awake!” Asriel cried out, his maroon eyes wide and bright.

“Isn’t it past your bedtime?”

“No!” Asriel buried his snout in her shoulder. “2B, Nines and I missed you! Besides, I can’t sleep.”

2B set the boy down, though he kept trying to cling to her. “What’s wrong? Why were you by the door?”

“Well…” Asriel coughed. “I—I have this cough, a-and I want Mrs. Doctor Alphys to take a look at it, but she’s stuck in her lab, and Mom doesn’t want me going out, s-so I was gonna wait for Nines to come back and bring her here…” He coughed again. “The—The pods say it’s nothing, and Mom says I’ll be fine, but… I wanna see Alphys. Just to make sure.”

“Neither this unit nor its counterpart has detected any physical faults,” Pod 042 said. “Hypothesis: Prince Asriel’s symptoms are psychosomatic.”

“I am not psycho-automatic!” Asriel protested. “What if it’s a logic virus?”

“Logic viruses don’t make you cough,” said 2B, reaching out to pat him on the head. “They
overwrite androids’ programming until they become fixated on killing everything around them.”

“H-How do I know that won’t happen to me?” Asriel tugged on 2B’s coat.

2B started to wonder if 9S had been telling the boy too many stories about the surface. “You do not have a logic virus. Infected units have red eyes.”

Asriel stumbled and let go of her. “… I have red eyes.”

“The colored part doesn’t turn red,” 2B hastily clarified. “The pupil does. And it’s bright. You can see it from ten meters away in the daylight. Now go to sleep.”

“W-Well, how am I supposed to sleep now?”

“In a bed.” 2B made her way to the stone doorway, braced her shoulder against it, and cracked it open, letting a bitterly cold wind howl through. “Logic viruses aren’t anything to be afraid of,” she assured Asriel. “Most are treatable with vaccines, and a good Scanner can cure all but the most advanced stages of infection. If you’re going to dream about logic viruses, just dream that 9S is there to cure you, too, okay?”

“Does Chara have a logic virus?” Asriel asked.

2B froze.

“I mean…” Asriel looked down at his feet. “They killed Dad… Why would they do that, if… if…”

2B felt her heart sink. It hadn’t even occurred to her that someone might have told Asriel what had happened while she’d been in that coma. But he must have had so many questions when 9S and 6O had dragged her lifeless, battered body into Toriel’s house, and eventually, somebody must have said something.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, hanging her head.

“They loved Dad. Really, they—they even knitted him a sweater once. They’d never hurt him on purpose—that’s not Chara. They hurt Dad on accident once, but it was on accident, and it really messed them up, so… There’s… there’s gotta be something wrong with them, right? Something you and Nines can fix?”

2B didn’t know what to say. How could she tell this child—twelve years old, older than her by far, and yet so ignorant, so naive, so mentally and psychologically underdeveloped—that sometimes even rational people of sound mind did horrible things to people they loved because they found such cruelty to be necessary?

“They wouldn’t… I mean…” Asriel buried his face in his paws, his voice cracking. “I—I mean, y-you guys never even told Dad I was— a-and I couldn’t even—”

“Asriel!” Toriel called out, rushing down the hall. “What are you doing down here? You ought to have been in bed fifteen minutes ago!” She scooped the boy up in her arms, despite his protests.

“It’s okay,” 2B assured her. “He just wanted to see me before I left.”

Asriel squirmed in his mother’s grip. “Let go of me, Mom!” he groused. He seemed a great deal more rebellious than before. Angry over his father, 2B supposed.

“Asriel, listen to your mother and go to bed.” 2B reached out and tousled his fur. “Nines and I will
be back when you wake up.”

With that, Asriel resigned himself to his fate (though he seemed oddly resentful as he muttered something under his breath), and 2B turned around and stepped over the threshold into a kingdom that had changed in her absence.

Somewhere, beyond the frozen night-bathed vistas stretched out in front of her, 9S needed her help.

She started out at a brisk trot, testing the strength of her legs, and slowly picked up her pace as she grew more confident in her body’s capabilities. Her muscles felt a little stiffer than usual, limbs a little heavier—but as Pod 042 had said, her capabilities remained within acceptable levels for a unit of her type. By the time she had exited the forest and begun crossing the ravines and plateaus that lay between her and Snowdin, she was sprinting at almost top speed.

Pod 042 kept up with her with ease, as always. “This support unit requires additional information to more effectively render support. Proposal: Unit 2B should state her intentions.”

“Find 9S. Rescue if necessary. Pod, scan for 9S’s black box signature.” No visor meant no HUD meant no map she could pull up, but 2B trusted her pod to guide her with sufficient verbal instructions.

“Affirmative. Black box signal of reasonable strength detected. Unit 9S is currently located in downtown New Home.”

That was on the other side of the kingdom. On foot, it would take well over an hour at top speed to go from here to there, and that was assuming 2B didn’t run into anything that would force her to slow down or take a detour.

“Contact Pod 153.”

“Connecting.” Pod 042’s antenna extended from its hull for a few seconds, then retracted. “Connection unsuccessful. Pod 153 may currently be in an area with low bandwidth. This unit will now attempt to connect every thirty seconds until successful.”

2B cursed her rotten luck. If she could just get a message to 9S and tell him to lay low and head back home, the two of them could meet each other halfway and she wouldn’t have to spend any longer than necessary worrying about him.

I can’t make it on my own. I can’t be strong like you, he’d said. 2B felt a chill run through her body that had nothing to do with the frigid air rushing past her. How dangerous was this kingdom now, if 9S couldn’t handle it himself?

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2B reached the end of the bridge, setting foot on solid ground as the wooden slats behind her continued to twist and sway and creak. “Respond.”

“Affirmative.”

Pod 042 fell silent, and within a second, Alphys’ voice came through in a haze of static. “2B? I-Is that you?”

“Roger that, Alphys.”

“Amazing! Y-You’re actually—I, uh, I mean, I knew you’d wake up sooner or later. I-I don’t half-ass my repairs, you know!”

“You’ve picked a good time to call,” 2B remarked, continuing on her journey through the frosty terrain, the forest rushing past her as she ducked under and weaved around the trees encroaching on the snowy paths. Eventually, the soft amber glow of civilization in the valley below began to come into view.

“Your pod sent me a m-message as soon as you woke up. I-I’ve had it connected to a private server to monitor your condition.”

“Is Pod 153 on the server as well?”

“Y-Yeah, but, um… not, uh… I can’t reach out to it right n-now. It’s, um…”

“Nines is in trouble, isn’t he?” 2B slowed her approached as she passed a Royal Guard outpost nestled among the trees, but once it became clear there was nobody on duty there, she picked up her pace.

“Like you wouldn’t b-believe. I can explain.”

“I’m on my way. What’s the situation?”

“H-He’s —”

There was a burst of static, and another familiar voice broke through. “2B! It’s me, 6O! I’m connected to Alphys’ server, too!”

“6O?”

“Yeah! I’ve got a small, portable computer terminal here with me, and it’s even got a direct visual link to Pod 042. The setup’s a little primitive compared to what we had back home, but Alphys and I can keep you up-to-date on your mission objectives, just like old times!”

“P-Primitive?” Alphys interjected. “N-Nothing I make is primitive!”

“Girls, focus,” 2B admonished her two ad-hoc support agents. “We don’t have any time to waste. I’m approaching town now,” she said, her boots slipping on the thick snow as she began to half-run, half-slide down the gentle slope of the valley. Snowdin quickly came rushing up to meet her as Alphys and 6O filled her in on 9S’s predicament.

9S had never spent a stint in jail before. To no great surprise, he hated it and wanted to get out as quickly as possible.
His first action (once he’d given Undyne a few minutes and decided the coast was clear) was to try and stand up. Easier said than done. His body still ached from the beating Undyne had given him—she hadn’t had to punch and kick him for real, had she? The slap had been enough.

The puncture wound tunneling through his leg from Snaca’s harpoon had started to bleed again. Tearing off a strip from the hem of his coat and rolling up his pant leg, 9S bound the wound as best he could with only one functional hand, his fumbling fingers tying a loose knot. If he strained his ears, he felt he could almost hear the whirring servos in his fingers protest, which didn’t instill much confidence in his body’s current condition. His right arm, though he’d deadened the pain receptors, still throbbed dully as it dangled at his side, and 9S didn’t want to think about what its internal mechanisms looked like right now.

How long, again, had he been running around with 2B’s Type-E protocols governing his body? A week and a half? Two weeks? More? He couldn’t quite remember. Had he been wearing himself thin all this time?

All right, 9S, he told himself, limping over to the bars of his cell and tugging on the one Undyne had told him was loose. This shouldn’t be too hard. Pull out the bar, find Pod 153, set it to full automatic and tell it to shoot the hell out of anyone who tries to attack me… Sure, Undyne would be mad at him if he mowed down more of her pals, but it wasn’t like she could be any more upset with him than she already was.

The bar came free in his hand, leaving him just enough room to squeeze into the hallway. He kept the bar in his hand just in case he’d need a weapon in his escape.

9S took a step forward, nearly fell over, and realized that if anybody caught sight of him, he’d be hard-pressed to defend himself, no matter how much makeshift weaponry he had. Couldn’t there have been an easier way to spring him out? Maybe he and Undyne could’ve faked a hostage situation and he could have pretended to use her as a living shield to safeguard his exit…

He nearly whacked himself in the head with the metal bar he was holding. Dammit, why hadn’t he thought of that five minutes ago?

No matter. He had to work with what he had right now. And what he had right now was a broken, battered body and a metal rod.

Pod 153 is at the end of the hall, 9S reminded himself, and while he still had a chance, he limped down the corridor, passing rows of cells on both sides, some empty, others holding petty crooks slumbering in the corners. The last cell to the right had no bars—instead, it was walled off with a fine copper mesh that coated the concrete walls, ceiling, and floor of the room as well.

Lying in the center of the walled-off cell amid a pile of assorted electronic junk—likely things confiscated from other prisoners—was 9S’s support pod, looking almost forlorn.

“Hey,” 9S whispered to it. “Pod 153. Can you hear me?”

Pod 153 didn’t stir. It must have been deactivated, then placed in the Faraday cage for safekeeping.

9S scoured the mesh cage for a doorway and examined the latch. It looked like it took a small key. He could try to find whoever in this jail had the key and steal it from them—which could put him in a lot of danger—or maybe he could whack the latch with a pipe until it broke. Or maybe…

The metal bar hit the latch with a loud, echoing clang. 9S froze, letting the sharp noise die down as it bounced off the concrete walls. Seconds passed by like hours.
At last, 9S heard footsteps from behind. At the other end of the hall, a shadow swung around the corner, forewarning the approach of a curious guard. With any luck, this one would have the key to the cage, and 9S would be able to knock them out and take it—

But first, he realized, he had to hide. He glanced around the hall as the footsteps grew louder and the sweeping beam of the guard’s flashlight grew brighter, looking for anything he could crouch behind or crawl under—

*Really?* 9S asked himself, his sight falling on a dingy cardboard box just big enough for him to curl up under. *Well, any port in a storm, I guess.*

Snowdin didn’t look much different from what 2B remembered. It was still a tiny, cozy town, nestled in the valley between a river and a forest, the eaves of its smattering of squat, wooden buildings creaking under the weight of the snow covering their roofs. 2B could see the Snowed Inn—one of the largest buildings in town, still lit up, its frosted windows casting warm amber light onto the snow—*the Librarby with its erroneous signage, the town square (already festooned with tinsel even though Holly Day was months away), the riverside harbor, Grillby’s pub with its crimson neon sign piercing the night air, Papyrus’ and Sans’ house, and even the little cottage 2B and 9S had once called home. Mill the peaceful Goliath-class machine towered over the town, currently making use of its stature in the town square to place tinsel and ornaments on a pine tree nearly as tall as it was.*

This had always been such a welcoming place, but now 2B was here as an intruder, and while the town hadn’t changed much, 2B could feel a change in the air suggesting that right now, she did not belong here.

“Anything else I should know about?” she asked once Alphys had filled her in on current events—including 9S’s current incarceration.

“*W-Well, forget about taking the boat to Hotland. They’ll never let you on,*” said Alphys. “*S-Sorry, but you androids are—uh, k-kinda persona non grata right now.*”

That wasn’t surprising in the least. “So I’ll have to go through Waterfall.”

*“Y-You should keep a lower profile. Take the tunnels. They’re still mostly machine-occupied, and while they’re officially p-part of the kingdom, they keep t-to themselves,”* Alphys advised. “*From there, you can take the Waterfall entrance to the laboratory s-sub-basement all the way to Hotland.*”

“Never thought I’d be treating *machine* territory as safe harbor,” 2B remarked, reaching level ground and dusting the snow off the hem of her coat before continuing to the edge of town. “I’ve reached Snowdin.”

*“Okay, now steer c-clear of the Royal Guard,”* Alphys said. “*Undyne’s managed to reduce their presence in the outskirts, but the town’s c-crawling with them.*”

2B had wondered why she hadn’t seen anybody on the way here. Undyne seemed to be sabotaging the Guard from the inside—not a plan of action 2B expected her to commit to. She slowed her approach and crept into town, keeping herself wreathed in shadow, and clung fast to the wall of the Snowed Inn as a figure in black armor, a canine monster with thick gray fur spilling over its collar, marched across the street.

*Familiar* black armor.

*“YoRHa heavy armor?”* 2B inquired, dropping her voice to a whisper as she glanced around the
corner of the wall. She spared a glance at her boots. The area around the Snowed Inn must have received quite a great deal of foot traffic: the snow was heavily tamped-down and her footprints were barely visible. In other parts of town, she’d have to be more careful about leaving a trail.


2B took a closer look and noticed that, in fact, the guard was wearing a black strip of cloth around its eyes. “Visors?”

“I-It’s called the RE:Visor system,” Alphys explained, unable to prevent a little bit of pride from seeping into her voice. “It’s linked up to a central command server to keep all on-duty guards up-to-date on each other’s actions. If one of these g-guys spots you, it won’t be long until the whole kingdom knows you’re here.”

“So try not to get spotted,” 6O suggested. “We’ll get back in touch when the coast is clear.”

“Got it.” 2B nodded, keeping her frustration to herself. Sneaking around wasn’t exactly her strong suit.

“Take care of yourself, 2B. Over and out,” said 6O.

Pod 042 fell silent—but it seemed the lone guard on this street had caught wind of the conversation, if only just barely.

“Hello?” the guard asked, drawing nearer to the Snowed Inn, the snow crunching beneath his boots. “Is someone there?”

2B froze and pulled away from the corner.

The front door to the inn swung open. “Yeah, welcome to the night shift!” the inn’s owner replied. “Rom, how’re the pups doing?”

“Oh, you know,” said the guard, dropping his guard. “Lou’s got fleas. Rem got some salt burns on her paws ’cuz she went out without her booties. Say, are there any fresh cinnamon bunnies at the bakery?”

“At this hour?” the owner laughed in the guard’s face. “Check back in the morning, if you’re still awake. You take care, officer.” The door swung shut.

Keeping silent, 2B gently rapped on Pod 042’s hull, then motioned to a cottage on the other side of the street. Taking care to stay in the shadows, the pod hovered across the street and knocked loudly on the cottage’s wall.

The guard’s pointy ears perked up. “Huh? Who’s there?” he asked, his voice sharp as he probed in the direction of the sound.

With his back to 2B, the guard wandered into the street. But before he could get far, 2B slipped behind him and grabbed him in a chokehold, the edge of her buckler digging into his throat. She kept the pressure on until the guard’s struggles ceased and his body went limp; she then dragged the guard’s body into the shadows as Pod 042 returned to her side.

2B patted Pod 042. “Good work, pod.” Turning her attention to the guard, she unwrapped his visor and held it up. “Can you flash the firmware on this and re-install a proper visor OS?”
“Affirmative.” Pod 042 reached out and took the visor in its claws, taking a few seconds to reprogram the nanomachines woven into the cloth. “Visor is now registered to Unit 2B.”

2B applied the freshly-wiped visor, glad to see the familiar elements of her HUD pop up. The resolution of her HUD elements was noticeably lower, but the visor seemed to run the standard OS and connect to her systems without much trouble.

Almost as if on cue, a small window opened up to the side of her visual display, Alphys’ face visible within. The doctor looked as if she’d seen better days: she was gaunt and weary, gray circles deepening her eyes underneath her thick, round glasses.

“2B, I just wanted to remind you of one thing,” said Alphys. “Try, uh… not to kill anyone. Undyne would be really mad if you…”

2B checked the pulse of the guard she’d downed and found it slow, but steady. “Why?”

“Um…” Alphys chewed on her lip. “Because it’s, uh… not good to kill people?”

2B sighed and made her way through the town, edging around the well-lit town square as multicolored lights bounced soft rays of red and blue off of the falling snow and the tinsel Mill was currently draping around the tree. She couldn’t help but notice how loud the sound of fresh snow crunching beneath her boots was. “I’ve killed many machines to protect other androids. Was that wrong, too?” she asked, irked by Undyne’s naive request.

“I—I’m just saying, a lot of these guys are still Undyne’s friends…”

“Even though they take orders from the enemy?”

“I mean, they won’t once we beat Chara, will they?” Alphys replied, nervously adjusting her glasses as they began to slide down her snout. “Just, um… stick to non-lethal takedowns, if you can? Please?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” 2B replied, eyeing the switchblade sword affixed to her forearm. It was most definitely not a weapon designed for “non-lethal takedowns.”

2B crept closer to the eastern outskirts of town, keeping a close watch on the movements of the several guards stationed at the foggy path leading deeper into the mountain, their bootleg YoRHa armor still visible in the dark mist wrapping around them. She felt an odd, uneasy twinge of deja vu as she approached, and hoped that she could slip through the guards’ blind spots.

She wasn’t so lucky. Before she could vanish into the mist one of the four guards, an antlered sort of jackrabbit-man, noticed her, the searching beam from his flashlight cutting through the air. Reflected light from the pristine snow around 2B’s boots sprang up with dazzling brightness as the other guards’ lights found her; 2B raised her arm over her brow and squinted as her visual processor automatically polarized and her eyes adjusted to the light, the black silhouettes of four guards materializing in front of the light.

Each guard drew a weapon. 2B adopted a combat stance. Non-lethal takedowns, huh?

She couldn’t make any promises, but she’d see what she could do.

▫▫▫

9S felt like an incredible idiot as he hid underneath the box and waited with bated breath for the guard to either notice him and get him in trouble or carry on and leave him in peace.
The footsteps came closer. 9S felt the complex servos in his chassis softly whine as a bead of sweat dripped down the back of his neck, and irrationally wondered if that would be enough to alert the guard to his presence. Or was he just oversensitive to the sound of the machinery inside him now, now that the strain had started to break down his body?

Or maybe the guard would notice that his cell was empty first.

The volume of the guard’s footsteps echoing on the drab concrete walls reached a crescendo, then stopped. The guard had stopped.

What if they didn’t leave?

9S gritted his teeth. *Come on, come on…*

The footsteps started again, this time growing quieter.

Now was his chance.

9S stood up, throwing off the overturned cardboard box, and charged at the guard while their back was turned, ramming into them with his shoulder and tackling them to the floor. He dug his knee into the guard’s stomach to hold them in place, ripped off their helmet, and drove his left fist into their face with all his might.

Unfortunately, this monster’s head was a solid hunk of greenish-tinted diamond, so the most 9S managed to accomplish was blooding his fist.

9S swore under his breath, wringing his hand as his bruised and battered knuckles stung, as the guard writhed beneath him, throwing him off and staggering to their feet.

9S dashed over to where he’d dropped the metal bar as the guard took off in the opposite direction, grabbed the bar, and threw it. The long metal bar spun through the air and cracked against the back of the guard’s head before they could reach the end of the corridor, sending them tumbling back to the floor with a spray of jeweled fragments flying through the air.

Pausing for just a second to catch his breath, 9S dragged the guard’s limp body down the corridor and stripped off the armor, shrugging off his own coat and applying as much of the guard’s armor as he could to create what he hoped would be a makeshift disguise. He then searched through the rest of the guard’s belongings and found, much to his luck, a ring of keys.

Things were finally starting to go his way.

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The last of the four guards fell to the ground, writhing in the snow as he clutched at the bleeding stump where his arm had once been. The armor Alphys had made for these guards, though based on YoRHa heavy armor, was made of inferior materials and lacked much of the durability it ought to have had; 2B’s blade had cut through it with little resistance.

An ongoing scan by Pod 042 kept tabs on the vital signs of her opponents, showing on her HUD that no life signs had been terminated (although one of the guards was trying their best to play dead).

Surrounded by the groans of the wounded, 2B folded her blade into its idle position and brushed the hair from her eyes. “Be thankful I only took your arm,” she told the defeated guard as she walked past him. “You won’t be so lucky next time. If there *is* a next time.”
With that threat hanging in the cold, misty air, 2B continued on her way.

6O’s voice rang in her ears, frantic. “2B, what are you doing? Now the whole kingdom knows you’re here!”

2B smiled.

“Exactly.”

Chapter End Notes

2B: Uh, 9S… What are you doing?
9S: I’m in a box.
2B: A cardboard box? Why are you…?
9S: I dunno. I was just looking at it and suddenly I got this urge to get inside. No, not just an urge—more than that. It was my destiny to be here—in the box.
2B: Destiny…?
9S: Yeah. And then when I put it on, I suddenly got this feeling of inner peace. I can’t put it into words. I feel… safe. Like this is where I was meant to be. Like I’d found the key to true happiness.
2B: Uh-huh.
9S: Does any of that make sense?
2B: Not even a little.
9S: You should come inside the box… Then you’ll know what I mean.
2B: I don’t want to know what you mean. Between you and 6O, is everyone but me that’s hooked up with the Commander strange?

Also, 2B’s new weapon? Yeah, in case you were wondering, it’s totally this:

Because, of course, Alphys is a weeb and so am I.
[E] Out of the Frying Pan, Part II

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, 9S actually does something smart.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! It feels like it's been forever since the last update, and that's mainly because I was busy officiating my sister's wedding and all of the preparations and celebrations made it very difficult, if not impossible, to do any writing for about an entire week. I'm still struggling to get back in the swing of things, especially since work is... kinda weird right now, but hopefully I won't leave you all waiting as long between chapters in the future.

Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alphys had to say, she enjoyed subterfuge a lot more than she’d expected. Had she gotten a solid eight hours of sleep just once in the past month? No. Had she eaten solid food at any point in the past two days? No. Could she remember the last time she’d polished her scales? No. Did she enjoy being told she had to work for a complete asshole and meet all their demands on the double lest her girlfriend be prosecuted and executed for high treason? Also no.

But was secretly designing weaponry for androids and setting up an encrypted server to create a rudimentary support pod network and keep up-to-date on the statuses of the three most wanted fugitives in the kingdom’s history while plotting the downfall of her current boss (who had murdered her former boss) the most exciting thing she had ever done?

Yes.

Sure, she was too nervous to do so much as have a pizza sent over to her lab lest the pizza boy see something he wasn’t supposed to see; sure, her eyes burned every second she spent awake; sure, she’d fallen hard back into her old habits of letting laundry pile up and not vacuuming and drinking too much coffee and all sorts of other things that held back sleep…

But gods, Alphys was living. When she had a passion for something, she threw herself into it one hundred percent, just like Undyne, and right now, resistance was her passion.

It wasn’t all clandestine work she was doing, though. Every once in a while, whenever Undyne could pull herself away from her own increasingly-miserable duties, she and Alphys would take an evening to settle in and watch some cartoons—er, historical records —that Alphys had on her server. And since the videos were on the same server connecting the Royal Laboratory to the pods, 6O could watch along. They even had a little chatroom set up so 6O could join in on the commentary.
6O was actually a lot of fun to hang out with, and given her circumstances, she really needed people like Alphys and Undyne to spend time with. Surprisingly, she quickly took a liking to Alphys' favorite shows and even totally got why *Mew Mew Kissy Cutie 2* was so disappointing compared to the first OVA, which was something Alphys had tried explaining *so many times* to Undyne to no avail.

Tonight, though, was not a cartoon-watching night, although Alphys was itching to continue the series they’d started last week. It was a “holy shit, 2B’s actually awake now and we need to fill her in on what’s been going on while she’s been asleep” night.

Oh, and also, 2B was going around and *very publicly* beating up every guard in her path instead of trying to keep a low profile. At least 9S *tried* to stay stealthy for the first couple hours or so before something inevitably blew his cover. Then again, though, 2B *was* a combat model.

“2B, *are all your systems working properly?”* 6O asked. On one of the several monitors Alphys had set up, a choppy, low-resolution stream of video from Pod 042 showed 2B’s progress from Snowdin to Waterfall. It was nearly unintelligible due to bandwidth issues, but it was clear 2B had disarmed—literally—another squad of Royal Guards on her way to the deeper tunnels. “I—Like we were saying, it’s best if you don’t let anyone see you!”

“I’m fully operational, 6O,” 2B replied, a little testily. “I know what I’m doing.”

“2B, maybe you should—you know, draw back and run some diagnostics—”

Alphys glanced at her readings from the RE:Visor system. There were already new orders being transmitted across the kingdom, directing the highest-ranking and strongest members of the Royal Guard to leave their assigned posts and converge on 2B’s location. Even now, blips on Alphys’ map were starting to filter away from the precinct jail in downtown New Home where 9S had been locked up. “Wait a minute, 6O! I-It’s all right. 2B—s-she’s drawing the Guard away from 9S!”

Now Alphys just had to hope that Undyne and 9S were taking advantage of this situation… and that 2B wouldn’t be overwhelmed by the forces she was leading toward herself.

9S fumbled with the key ring, scarcely able to believe his good luck as he matched a tiny copper key to the latch on the Faraday cage holding his pod. His fingers shook with exhaustion as the key slid into the lock and twisted, and with a creak that almost sounded like a relieved sigh, the door to the cage swung open.

Pod 153 did not stir, and as 9S approached, he noticed scorch marks, nearly unnoticeable against the pod’s black hull and visible only as irregular matte-black patches on its glossy surface. As he worked to reactivate it, 9S couldn’t help but wonder if Undyne had forcibly shut down the pod by blasting it with lightning and worried that Pod 153’s circuitry might have been irrevocably damaged, either limiting its functions or damaging parts of its memory or personality. The thought upset 9S more than he anticipated. Sure, support pods weren’t on the same level as androids, but Pod 153 had been with 9S for almost a year now—it was one of his *friends.*

He powered on the pod in safe mode, hacked into it to run a quick diagnostic, and when he didn’t see any major damage to any important systems or subsystems, 9S breathed a sigh of relief and brought the pod’s higher functions online.

Pod 153’s hull began to warm up as a soft whirring filled its chassis. “Support… unit… 153… is… active.” Its voice started out slow but quickly picked up speed as the pod’s systems returned to
normal. “Running… data consistency check… Data consistency check complete. Running initial scans.”

The pod lifted itself into the air, an amber light on its hull blinking. “YoRHa Unit 9S detected. This support unit is assigned to Unit 9S.”

9S couldn’t help but smile. “Pod 153… welcome back.”

Pod 153 gave a little nod. “This support unit was deactivated before the data cached in its RAM could be saved to internal storage. Short-term data loss has occurred. Proposal: for better and more efficient support, Unit 9S should state his intentions.”

He patted it on the side, his weary grin widening, and the pod followed him outside the cage. “C’mon. Let’s go home.”

“Affirmative.”

9S reached down and picked up the helmet he’d liberated from the guard he’d knocked out. With this armor on, he could probably pass for a guard and slip out unnoticed, although people might ask questions about why Pod 153 was following him around.

But just as 9S was about to don the helmet he’d picked up, he got an idea. “Pod 153,” he addressed his support pod, “I want you to shoot out the locks of every occupied cell in this hallway.”

“Affirmative.” Pod 153 opened up, revealing its machine guns, and methodically floated down the hall, opening the doors to each cell it found with extreme prejudice. As gunfire echoed across the concrete walls, the prisoners slumbering in their cells quickly awoke, shuffling to their feet.

“Hi, everyone,” 9S said, greeting his groggy fellow prisoners as they clutched at their ears and ear-equivalents. “First of all—oh, hi, Zizek.”

Zizek waved at 9S. There were still dried mustard smears all over its blank face.

“Anyway, we’re doing a prison revolt.” 9S tossed one of the freed prisoners the ring of keys. “Look through whatever’s been confiscated here and look for anything that might explode well.”

“I may still be a kind of a Marxist, but I’m very realistic,” Zizek spoke up, his robotic monotone somehow sounding disdainful. “I don’t have these dreams of revolutions around the corner.”

“Then just sit in your cell or something,” 9S replied, rolling his eyes. He scanned the hall and picked out one of the escapees in particular, a monster about his height and build that looked a bit like a snail with arms and legs, with banana-yellow skin covered in thick mucus. “Oh, and you. What’s your name?”

“Um… Escar?”

“Escar, huh.” 9S nodded. “What’re you in for?”

“Stole a loaf of bread.”

“Poor guy. You were just doing what you had to do to survive, right, Escar?”

“Uh… not exactly.” Escar looked away, his eyestalks swaying nervously. “I, uh, stole it so I could hide a knife in it and, uh, well, you know.”

“Oh,” 9S said, a little disappointed. “Well, Escar, mind doing me a solid?”
Lieutenant Snaca of the Royal Guard kept her office much, much cleaner than Undyne did, which was one reason why Undyne had the sneaking suspicion that Snaca wanted her job. To say it was tidy was an understatement. It almost sparkled. Her desk was impecably neat. All of her paperwork was tidily organized. There was a framed picture of her parents on one side of her desk and a framed picture of King Chara hanging from the wall (where once a framed picture of Asgore had hung), and the glass protecting both was perfectly polished. (Undyne had a framed picture of Chara in her office as well—when nobody was looking, she threw darts at it.)

Any inadequacy Undyne felt comparing Snaca’s neat piles of paperwork to her disorganized mess of an inbox was overshadowed by her firm belief that anyone who spent so much of their time at work tidying up their desk probably wasn’t spending enough of their time doing their job.

Snaca’s office was perfect—except for the pile of weapons scattered on the floor at her feet.

Snaca had been busy admiring the weapons she’d confiscated from 9S when the first reports of the latest casualties—the loss of Outpost 37 and 36—had reached her. The gilded and shimmering Joyeuse she’d been polishing had fallen from her scaly talons as soon as word had reached her and clattered on the polished floor of her office, soon joined by the spear, greatsword, two katanas, and curved saber that fell from her lap as she shot up to her feet in shock.

“Another android spotted entering Waterfall. Positive identification as—”

The signal had cut out and the desperate voice on the other end of the radio had vanished, cut short with a panicked scream. But it was instantly obvious to Undyne who had cut the transmission.

2B was alive, awake, and tearing through the kingdom on her way to rescue 9S because of course, she was. Undyne felt her stomach churn. 2B was the kind of person who’d cut down anything and anyone in her path without the slightest hesitation if 9S was at risk. If 2B left a body count in her wake… how could Undyne cope with that?

As Snaca started panicking, banging on the radio and fruitlessly tweaking its dials, Undyne crossed her arms and shifted uncomfortably. “Outpost 36! Outpost 36, respond! What’s going on?” Snaca hissed.

The radio squawked back to life with a burst of static, the same unfortunate guard’s voice coming through, reedy and nervous. “She—She just… tore through us like—”

“How many of you are left?” Snaca barked.

“H-How many? Uh… all of us… but…”

“No casualties? Great!” Snaca’s eyes lit up. “Go after her, then!”

“W-Well, um, that’s the thing—she cut off our arms, ma’am.”

“Both of them?”

“Uh… both of mine, at least…”

“You still have your legs, don’t you? Run after her and kick her!”

Undyne grabbed the speaker from Snaca’s hands and held it to her mouth, ignoring the dirty look Snaca shot her. “This is Captain Undyne. Who am I talking to?”
The disarmed guard’s tone brightened at the sound of Undyne’s voice. “Captain! I-It’s PFC P-Pines, ma’am—”

“PFC Pines?” Undyne racked her brain and quickly paired the name with a face. Pines, a new recruit who’d moved from Snowdin to Waterfall just a few months ago. He could be a little sappy sometimes, but he never let anything needle him. For him to be shaken this much, 2B must have felled him in a matter of seconds, and though she’d spared his life, she probably hadn’t been so keen on being gentle with him. “Get yourself to a hospital, Pines. You and anyone else who’s injured. You’re all off duty.”

“R-Really, ma’am?”

“Of course!” Undyne forced as wide a smile as possible, even though she knew only Snaca could see it. “Just take it easy! And don’t worry about your arms—someone’ll pick ‘em up for you!”

“Th-Thank you, ma’am!” Pines said, sounding much more relieved.

Undyne hung up. “You’re gonna have to work a lot harder on your bedside manner,” she told Snaca, “if you want to be captain someday.”

Snaca rolled her eyes. “Me? Captain? What under Earth could give you that idea?” she asked, her voice dripping with faux innocence the same way her talons dripped with venom.

“Just a hunch.” Undyne shrugged, then picked up 2B’s white katana, the Virtuous Contract. A little bit of dust still clung to its ivory blade. “Stealing swords now, huh?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Hey, watch it. I liberated those swords.” Snaca scowled and grabbed a handful of swords for herself. “It’s called civil asset forfeiture! And give that one back!”

“Nah.” Undyne wiped off the dust and sheathed the Virtuous Contract in her belt. If 2B really seriously got all this way without actually killing anyone, Undyne would happily turn the sword over to her. If not, well… then it would be Undyne’s sword because the last thing anyone could call 2B would be virtuous. “You know the saying—Rank has its privileges.”

Snaca grumbled, but relented, settling for clutching 9S’s remaining armaments. “All right. Well—let’s go take down 2B before she kills someone.”

Undyne took a deep breath. That was a good plan. If she and Snaca, the two strongest monsters in the kingdom, both headed for 2B, 9S would have a better chance to escape.

Dammit, she still felt bad about 9S, even if he was a murderer now, even if it felt good to drive her fist into his stomach and watch him cough and writhe on the floor. Those big blue eyes of his weren’t the eyes of a killer, but the kid had way too much blood and dust on his hands now for Undyne to treat him as anything else. And yet Undyne still couldn’t help but feel some pangs of loyalty toward him.

But she’d meant what she’d said to him. 9S meant nothing to Undyne now; the only reason she was letting him escape was because she knew what 2B would do if anybody took 9S away from her.

As Undyne led Snaca out of the department and onto the streets, a fully-armored guard hurried past her, a boxy black machine tucked under their left arm as their right arm dangled uselessly at their side. They walked with a pronounced limp.

Snaca noticed these things at the same time Undyne did, and as the guard hurried away, she called out to them. “Hey! You!”
Undyne felt her blood run cold. She knew exactly who this guard was. Maybe Snaca did, too.

The guard turned around a little too slowly for Undyne’s comfort, stumbling a little. “Y-Yes, ma’am?” he asked. The voice that came from under his helmet was obviously 9S’s, although he was trying his best to make his voice sound deeper and more gravelly. It would have been funny if Undyne wasn’t currently terrified.

“Why do you have Unit 9S’s… uh, pod thingy?” Snaca asked.

“Oh, this?” 9S asked, hefting the pod. “Uh… Doctor Alphys asked me to bring it to her lab. So she could study and dissect it.”

“Hmm. I see.” Snaca waved 9S along, and Undyne tried not to breathe a sigh of relief as 9S walked off. “Oh, wait. One more thing.”

9S froze. So did Undyne.

“Aren’t you a little short for a stormtrooper?” Snaca asked.

“Oh… no?” 9S shuffled uncomfortably.

“Take off your helmet.”

9S took off running, and Snaca wasted not even a second as she bolted after him. Undyne found herself lagging behind, for once realizing how exhausted she was. Pouring her heart out to Gerson earlier that evening had somehow been more exhausting than a whole day of intensive workouts, and Undyne could feel her eye burning as if her tears had turned into lemon juice. In spite of herself, she just wanted to curl up and sleep the night away… and she definitely didn’t want to be here where she might have to bail 9S out again in what would probably be an extremely suspicious way.

9S stumbled and fell, Pod 153 tumbling out of his arms and rolling along the sidewalk as Snaca tackled him. “Gotcha!” she hissed triumphantly, ripping off 9S’s helmet just as Undyne caught up with her.

Undyne and Snaca looked down, both equally dumbfounded, the look of triumph draining from Snaca’s face.

The man beneath the mask was most definitely *not* 9S.

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From the nearest alleyway, 9S poked his head out from behind the corner and, fully aware of his foolishness in doing so, watched Escar go with the knowledge that his plan was working without a hitch buzzing in his mind like a gentle, friendly bumblebee. All he’d had to do was give the slug his purloined armor, tell him which arm not to use and which leg to limp with, hand him Pod 153, and to complete the illusion, hack into the helmet and project his voice from it, and it had all been perfect.

As the decoy stumbled andfell, 9S ducked into the alley and took off in the opposite direction to put as much distance between himself and Snaca as he could in the shortest possible timeframe given his injuries, the sound of gunfire from Pod 153 echoing across the street as it laid down suppressing fire to further impede 9S’s pursuers.

Off in the distance, a dull boom cut through the air, the ground slightly shaking in the aftermath.

And *there* was distraction number two.
With Pod 153 back in action, Alphys now had both pods connected to her server and, at long last, could give 2B some good news about 9S.

All she had said upon hearing that 9S had given Undyne and Snaca the slip was, “Good,” but even in that one word Alphys had heard the tension melt away from her voice. 6O, though, had cheered with more than enough enthusiasm to make up for 2B’s guarded response.

Everything was working out. The Royal Guard presence in New Home was lightening as manpower was diverted to dealing with 2B, with a breakout in one of the small regional jails downtown drawing the heat away from 9S as he made his escape.

Alphys let up a deep sigh as she watched the blip on her map from 9S’s black box signal draw closer to Hotland. 2B was approaching from the opposite direction with remarkable speed; if all else went well, the two of them would meet up… right here, in Alphys’ lab.

All the distractions paid off. Soon, 9S left the crowded streets of New Home behind with less difficulty than he’d expected and now stood in the sweltering oven that was Hotland. The entire cavern containing this hellish region of the kingdom throbbed with a red-orange glow from the lakes and rivers of magma, swirling in long, slow eddies around rocky plateaus and sharp spires of obsidian with a speed that made molasses seem fast; thick pipelines of coolant and fuel with wide platforms cobbled around them linked the islets like bridges and choked the Core, the central source of the kingdom’s power, like twisting vines as the massive structure hung suspended over the largest of the molten lakes.

From his current vantage point at the furthest east side of Hotland, just past the gate leading to New Home, 9S could see, off in the distance, Alphys’ laboratory—a familiar white cube of a building sitting atop one of the rocky plateaus near the entrance to Waterfall. His heart leaped, his spirits rising as he felt the heightened whirring of his black box lessen. If he could make it there, he might as well be home free. Alphys could help him with his arm. Or he could just head down to her basement laboratory, far beneath the molten lake, and exit out into the depths of Waterfall. It wouldn’t be hard to make it to Snowdin from there, and from Snowdin… home.

Home to 2B. He’d see her again. At last, after so long, he would be able to talk to her and she would be able to hear him; at last, after so long, he would be able to hug her and she would be able to hug him back.

Pod 153 caught up with 9S as he began his descent down to one of the pipeline bridges below. He made a jump down to one of the rickety platforms he’d normally have been able to handle easily, but when his boots had hit the metal grate straddling the pipes, he’d felt the shockwave shoot up his legs and spine like an electric jolt and had nearly fallen over, only to be supported by his pod at the last second. 9S didn’t take another step until his legs stopped feeling like jelly.

Confident he could take another step, he pushed onward, carefully hewing close to whatever he could hide behind. Every moment a passerby came too close for comfort, every time he ducked under something or dove behind something to keep himself hidden, every second he spent immobile, waiting for the danger to pass, was an interminable delay in his eventual freedom. The closer he got, the larger Alphys’ lab grew, the more impatient he became.

When 9S found himself pinned down behind a pile of metal crates while a pair of heavily-armored guards stood around a water cooler bemoaning the heat and humidity, the wait was agonizing
enough to set his teeth on edge. The longer these two guards stood and talked about nothing, the harder it was to stay put. He had half a mind to lunge at them and beat them to death with his bare hands, or better yet, the stupid water cooler they were standing around.

*Cooler heads prevail, 9S,* he told himself, quelling the violent instincts swirling around his head. Those stupid Type-E protocols kept getting him into these messes. As soon as he had a chance, he swore he’d uninstall them.

9S took stock of his surroundings, hoping he could find something to use to distract these knuckleheads. Both guards were currently patting themselves down for spare change, wishing very loudly that they could afford some sodas from the vending machine and loudly complaining about the prices of the pastries set on a flimsy table standing between the machine and the water cooler.

9S decided that the best way to both make his escape and blow off some steam was to indulge them, so he hacked into the machine and started firing bottles of soda at the poor guards at full force until they beat a hasty retreat.

At least he didn’t murder them.

9S took what little opportunity he had to run before the guards could return and catch sight of him, stopping only to steal a croissant and fill a flimsy paper cup with water to wet his parched throat before moving on, ducking into a gloomy manor that seemed to have been scooped up from the Ruins and plopped down on the parched rock. Not a single light was on; every elegant window revealed only a pitch-black abyss on the inside. The door was unlocked.

The inside of the house was so dark that 9S felt comfortable in assuming it was empty; closing the door behind himself, he let out a relieved sigh. Here, he’d catch his breath, slip out the back door, and be back on his way. He tore into his purloined croissant, trying his best to savor the flaky pastry even as his instincts screamed at him to cram the whole thing into his mouth and eat it without chewing, his stomach churning with phantom hunger.

As he finished his meal, 9S crouched down, bowed his head, and let the throbbing aches running through his limbs wash through him. He wanted so badly to keep moving, but… but he was just so tired. His arm was broken, he’d been pumped full of venom and beaten up, his legs burned and ached.

Alphys could fix him, or at least help him deal with the pain. But until then, 9S had to go on. He had to keep pushing himself forward, and forward, and forward…

For the first time since it had been reunited with 9S, Pod 153 spoke up. “Incoming transmission from Unit 2B.”

“Okay.” 9S closed his eyes as 2B’s voice surrounded him. Her real voice, not a recording.

“*Nines? Are you there?*” There was a brisk, urgent undercurrent of concern in her hushed voice.

9S nodded. “Yeah,” he whispered, his voice hoarse and quiet as a stone formed in his throat. “I’m here.”

“*Are you hurt?*”

“A little,” he lied. “*2B, I*…”

“*I’m so glad to hear your voice,*” they both said at once.
9S couldn’t help but smile. “Did you have a good sleep?”

“I’ve had better.”

“I’m sorry. I… I should’ve been there for you when you woke up.” 9S’s chest ached anew. He wished so badly that 2B could be here with him, that she could wrap her arms around him and he could nestle his head on her shoulder, that he could feel her soft hair brush against his cheek and her fingers stroke his hair as she caressed his mangled body, and she could tell him everything would be okay now because she was here.

“It’s okay. I’m coming after you. I’m almost at the lab—it won’t be long, so stay put.”

“No, 2B, I’ll make it back.” 9S stood up on unsteady legs and made his way through the darkened foyer, fumbling in the dark. “I… I’m on my way. I’ll—”

Something wispy and sticky clung to his arm, tugging on it as 9S pulled himself forward. Tearing his arm free, 9S activated Pod 153’s flashlight, illuminating the manor.

He saw rows of bookshelves, tables, and chairs all covered with dust; the remains of an ancient crystal chandelier hanging from the arched ceiling; vases, and statues, and faded paintings in gaudy frames…

And everywhere he looked, spiderwebs crisscrossing the air, leaping from chair to table, from urn to vase, streaming from the chandelier to the staircase leading to the second floor of the ancient house. Somehow, though he hadn’t felt it before, the floor, too, was coated in a layer of webbing, clinging to the soles of his boots. Glistening black spiders scurried across the threads, weaving new webbing over the old with lightning speed.

Normally, none of this would worry 9S—he found spiders to be fascinating creatures—but what did worry him was the revelation that he was not alone in this old, bleak house.

At the top of the stairs, leaning coquettishly on the dusty banister, was a lavender-skinned monster with six long and spindly arms, dark hair done up in lavish braids, a ruffled red dress, and five shiny black eyes that all blinked in sequence. While her two right forearms rested on the banister, one of her two left hands rested on her cheek while the other held a cup of tea.

The monster smiled, revealing two shiny black fangs. “Ahuhuhuhu… oh, dearie me, look who’s wandered into my parlor…” she cooed in a sickly sweet voice.

9S turned around, not willing in the least bit to deal with any of this garbage, but found a thick, white, gauzelike coating of silken webbing already covered the door like a cocoon.

“You’re not going anywhere, darling.” The monster let out another girlish laugh. “Not until you’ve had a lovely evening with little Miss Muffet.”

“Oh, come on!” 9S tore his boots free of the sticky webbing, only to put his foot down and immediately get stuck again. “This is the last thing I’m in the mood to put up with right now!” He turned to Pod 153. “Pod! Fire—”

The spiders under Muffet’s command had already ensnared the support pod, tangling its black hull and writhing manipulator arms in a snarled knot of webbing.

“Oh, I see. You think your taste is too refined for our pastries, don’t you?” Muffet asked, her giggling laughter echoing throughout the foyer. “I disagree with that notion. I think your taste is exactly what this next batch needs!”
All Undyne wanted to do was go home. Well, not home, not back to Waterfall, but rather back to Alphys.

It was funny how she hated Hotland so much, yet enjoyed spending time with Alphys nevertheless. But, after all, the two of them were in the same sinking boat, both bailing out the water before they capsized and plugging the holes in the hull and commiserating in their mutual pain and peril. At her house, she was alone. In Alphys’ lab, the two of them could sink into each other’s arms after a long day.

Having a tyrant for a boss wasn’t something Undyne wanted to talk to someone like Papyrus about. Not him—not such a sweet, happy-go-lucky guy who’d be sure to say something upbeat and well-meaning that wouldn’t quite manage to soothe her because it was too upbeat and too well-meaning and it would ring hollow no matter how sincere he was. Going to Gerson like she’d done earlier almost felt like a mistake in hindsight—now she just felt even more unmoored, knowing now that Asgore had been lying all along. Alphys understood, though, because she and Undyne were in this mess together.

Instead, Undyne was wrangling a bunch of prisoners who’d broken out of jail while Snaca chased after 9S.

As Undyne muscled a miscreant back into his cell, she hoped 9S was safe, but again, she reminded herself, not for his sake.

Chapter End Notes

Is this an episode of Doctor Who from the 1970s? Because 9S keeps getting captured and escaping and getting captured again.
Chapter Summary

Weakened and unarmed, 9S has no choice but to push himself beyond his limits to escape the clutches of the Royal Guard.

Chapter Notes

(musical accompaniment)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2B paused to catch her breath, clutching at her side as a sharp pain ran through her torso like a bolt from the blue and drove the air from her lungs. Pod 042 wasted no time in explaining to her that the alloys used to replace damaged-beyond-repair portions of her chassis had less tensile strength and flexibility; the pain she was currently feeling was a result of overexertion and would pass after only a few minutes if she slowed down and stopped straining herself.

She did, but only for a few seconds, ducking into a patch of tall swamp grass and taking just enough time to steady her breathing and get her internal temperature down to something more manageable. Slowing down wasn’t an option.

“Alphys, what’s happened to 9S?” she asked. The last thing she’d heard before her all-too-brief conversation with him had been cut short had been a sharp peal of unfamiliar, coquettish laughter.

“Hmm... I-I’m still receiving data from his pod, somehow... but not a lot. I-I’ll try triangulating his location.” 2B heard the sound of Alphys’ claws tapping on a keyboard. “O-Oh, good. He’s at Muffet’s house.”

“Who?”

“S-She runs those o-overpriced spider bake sales. Overall, she’s h-harmless, but—” Alphys paused. “It’s... not her he has to worry about. The Royal Guard’s closing in on him!”

2B peeked through the thick grove of swamp grass she’d dove into, spying the shore of a swift, narrow river. Large ice floes bobbed in the dark water—This river led to the Core’s cooling system. “If I follow the river,” she asked her guides, “would I...”

“D-Don’t even think about it,” Alphys said. “I-It’ll take you way o-off-course... and d-dump you into a pool of b-boiling, radioactive water.”

“In such an environment.” Pod 042 said, “Unit 2B would be in extreme risk of fatally overheating. Proposal: Unit 2B should find a safer, more direct route.”

“You’re coming up on Outpost 43,” 6O told 2B, her voice ringing in her left ear. “Be careful. The Waterfall-Hotland border is a lot more heavily guarded now. They’ve got—”
“Some of the guards at this station are pretty tough,” Alphys warned, her voice dueling with 6O’s in 2B’s right ear. “And they have EMP weapons! You’ll have to be extra careful—some of the replacement material in your endoskeleton is more conductive, so those kinds of weapons could hurt you a lot more…”

“Roger.” 2B stood up, pressed on her side where the stitch had been to make sure the pain had faded away, and pressed onward.

The outpost, its two-story fortifications spanning the width of the cavern and its highest points reaching from the floor nearly to the ceiling, was a hodgepodge of hastily-erected walls and platforms, bristling with Royal Guard personnel; it reminded 2B of the structures the Resistance constructed on the front lines of the war on the surface: inelegant, ramshackle, built in a hurry and fortified as needed.

As 2B drew closer, the guards stationed on the ramparts took notice of her and tossed salvos of magical projectiles her way. The bullets were slow-moving, but the patterns they traveled in were complex and difficult-to-avoid waves and helices. 2B was hit a few times, the impacts sending waves of pain through her body and pushing her back. But Pod 042’s machine gun fire—calibrated to be nonlethal, out of respect for Undyne’s wishes—was faster and far more direct, if not a bit ungraceful, and quickly dispatched the snipers.

Shrugging off the pain as it faded, 2B picked up speed. The gate to the outpost was closed, but the skeletal scaffolding clinging to the wall showed another point of entry. With a running jump, 2B reached for the lowest platform, her fingers digging into the metal grating as she dangled over the edge.

Taking notice of her, a machine loitering on the ramparts—a medium biped with the Royal Guard insignia printed on its torso—hurried down the scaffolding, raising a thick and heavy broadsword and letting out an electronic battlecry. “For the glory of King Chara! Glory to monsterkind!”

2B pulled herself up, swinging her leg up and rolling onto the platform just in time to raise her arm and parry the blow with the buckler mounted to her forearm. She struggled to push the machine back, the clash of metal sending reverberations like the tolling of a bell up her arm, and with one fluid stroke swung her blade out from its idle position beneath her shield and sliced through the machine’s arm.

As the machine reeled back, 2B laid a hand on its torso and shoved it aside, throwing it off the platform. It hit the ground with a thud. The machine was heavier than she recalled these types of machines being—or perhaps she was merely weaker.

 Ascending to the ramparts, 2B wasted no time in leaping down to the ground on the opposite side of the wall, much to the chagrin of two guards who’d lunged at her from the left and right and collided with each other. 2B hit the ground running, enemies closing in on her from all sides.

“Would you mind telling me—” 2B asked, hissing through gritted teeth as she parried a strike from one of the six blade-tipped legs of a massive multi-legged machine that scuttled, crablike, across the ground. “Why there are machines here?” She narrowly avoided another machine’s spear as it attacked from the other side, ripping the spear from its hands and tossing it aside, then slicing the machine’s short legs out from under it.

“Machines are just as able to join the Guard as any other subject of the king,” Alphys explained. “The Guard has a new policy now, too—any outsider who joins gets all their other citizenship requirements waived.”
“Beats taking a written exam,” 2B muttered, recalling the exhaustive studying she and 9S had had to do to become citizens.

The crablike machine reared back on its hind legs and struck at her; she slipped just out of reach in the nick of time. Arcs of lightning coursed down the machine’s front legs, and as the arcs strayed close to 2B, she felt an uncomfortable tugging sensation inside patches of her arms and legs. As she grappled with the machine, she felt as though small parts of her body were trying to tear themselves away from her. This must have been the adverse effects of electromagnetic weaponry Alphys had mentioned earlier.

The machine pinned her down, its electrified legs pressing against 2B’s body and immobilizing her. 2B felt a wave of nausea sweep through her, as if her insides were revolting; her arms went numb and bright, searing colors began to flash before her eyes as the high voltage played havoc with her visual processor.

2B cut off the bladed tip of one of the machine’s legs, grabbed the freed blade, and jammed it into the knee joint of the other front leg, immobilizing the machine and pulling herself free. As the multi-legged machine limped away to metaphorically lick its wounds and 2B shook the distortion and hallucinations out of her head, she just barely took notice of a black-armored guardsman running at her from behind. With one strike, 2B severed his forearms, planted her boot in his stomach, and kicked him away, sending him flying into a pile of sandbags.

“Y-You really are c-cutting off a lot of people’s, uh, arms, aren’t you?” Alphys nervously stammered.

“I’m not killing them,” 2B pointed out, noting that the running tally of fatalities Pod 042 kept on display in the corner of her HUD was still hovering at around zero.

“Y-Yeah, but, uh… what kind of a life can you live without any arms?”

2B sighed and pressed onward, her pod laying down suppressing fire to hold back the remaining guards. “You should be happy. When this is over, dozens of people will flock to you for prosthetic limbs.”

“Gee, thanks. Um… Why not try just breaking their arms? It’ll p-put them out of commission f-for weeks, a-and then I w-won’t have to build robot arms for everyone!”

“Understood.” 2B caught the next guard to lunge at her, twisted the dagger out of their hand, jabbed them in the eye, and snapped their forearm like a twig.

It was a little more work to do things this way, but it was somehow, in a deeply visceral way, satisfying.

▫▫▫ ▽▫▫▫

9S struggled in vain against the webbing ensnaring him as Muffet walked down the staircase toward him. He knew that spider silk was stronger than steel by weight, but had never imagined he’d ever be in a situation where he’d be on the receiving end of a practical examination. The fuzzy, sticky cocoon burying him up to his neck made him feel like a pupating silkworm larva. And when you were surrounded by spiders, a bug was the last thing you wanted to feel like.

Could these spiders eat him? Probably not. 9S doubted synthetic android flesh was readily digestible. Could they try? Absolutely. Would the attempt kill him? Probably.

Muffet paused as she reached the foot of the stairs to take a sip of her tea. “Oh, relax,” she said. “I
use that line on everybody. I’m not really going to eat you!”

“I wouldn’t taste good, anyway.”

“Oh, don’t be sour grapes,” Muffet pouted. “Yes, I could liquefy your flesh and make a fine pastry dough with it, but the amount of money I get selling authentic android croissants would be paltry compared to the bounty the kingdom has on your head.”

Muffet gestured to the interior of the musty old house. “My people have been trapped in the Ruins for generations, as the cold of Snowdin is quite fatal to us insects. It took every penny I had to bring my house out of the Ruins, you see, and I had to leave so many of my kind behind…and at the rate my baked goods are selling,” she said, sniffing and wiping a tear from one of her black, almond-shaped eyes, “it will be many years before I have enough money for a heated carriage to carry my brethren through the treacherous cold.”

“I’m so glad I could be of use to you,” 9S said.

“And of course, once King Chara has your soul, we’ll be able to go to the surface, as well! And, oh, how wonderful that will be.”

“Until the first winter,” 9S muttered.

“Oh, and by the way…” The warmth left Muffet’s face, and her five-eyed gaze became cold and hard. 9S felt like an ant under a magnifying glass as his black box warmed up a few degrees. “Did you know a fellow in the Royal Guard by the name of Formickey?”

9S shook his head.

“He was part of the late King Asgore’s personal entourage on the day Their Royal Highness…”

“Chara killed him,” 9S completed. Formickey must have been one of the guards in charge of looking after 60 when Chara had gone after her.

“And he was my cousin.” Muffet examined her sharp, scarlet fingernails. “Third cousin twice removed. Or second cousin three times removed? Oh, it is so hard to keep all the in-laws and step-siblings straight straight when your grandmother had a thousand babies. But I digress.”

“All the more reason to let me go. Your beloved king murdered—”

“No, dear.” Muffet let out a mirthless laugh. “You killed him. It was because of you androids and Asgore’s treasonous loyalty to you that King Chara was forced to dispatch him. His dust covers your hands. And speaking of dust on your hands, I was listening to the radio just before you arrived and heard that something terrible has happened to an old friend of mine. Well, more like a cousin’s former roommate. Perhaps the name, ‘Jim,’ rings a bell…?”

9S felt his sins crawling up his back. Or maybe they were spiders.

One of them crawled over his mouth, tickling his lips as it traced a line of webbing in its wake.

Yep. Spiders.

▫▫▫

2B soon found herself standing in a familiar field of luminescent echo flowers. A susurrus of softly-whispered wishes engulfed her as she passed through. She hadn’t been here in a while—she didn’t
normally take this path to get into Hotland—but this place was burned into her memory.

This was the place she had first met Undyne. Where the two of them had fought, where 2B had first realized how strong monsters could be…and how deadly they could be. Further on, in the tunnels leading to Hotland, was the place where 9S had…

Where he’d died. Where he’d died, for the first time not by her hand, where she’d watched the life drain from his eyes and had been truly powerless, where she’d truly had no say in the matter and had only been able to stand by and watch.

These waving flowers carried the memories of so many past conversations but knew nothing of 9S’s death, of Undyne’s righteous rage, of the pasts that had never happened. 2B alone carried the burden of those memories, carried the burden of knowing that there had been a time when she had so carelessly and callously cut down people she would have soon learned to see as friends…as family…

“2B, are you okay?” 6O asked, startling 2B out of her reverie.

2B shook her head and recomposed herself. “I’m fine,” she insisted, hurrying into the tunnels. The air around her grew hotter and more humid as Hotland neared. “How’s 9S?”

“Not…moving. But the guards in the area…” Alphys seemed to chew on her words, then groaned. “Oh, no…Muffet probably called the cops t-to collect the bounty on his head!”

2B picked up speed. She wasn’t going to stand by and watch 9S die again.

“2B, I-I was going to ask you to s-stop by my lab so I could equip you w-with the rest of the Celestial Being set,” Alphys told her, “b-but s-since you’re taking the lower entrance to Hotland, I’ll be too far out of your way. I—I’m sorry I can’t do anything more for you.” Her voice cracked. “Y-You’re sure you can do this, right?”

“You’ve done plenty, Alphys,” 2B assured her. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll take it from here.”

In front of her, Hotland beckoned, and gazing out at the infernal lake, 2B didn’t need any confirmation from her pod to know that 9S was out there waiting for her.

“Um…” 9S raised his voice. “I’ll pay you double whatever my bounty is if you let me go,” he told Muffet. It wasn’t quite a bluff—Toriel had a lot of money stockpiled from when she’d parted ways with Asgore, and there was probably more than twice whatever the price on his head was tucked away in her home.

Muffet laughed, then looked at all four of her wrists to note the time. “I’m afraid the Royal Guard will be here any minute, so we don’t have time to negotiate your release. Besides…”

“Triple,” 9S offered.

Muffet blinked and swallowed hard. “You have three hundred million G?”

“Yes?” 9S said. One hundred million? That’s insane! I had no idea they were offering that much for me, he thought. Does the royal treasury even have that much money to spend? “Yes,” he repeated with much more confidence. “Barely, but yes. Um, if you let me get my arm free, I can write you a check…?”
Muffet set down her teacup and snapped her fingers. 9S almost saw dollar signs pop up in her eyes. “Oh, yes, certainly, dearie.” She laughed as 9S felt spiders scuttle over his left arm and begin pulling away the webbing keeping him bound. “Well, this works out for everyone nicely, doesn’t it? I get my money, my people can rejoin me in this lovely climate, and I get my revenge on you by making you financially destitute.”

Only a thin coating of webbing was draped on 9S’s left side now; with his freed hand, he brushed it away. “Um, actually, ma’am, my checkbook’s in my right pocket, so I need my right side free, too.”

Muffet chuckled. “Ah, say no more!”

“And I’m sorry about Jim. It was kind of a ‘heat of the moment’ thing,” 9S said as the spiders pulled away the rest of the webbing.

“Oh, I was kidding about that. I barely knew him. Or Formickey.” Muffet smiled, baring her sharp, shiny black fangs and pinching 9S’s cheek. “I just wanted to frighten you, dearie.”

9S sighed with relief. “So you lied about calling the Royal Guard, too.”

“No,” Muffet said, grimacing sheepishly. “I called them as soon as you stepped inside here. I needed that reward money—how was I supposed to know you were so obscenely wealthy?”

A heavy hand knocked on the door to the mansion, echoing through the musty foyer and rattling the windows.

“Ah, that must be them!” Muffet said, her sugary demeanor returning to her as she slipped past 9S and made her way to the front door. “I will stall them while you, ah, empty your coffers.”

9S unwrapped Pod 153 and made a big show out of rifling through his pockets while Muffet attended to the door. All things considered, this wasn’t as bad a situation as it could be. Maybe it wasn’t even the Royal Guard at the door. Maybe 2B had found him (sure, that was a long shot, but it was within the realm of possibility).

“Hello, Miss, uh, Muffet? This is Lieutenant Snaca of the Royal Guard. I received your call about a, uh, a dangerous fugitive who ran into your house…”

“Oh! Oh, him! Terribly sorry, darling, but he escaped out the back door just before you arrived.” Muffet laughed. “I am so, so sorry to have made you come all this way. Can I get you some tea? Or some spider cider on the house? What about a spider doughnut? You Royal Guards must have worked up an appetite…”

9S pretended to write a check and pondered his next move. Escaping out the back door was right out—that was the next place the guards would check. So that left…

One of the other guards spoke up. “THIS IS CORPORAL FOUCAULT 6291 OF THE ROYAL GUARD. WE WOULD LIKE TO SEARCH THE PREMISES.”

A machine?

9S glanced over his shoulder. Muffet was blocking the door to hide him from the guards—so he couldn’t see them either. But that harsh, electronic blare could only be the voice of a machine. He couldn’t believe his luck. A machine was the best thing Captain Undyne could have sent after him.

Still his guardian angel, even though she hated his guts. Undyne was one hell of a friend.
Muffet continued to stall the guards. “Well, I suppose if you must…” She glanced over her shoulder at 9S, her eyes meeting his for only the briefest fraction of a second before following the staircase up. “Oh, but I haven’t dusted in ages…”

9S made his way up the staircase. Muffet expected him to hide out in one of the upstairs rooms, but he had a better idea—although he’d only have a short window of opportunity to pull it off.

Muffet turned around and let the guards in. Two of them. Snaca and the machine identified as Foucault—a small sphere type, floating in the air with a long axe held in their spindly arms.

“Oh, no!” Muffet shouted out as she caught sight of 9S on the staircase. “The fiend was here all along!”

9S wasted no time hacking into Foucault and taking control, and before Snaca could even think of leaping into battle, he turned the machine’s axe on her, swinging the blade through the air and nearly decapitating her before activating Foucault’s self-destruct function.

He turned tail and ran further up the staircase until he reached the second floor hallway. Seconds later, Foucault self-destructed, the explosion rocking the house down to its foundations. 9S braced himself, gritted his teeth, grabbed onto Pod 153, and threw himself through the second floor window, tucking in his legs and hitting the ground rolling.

Why is it always the window? 9S asked himself as he picked himself up off the parched, baked ground and shook the glass out of his hair. He’d landed on his numb and broken right shoulder, which was thankfully incapable of feeling anything other than a dull, throbbing soreness.

“Unit 9S’s right arm has sustained further damage. Analysis: repair may no longer be possible.”

9S pulled himself to his feet and took off. “It’s busted to hell and back anyway. Not like it can get any more broken at this point.”

“An unusable appendage may restrict Unit 9S’s combat capabilities. Proposal: Unit 9S should seek out Doctor Alphys for triage.”

“I’ll get it looked at when I get a chance.” 9S reached the edge of this islet, the heat from the channel of magma several meters below rolling over him. The rest of Hotland stretched out before him, islands both natural and artificial shimmering in the heat. “Pod, can you locate 2B?”

“Affirmative. Running triangulation scan. Unit 2B is currently on the west side of Hotland.”

So close. After so long… “Then we’ll meet in the middle!” With renewed resolve, 9S crossed the metal platform suspended over a pipeline that ran from one island to the next to form a crude bridge. “Can you send her a message? I—”

9S felt something yank backwards as he ran and fell flat on his back, the back of his head slamming into the metal grating. He tried to pull himself up as something dragged him back. Something—

A harpoon embedded in his right bicep. With how fucked up his arm was already, he hadn’t even noticed he’d been hit.

On the other end of the long, taut cable trailing from the harpoon stood Snaca, her entire right side blackened from the explosion, her visor torn away, her armor scorched, and her eyes blazing red. She yanked on the cable as 9S tried to pull himself to her feet, sending him tumbling back down.

“You put me through hell…” Snaca bared her fangs. “Why don’t I return the favor?”
With serpentine grace, she lunged at 9S, weaving through Pod 153’s hail of gunfire, her talons tearing at 9S’s shirt as he wearily backed away from her advances. The harpoon embedded in his arm kept 9S tethered to her; it was all he could do to put even a little distance between himself and the vicious snake. Whenever 9S got more than a few steps away, Snaca simply yanked him back within range of her sweeping claws.

“There’s no use running! Of all King Chara’s soldiers, of all their apostles, I am their most devoted—and I won’t dare let them down!” Snaca raked her claws across 9S’s chest, leaving deep gouges that tingled and stung as the blood welling from them smoked and sizzled.

9S stumbled backward, clutching at his chest. The dosage of venom he’d just gotten wasn’t as plentiful or as concentrated; it didn’t seem like it would put him to sleep any time soon, but with each passing second, it stung more.

“Great Undyne impression you’ve got there,” he defiantly spat. The barbed comment slipped out all too easily, although 9S knew he probably should have kept the quip to himself. “Got anything original to show me?”

Snaca reeled him back in with the harpoon and struck 9S, her talons carving bloody furrows up across his face from chin to forehead; her other hand made a fist and rocketed into his gut. But in such close quarters, she had less room to dodge, and Pod 153’s gunfire managed to land on a weakened section of her armor, liberating a gout of blood from her side as bullets peppered her flesh.

Seizing the opportunity, 9S grabbed the harpoon stuck in his arm and tried to snap it, but—

Why couldn’t his fingers curl tightly enough around the shaft?

_Oh, no._

He was getting worse. Falling apart faster now.

Snaca whirled around, her long and muscular tail blindsiding 9S and hitting him in the side of the head. Static flickered past his vision as everything went gray, and 9S staggered and stumbled, barely staying on his feet.

_This lunatic’s really gonna beat me to death…_ 9S felt a vise squeeze his chest, mingling with the pain from the venom, the heartache indistinguishable from Snaca’s beating as a static haze filled his sight. _Not now… when I was so close…_

As she fought her way through the next outpost, 2B was struck with deja vu.

Running after 9S, fighting past waves of enemies. This was just like last time.

It wasn’t so dark this time, although the air in Hotland was so dry, thick, and hot that it felt just as oppressive as the darkness. There were no tight corridors like in the depths of Alphys’ laboratory—between precarious ravines and rivulets of molten rock draining into the lake, 2B had ample room to maneuver.

But the thought kept running through her mind, and no matter how quickly she ran through the lower levels of Hotland, cliffs from the rocky, obsidian-laced plateaus on either side of her looming over her, 2B could not outrun her growing anxiety.

_What if I’m too late again?_
A cluster of black-armored Royal Guards and machines leaped in front of 2B. As she blocked the strike from one monster’s sword, another stabbed at her with a radiant spear, tearing through her coat; 2B struck them both down with a single swing of her blade. She didn’t bother checking to make sure she hadn’t killed them. Pod 042’s running tally of fatalities remained at zero, so 2B just kept going, tearing through the machines next.

“Um… 2B…?” Alphys spoke up. “Y-You could’ve killed those—”

“Yes? And what of it?” 2B snapped as a spiked flail slammed into her abdomen, knocking her into the waiting embrace of another guard lying in wait behind her. She kicked the guard in the shin, grabbed them by the shoulders, and threw them into her other opponent.

“I—It’s just that… you said—”

“I said, did I?” 2B stabbed one of the fallen guards through the shoulder and watched them writhe before she yanked the blade free. The guard curled up and played dead. 2B nodded in approval.

A ragged yell rang out behind her, and 2B turned around just to find one of the guards she’d dispatched—his shattered arm flopping at his side—bearing down on her with a heavy, electrified hand axe.

The blade bit into 2B’s shoulder, sending convulsing electrical current through her muscles; she grabbed the handle of the axe, tore the blade from her shoulder, and grappled with the guard, staring into the emerald optical sensors of his helmet.

2B kneed him in the groin with so much force that the guard immediately went limp and collapsed to the ground, vomit leaking from the seam between his helmet and his neck. Another guard rose up and lunged at her; Pod 042 opened fire and blew their arm off.

It was so pointless. Injure them, and they’d come back and have another shot at killing you. Kill them, and they would never trouble you again.

“2B, are you a-all right?” Alphys asked.

“I’m fine. No thanks to your insistence on handicapping me.”

Alphys was scandalized. “2B!”

Truth be told, 2B wasn’t used to talking back to people—when she’d served in YoRHa, she’d obeyed every order without question, for better and for worse. But now she couldn’t resist the urge.

“What?” 2B pressed onward, dispensing with the usual finesse. The monsters in her path grew more hesitant in their attacks and began pointedly keeping their distance; the machines, with their greater durability, retained their gung-ho attitudes and continued to attack her head-on. “For every five seconds I spend sparing these enemies,” she said, exasperated, “I could take half the time to just kill them. What if I’m a second too late?”

“N-Nines… 9S is gonna be fine, 2B,” Alphys insisted.

“No! O-Of course not! But…” Alphys sighed. “I-If you kill everyone who gets in your way, then this is all over… you w-won’t be able to go back to the way things used to be. No one will see you as a-anything other than a murderer…”
2B gritted her teeth, cutting through the next wave of enemies in front of her, bringing her sword to one of her foes’ throats. One thrust, and this one would never hurt anybody.

She stopped.

She’d fought her way through this place before—fought and killed—and where had it brought her then?

Asgore’s voice rang in her head. *They may call me a coward for that, and they will be right. But it is a terrible thing to have blood on one’s hands, is it not? Even worse, sometimes, than being a coward?*

Undyne, too. Her accusatory words still haunted 2B, two timelines later.

*You don’t know how to do anything but kill.*

“I’m sorry, Alphys,” 2B walked past the fallen soldier, took a deep breath, and sighed, shrugging off the smarting pain riddling her body from the injuries she’d sustained in battle. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”


“Roger that.” 2B turned to Pod 042. “Pod, plot me the most direct course to 9S’s current location.”

“Map analysis in progress. Creating proposed route.”

The directions populated 2B’s HUD, and steeling herself, she soldiered on.

Snaca yanked on the cable again, drawing 9S back within range of her talons.

9S only had a split second to make his next move. “Pod, deactivate the shoulder seam on my right arm!” he shouted out.

Pod 153 responded instantly, sending the necessary codes to 9S’s motor systems to seal and sever all vessels and circuits and detach right arm, liberating the arm from his torso at just the right moment. Freed so abruptly of the great weight she’d been tugging on, Snaca flew backward, her harpoon with 9S’s skewered right arm flying along with her as she hit the bridge.

9S took off down the bridge while he had the chance, limping to freedom as quickly as he could. “Pod, what’s in this pipeline?” he asked, pointing to the pipes running beneath the metal grating.

“Analyzing. Result: this is a water pipeline.”

“Water, huh?” 9S’s eyes drifted to the river of magma below. “Pod, will a laser pierce these pipes?”

“Analysis: the pipes were not designed to withstand energy-based attacks.”

Snaca pulled herself to her feet, clutching at her side.

“Then fire!”

Snaca’s eyes widened as she wrapped her arms over her chest in a futile attempt to protect herself.
On 9S’s orders, Pod 153 aimed downward and fired through the grated platform, through the pipes, and into the magma below. Great torrents of water gushed from the holes bored into the pipes and poured onto the molten rock, creating an opaque white cloud of boiling steam that wrapped around the bridge and consumed both its passengers.

9S could feel the intense heat scald his exposed skin as he ran to safety, not stopping until he was free of the steam and standing on solid rock—kneeling—lying on solid rock. His clothes, dampened by flash-condensation, clung to his raw skin. As an android, his skin was resilient to such high temperatures, but Snaca…

Well, a monster wouldn’t be so lucky. Snaca should have been cooked through by the intense heat.

“Thanks, 153,” 9S muttered, rolling onto his back and sitting up. He reached out for his support pod, taking its readily-offered claw and using it to pull himself up. “A lifesaver, as always.”

“Statement: this support unit is merely following its programming. However, I take great pleasure in doing so.”

9S smiled.

“Query: how is Unit 9S feeling?” Pod 153 asked as it helped 9S up. 9S leaned against it like it was a floating crutch.

“Why don’t you run another analysis?”

“Statement: analysis only reveals the physical condition of an assigned YoRHa unit. This support unit will repeat its query: how is Unit 9S feeling?”

“I don’t think I can tell you anything you don’t already know. I feel like I look.” 9S tried to wipe the blood from his eyes before remembering that he only had one arm now, and it was currently grabbing hold of Pod 153’s arm for support.

9S couldn’t help but feel sorry for Alphys. She’d taken nine months to piece together his arm and get it in working order, and fifty days later, he’d managed to completely trash it.

9S watched the steam clear away as the cooling magma below the bridge blackened and hardened, sighed—

But his breath caught in his throat.

Snaca was still standing in the middle of the bridge.

9S sputtered as he pushed the stale air from his lungs. “Oh, come on—”

Hotland was the industrial hub of the kingdom; with the Core, Alphys’ lab, and the foundry built through the lower levels all drawing on the bounty of geothermal energy provided by the flowing magma running through the massive chamber. Weaving off and on conveyor belts, around massive moving pieces of machinery, 2B felt strangely at home fighting the machines that stood in her way.

As 2B crossed the metal scaffolding pulling her up from the lower levels of Hotland and away from the worst of the heat rolling off the scorching magma, a massive Goliath-class machine dropped down in front of her, shaking the metal platforms so intensely that all 2B could do was struggle to barely hang on. The Goliath machine was peculiarly-ornamented, its outer casing plated with
shimmering gold leaf.

“2B! How fortunate that we should meet here of all places!” a familiar voice issued from the machine as its torso unfolded, revealing a very familiar face within it. “I’ve never had a chance,” Mettaton went on, his faceplate lighting up with glee, “to pay you and your boy back for all the humiliations you’ve laid upon my beautiful visage! Now, 2B,” he crowed, the massive machine he was piloting raising a heavy fist, “prepare to d—”

2B did not mince words.

“How fortunate that we should meet here of all places!” a familiar voice issued from the machine as its torso unfolded, revealing a very familiar face within it. “I’ve never had a chance,” Mettaton went on, his faceplate lighting up with glee, “to pay you and your boy back for all the humiliations you’ve laid upon my beautiful visage! Now, 2B,” he crowed, the massive machine he was piloting raising a heavy fist, “prepare to d—”

2B did not mince words.

“Get out of my way.”

She cut down the machine’s legs with one swift stroke and let it tumble to the floor of the foundry far below. The machine crashed onto the conveyor belt and slowly began to travel toward a glowing pool of molten steel as Mettaton hurriedly pulled himself out of his cockpit, shaking a fist at 2B as she ascended.

Snaca threw herself at 9S with nearly double the speed and ferocity as before, tackling him to the ground, the world spinning around 9S before he came to a stop. Pod 153’s suppressing fire bounced off her sharpened scales; as she pinned 9S to the ground, acrid spit dripped from her wide-open mouth and sizzled and smoked as it hit 9S’s skin. Her eyes had turned jet-black, her slitted pupils stark white; after her strange transformation, she now resembled more a wingless dragon than a snake.

9S had seen a transformation like this before, he realized. In some ways not quite as dramatic, in some ways more; but it seemed Snaca had inadvertently stolen another trick from Undyne’s book.

Snaca swatted Pod 153 away and drew back her right arm, the mouth on her palm wide and gaping; and somehow, the mouth gaped wider, the seam traveling up her arm to her elbow, and her entire forearm opened up and transformed into a long, fanged muzzle.

9S couldn’t move. Was it the pain? The venom? The fatigue? A mix of all three?

Was this the end?

Why here? Why now?

Why am I here?

What brought me to this point?

9S was a Scanner. He was designed to be curious, analytical, detail-oriented. And, of course, as a unit designed primarily for information-gathering and reconnaissance, there wasn’t much point in him being brash or headstrong or self-sacrificing. He was never supposed to be as violent or bloodthirsty as a combat model.

But there was a part of him that defied his programming, a piece of his personality that didn’t quite fit with his design, a part of him that only came out with his anger, with his hatred. A part of him that relished the pain he could inflict. It was the part of him that had come out when he’d stared down 6E and told her he would kill every single one of her kind. It was the part of him that had nearly killed 2B when he’d been stripped of his soul (the nightmares still visited him, less frequent ten months later but just as potent when they did come). It was the part of him that had brought him here, at the end of his hope, to go out in a blaze of violence and glory.
It was a part of 9S he wished did not exist. He’d indulged it for so long now, listening to its siren song brush against his ear all the while 2B had been in her coma and allowing it to guide him to what he’d thought had been an awful truth—that she was gone forever, that 9S had nobody now but himself, and that he had no recourse but revenge.

He’d given himself to his rage, given himself over to the darkest and most hateful depths of his heart, and thrown himself to the wolves. Because what could there be in life without 2B to join him? What point was there in living, longing for the love of someone who no longer existed?

And the cruelest twist of fate of all—by the time he’d heard 2B’s voice at last, he’d already crossed the point of no return. Now he was here, crippled and broken by his own design, pulled inexorably to this ignoble end by his own poor decisions.

9S didn’t want to be what he’d become. He had to be better than this. To be stronger than this. But that opportunity had passed him by, hadn’t it?

Because this was the end.

No.

There was one last resort. One last thing he’d developed using 2B’s Type-E protocols and combat data.

YoRHa combat models had once been equipped with a berserker mode, dubbed “B-Mode,” which temporarily boosted the power output of a unit in exchange for lowering its stamina and defenses. 9S had reverse-engineered it and rerouted his own self-destruct functions around it. He’d known his body wouldn’t be able to handle it—especially not now.

Using it would probably kill him.

He’d been planning to save it as a last resort when he went after Chara, but when he’d found out that 2B was back, he’d set his suicide mission aside.

But maybe…

Maybe…

If 9S used it to escape here, maybe he’d last long enough to reach 2B and say goodbye to her.

It would be better than dying here and never seeing her again.

*I’m so sorry it had to come to this, 2B. Everything that’s happened here today has been my fault.*

*Everything.*

*Because I couldn’t control myself. Because I couldn’t see past my own hatred and grief.*

*I hope someday you’ll forgive me.*

9S closed his eyes, took as deep a breath as he could as Snaca moved in for the kill, and activated it.

-ALERT-

**B-MODE: FULL COWL**
At last, 2B had reached the taller pillars of rock which housed the sparse residential level of Hotland. Some homes were built into the rock, some on top of it; most were empty, as Hotland was proving less and less a comfortable place to live with each passing year. The signal from 9S’s black box grew stronger the closer 2B came to it.

Almost there.

An electronic scream rang out from behind 2B; she glanced backward just in time to see an exploder—merely a small machine model’s legs bolted onto a bomb, possessing no intelligence and scarcely fit to be labeled a “machine lifeform”—charging at her. Pod 042 fired on it until it erupted into a pile of shrapnel just meters away from 2B; even at such a distance, the heat and concussive force from the explosion still pushed her back.

A hulking guard, too big to fit into YoRHa armor, attacked from the side. In a single arc of her blade, 2B severed one arm and both legs from his meaty torso and threw him onto the scaffolding she’d just climbed up; another machine swung a sword at her and she caught it with one hand, blood streaming down her sleeve, and plunged her blade through its head. She watched its optical sensors grow dark.

The counter on 2B’s HUD shifted from zero to one.

Just a machine, she told herself, pressing onward. She couldn’t afford to care about it. She had to reach 9S, come hell or high water.

The first thing 9S felt, strangely enough, was euphoria.

Bliss.

No pain. But a flood of endorphins running through his mind, melting away the aches and pains, the stinging wounds, the battered muscles.

One punch fractured Snaca’s skull; as she reared back, clutching at her face in agony, her long and spiked tail whipping angrily behind her, 9S felt himself stand up.

Felt himself.

Like he wasn’t in control of his own body. Like he was a mere observer, his body acting merely on its own instincts, using all of the combat protocols taken from 2B’s programming to their full potential with no heed paid to 9S’s unsuited physique.

The second thing 9S felt was worry. Because he couldn’t feel it, but he could somehow see the inside of his body crack and crumble as impossible strength was pulled from his chassis and channeled through his muscles.

What had happened to his right arm first would happen to everything else soon.

Snaca’s tail wrapped around his neck, crushing his throat—he couldn’t feel himself overheating, but he knew that without his lungs to carry heat from his internal systems, it would happen soon enough—and slammed him into the ground, the rocks cracking and crumbling beneath him. He didn’t feel
the pain. Everything he *did* feel was abstract and distant, worlds away.

9S grabbed hold of Snaca’s tail, fingers digging into her scales tightly enough to break the skin, and threw her into the air; she righted herself in midair, landing and digging her claws into the ground, rending furrows in the rock as she slid to the edge of the islet. Debris slipped off the lip of the cliff and tumbled to the river of magma a dozen meters below.

Snaca charged at him, two swords protruding from the gaping maws on her arms like sharp, metallic tongues. One was 2B’s secondary blade, the Joyeuse—the other was 9S’s own sword, the Cruel Oath.

Snaca’s blade-tipped arms whipped through the air, curling and twisting with all of the flexibility of great jungle snakes, forming a maelstrom of dancing blades 9S could barely avoid, even in spite of the massive boost to his agility and reaction time. At last, he found an opening and dove in, tearing the Cruel Oath free of Snaca’s grasp and turning the blade on her.

The two swords met and clashed, dancing around each other with a cacophony of ringing metal and a dazzling display of light reflecting across the swift blades. At last, 9S’s blade drilled into Snaca’s stomach, the force of the impact liberating blood and bile from all three of her gaping, slavering maws. Dust, too—the blood spilling from Snaca’s broken body dried and crumbled before it could even hit the ground.

Undeterred from the force of the blow, Snaca’s arm-mouth latched onto 9S’s torso and bit down as she raised her second sword over her head and prepared to strike.

9S couldn’t shake her off. Blood and coolant pumped from deep puncture wounds. It didn’t hurt at all, but 9S knew that it *should* hurt, and the fact that he had to remind himself that he’d just sustained what was likely a mortal injury cut through the euphoria of B-Mode and filled him with terror.

Terror, and…

Sadness.

*Anguish.*

This was it.

A marvel of reverse-engineering even Alphys would be proud of, and it wasn’t enough.

Snaca shouted something at him, her venomous spit flecking his face, but 9S couldn’t hear her. All he could hear was the fevered pitch of his black box.

9S gritted his teeth and kicked her.

Evidently, his legs were stronger than his arm, or at least not as worn-out.

The force of his kick was enough to throw Snaca into the air. However, it wasn’t enough to tear Snaca’s well-anchored mouth from 9S’s midsection.

Instead, it tore her arm off right at the elbow.

As the ragged jaws clinging to 9S crumbled to dust, 9S felt the high run out.

He collapsed.

Collapsed, hemorrhaging blood and coolant. Everything hurt—every cubic centimeter of his body,
inside and outside, from head to toe. Each breath he took was labored.

9S had been expecting this, but how much agony he was left in still took him by surprise. There was no way to prepare for this kind of pain. He couldn’t even summon the mental energy to hack into himself and deaden his pain receptors.

Snaca hit the ground just a few meters away from him and slowly, slowly, agonizingly slowly, stood up.

She stood over him, contempt emanating from the iridescent blue-green shine of every scale on her body. Her remaining arm hung limply at her side, dragging the Joyeuse against the ground.

“It’s over,” she told him. “From this day forward, no one else will live in fear of you damned machines. From this day on, we’ll be free, and I will be the greatest he—”

In spite of himself, 9S started laughing.

“You… You really don’t have a single original idea in your head… do you?” he asked Snaca.

Enraged, Snaca lifted her foot over 9S’s head, about to bring it down on him and crush his skull (or at least try).

Almost there.

2B was almost there.

Her legs burned. Error messages flickered on her HUD as she pushed her way past every enemy that stepped in her path, not even bothering with fighting even if someone managed to land a hit on her.

She wouldn’t be too late.

Not this time.

Not this time!

At last, the readings from 2B’s HUD pointed her in a straight line.

And at last, she saw him.

9S.

Collapsed on the ground as a grotesque dragon of a monster stood over him, one clawed foot raised over his head—

2B’s heart sank, her black box heating up in her chest as her muscles contracted around it, blood singing in her ears as the whir of her black box was lost to the rapid pumping of coolant through her weary muscles.

She wasn’t close enough.

As fast as she could run, she’d never make it in time.
Before Snaca could bring her foot down, a lance of light tore through her stomach, the beam assaulting 9S’s eyes as it passed overhead, the heat radiating from it singeing his hair and skin.

Another laser blast tore through Snaca’s midsection from the opposite direction. Her eyes widened, mouth agape, slitted pupils contracted to thin lines as she gasped in agony. 9S struggled to turn his neck, pushing past the searing pain shooting up his neck, and saw Pod 153 struggle to pull itself free of a pile of rubble as it prepared to fire again.

Snaca was still standing, even as the burned-away flesh surrounding the two holes in her midsection crumbled and flaked off, widening the holes.

9S hadn’t known how Undyne had called upon such strength and endurance when she’d fought 6E, but somehow, Snaca had done it as well, clinging to life against all odds. Was it just something exceptionally strong monsters could do?

Snaca opened her mouth and dust poured from her jaw in a dry fountain. She stumbled, then raised her sword over 9S’s head.

“King Chara... grant me strength...” Snaca croaked, “my angel, my savior, I am your s-sword... If I perish here, and my unworthy brethren... would have died for nothing... I must... I must... I must...”

▫▫▫ ▯ ▫▫▫

2B saw the glittering blade travel in an agonizingly-slow arc, as if the monster standing over 9S was drawing the killing blow out for its own sick satisfaction to an impossible degree.

Her arms, her legs, her body felt so heavy—and heavier still, as if her chassis were composed entirely of lead—with each passing second that she found herself too far away to make a difference.

Pod 042 was still cooling down—it couldn’t pull off another shot for at least another minute. And by then, it would be too late.

9S seemed to be miles away.

No...

Not again...

Memories flitted through 2B’s head of every time 9S had died.

Every time he’d died by her hand, and more.

The electric spear skewering his skull and leaving a hole all the way through his head where his eye had been.

His broken body clinging to hers in the snow as the two of them waited for their systems to fall offline, not knowing if either of them would come back.

His empty, blank stare after 2B had torn the machine core from his chest.

She couldn’t let it happen again.

This could not continue.

The world around 2B seemed to slow down—the glittering arc of the Joyeuse in the hulking
monster’s grip now traveling at a ludicrously cruel slowness, as if the air were as thick as molasses.

2B pushed herself forward, her muscles burning.

She would not fail 9S again.

She would not.

As the draconic monster came rushing up to meet her, 2B realized that somehow, everything in the world had slowed to a crawl save for herself.

Snaca looked up at the android who’d just murdered her compatriots as the visor they’d worn around their eyes split in two and fluttered to the ground.

Red eyes—the same crimson as everyone else in the Dreemurr family.

She was staring into the eyes of Chara Dreemurr.

When she had been a little girl, Snaca had heard the story over and over again. The story of Chara and Asriel Dreemurr. Snaca’s mother told her that Chara was the fabled Angel—the one who had seen the surface and would return one day to empty the Underground.

Snaca had always laughed at her superstitions. Chara was dead. They would never return, even if everybody in the kingdom prayed for it every night for a hundred years.

But now, she was staring at the face of the divine.

“Y—You... Princex Chara?”

“In the flesh,” Chara intoned, setting aside their sword. The cruelty vanished from their grim face, their glare softening.

Snaca felt herself laugh. “Talk about picking the wrong sside…”

She realized at that moment that Chara was everything her mother had said they were.

Divine.

And while they had smote her friends, they had elected to spare her, of all people.

While Chara set their sights on the android girl Snaca was supposed to protect, the moment the two of them had locked eyes seemingly slipping from their memory, Snaca saw the light.

She had been blessed. Chosen. Burdened with glorious purpose by the angel themselves.

She would serve Chara to the ends of the Earth.

She would never give up.
Snaca vowed that day, the day she had felt the touch of the divine, that even if somebody killed her, she would not die until she saw her lord and master’s vision through. She would live where all others died. That was the silent pact she made.

The thought of leading her people out of their eons-long imprisonment under the banner of a living god… it filled Snaca with determination.

With a glittering flash of shining metal and a shower of blood and dust, Snaca fell to the ground, a neat diagonal line through her perforated torso running from hip to shoulder cleaving her in two. And standing behind her—

Behind her—

9S opened his mouth, but at first, no sound came out. Until, after a second that had felt like an hour, he squeaked out one name:

“2B…”

9S lifted his arm with all his strength, his fingers trembling, his hand shaking as he reached out to her. Tears built up in his eyes, reducing the world to a blur. The light shining behind 2B as she stood over him lit up the fringes of her silvery-white hair like a halo. 9S wondered if the faint blue light that seemed to engulf her was a real phenomenon, or just a hallucination brought on by the extreme damage to his systems. It seemed familiar… like he’d seen it before somewhere.

2B spoke to him.

“Oh, Nines…”

Her voice: soft, hushed, nearly a whisper.

Her hand wrapped around his and she knelt down and wrapped her black coat around him, her strong arms curled beneath him, her touch softer and more comforting than 9S could imagine after so long without it.

9S closed his eyes, letting his relief wash a small amount of the pain wracking his broken body away. He’d made it. He’d made it this far. If he never woke up again, that would be all right.

It was all right now.

Because 2B was here.

Chapter End Notes

"Kaio-what?"
Chapter Summary

An old friend turns up to make a deal with 2B and 9S. Undyne and Alphys have a moment to themselves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

- Commencing System Check
- Memory Unit: Green
- Initializing Tactics Log
- Loading Geographic Data
- Vitals: Yellow
- Remaining MP: 14%
- Black Box Temperature: High
- Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal

“Nines... Nines, please...”

- Activating IFF
- Activating FCS... Failed
- Initializing Pod Connection... Failed
- Initializing Pod Connection... Failed
- Initializing Pod Connection
- Launching DBU Setup
- Activating Inertia Control System
- Activating Environmental Sensors

“Is this all the staunching gel we have, Alphys?”

- Equipment Status: Red
- Boot Process Aborted
- Running Disk Integrity Check

“I’ve got this, 2B! Hold on...”

- Override Password: *********************
- Forced Safe Boot Engaged
- YoRHa No. 9 Type-S Safe Mode Online_

9S almost didn’t expect to wake up. But somehow, he managed to crack open his eyes, just barely—long enough to see an indistinct, subtly-shifting pattern of large gray blocks.

He counted his blessings he was alive. After what he’d gone through, he’d thought for sure he was going to die. And... it would have been okay to die with 2B standing over—
Wait, no. Why on Earth had he thought *that*? Had he been delirious from the pain? It *wouldn’t* have been okay to die by 2B’s side! It would have hurt her so much!

He was alive. That was good.

He was stuck in safe mode. Couldn’t see anything. Could barely hear anything. That was less good.

*Safe mode, huh?* he thought. *That explains the gray. My video codecs aren’t communicating properly with my visual systems.*

He tried to move and couldn’t. That made sense—his motor systems wouldn’t be functional in safe mode, either.

Well, “stuck in safe mode” was better than “inoperable,” and he could probably hack his own systems to remove whatever corruption was preventing him from rebooting properly now that his body was filled with numb, tingly static instead of excruciating pain. Then again, once he did that, his body would be filled with excruciating pain instead of numb, tingly static.

“All right,” 2B’s voice emitted from one of the gray blobs of oversized pixels, about as low-fidelity as her appearance but still music to 9S’s ears. Sixteen kilobytes per second and ravaged by compression artifacts, but music nonetheless. “He’s awake,” she observed to Alphys. “Can he hear me?”

“Oh… y-yeah, not very well, but yeah.”

“All right?” 2B laid a hand on 9S’s forehead, or what was probably a hand, and ran her fingers through his hair and across his scalp. Or, at least, 9S thought that’s what she was doing.

He couldn’t actually feel it—just vague impressions, with his brain filling in a scant few of the blanks.

Oh.

He couldn’t just wallow here in safe mode, after all.

*I’m fine,* he wanted to say, but his vocal processors were offline.

“*H-He can’t talk,*” Alphys added.

9S blinked.

“Oh! He can blink, though!” Alphys noticed. “All right, if you have anything, uh, important to say, blink once for ‘A,’ twice for ‘B,’ three times for ‘C,’ f—”

“How’d you learn to reboot him in safe mode?” 2B asked.

“Oh, uh… he taught me. We—we tried to do it to you, but, uh, well…”

“I see. So he’s… conscious?”

Pod 153 chimed in. “Analysis: Unit 9S’s self-hacking module is functional. Proposal: Unit 9S should assess any damage to internal systems and reboot into normal mode, if possible.”

9S gathered his thoughts and dove into his systems.

2B had held herself together when she’d reached 9S and swaddled his bleeding body in her coat.
She’d held herself together when she’d all but kicked the door to the Royal Laboratory down. She’d held herself together while she and Alphys had gathered all the tools at their disposal to stabilize him, keeping a vigil kneeling at his side while trying not to feel helpless.

9S was good at maintenance, at least for a Type-S, but 2B didn’t have such experience—she knew more about how androids worked than most androids, but only to more efficiently execute them, not to repair them. With the fall of YoRHa, the only two people in the world 2B knew of who knew how to maintain and repair damaged androids were right here—one unconscious and clinging to life, the other fumbling through a toolbox. She had to trust Alphys to patch the puncture wounds running across 9S’s chest, seal the larger fractures in his chassis, because 9S…

To say he looked horrible would have been an understatement. Lying so limply on a bed made from 2B’s coat and the tattered remains of his own clothing, the scars marring his skin hardening his once-soft and boyish face, grime smeared over his ashen skin, long red claw marks cutting into his muscles and scraping the hard endodermis beneath. Three parallel furrows ran from the right side of his chin to his left temple, splitting his lips and running across the bridge of his nose, his left eye fortunate enough to occupy the space between two of the lacerations and remain unscathed. 9S looked more than horrible—he looked mangled and broken.

When his eyes had opened—still soft, pale blues—2B’s black box had stopped for just a moment. At least, that was what it had felt like. Nevertheless, she’d kept her composure, managed her expectations, stifled both her optimism and pessimism as they dueled within her.

But then, after what had felt like an eternity waiting with bated breath, 9S’s hand had moved. And he’d lifted his head, and wrapped his fingers—stiff and uncooperative as they were—around 2B’s wrist.

And that had been enough.

She smiled and broke down, crying tears of relief into his shoulder, cradling the back of his head in her hand, her fingers running through his hair. Wrapped up in her arms, 9S shivered and pulled himself closer with a weak and shaking arm, his cheek nestled in her hair, his tears dampening her silver-white locks. 2B kept her grip as gentle as she could, though in her relief she just wanted to hug him to pieces. She’d almost lost him. She’d come so close this time to losing him just like she’d lost him before. A single second… a single fraction of a second…

What had she done? How had she done it? How had she pulled 9S out of the yawning abyss he’d thrown himself into? How had she made it in time?

“Uh… 2B?” Alphys patted her on the shoulder. “I-It’s okay, y-you don’t have to… He’s okay, see?”

“2B, what’s wrong?” 6O asked, her voice soft against 2B’s ear. “You did it! It’s okay!”

9S began to whimper; fearing she was hurting him, 2B loosened her grip and laid him down on the floor, once again laying out in full view all of the damage he’d endured even as the lacerations splitting him apart began to close. The tears leaking out from under her visor and rolling down her cheeks dripped onto his face, mingling with his own tears and the shiny glaze of staunching gel coating his wounds. Her tears weren’t just tears of relief and joy now; now it hurt to breathe for a different reason, the weight pressing against her chest born of melancholy.

If only she’d just woken up a day sooner… just a day…

“2B, it’s okay,” 6O repeated. “9S looks… fine. He’ll be fine. You got to him in time!”
9S reached out and caressed 2B’s face, the curve of his soft palm and gentle arc of his fingers matching the curve of her cheek, and a weak and bittersweet smile played across his face, coaxing more blood to well up from his split lip and stain his white teeth scarlet. “H-How long have I been out?” he asked, his voice cracked and trembling, just a little above a whisper. “Six more weeks? Or months?”

“Uh… twenty minutes,” Alphys answered, glancing at her wristwatch.

“Damn. You work fast, Doc.” 9S sat up, grasping 2B’s shoulder for support; she laid her hands on his sides and kept him steady. “I’m sorry. I should’ve been there for you when you woke up… I was stupid… reckless… I’ve caused so many problems…”

“Shh. Save it for later,” said 2B. “Now isn’t the time to let those thoughts trouble you.”

“Ah, yes… how could I forget one of YoRHa’s most important rules…” 9S sniffled. “‘Angst is prohibited.’” He gave 2B another one-armed hug, collapsing into her embrace and sobbing. “I’ve made quite a mess,” he said, panting out his words between labored breaths, “haven’t I? I’d really like to… take a long, hot bath… put on a fresh set of PJs… and curl up under a thick, warm, fluffy blanket.”

“We can do that,” 2B assured him. “We can do that.”

“2B…” Alphys checked her laptop, a pang of worry entering her voice. “I—I hate to kick you guys out, but if you th-think Nines is well enough for you to c-carry him out of here, you’d, uh, better do it pronto. It looks like a couple guards are coming this way. I-If they saw you coming in this direction, th-they’ll have reasonable s-suspicion to search this place.”

2B eyed the ragged coat lying on the tiled floor and the scarlet android blood staining the grout between the tiles and felt her black box sink deeper into her chest.

“I-I can clean that up before they get here,” Alphys said, “but you guys sh-should head into the basement. Take the corridor to Waterfall as soon as you can.” She skittered over to the elevator, keying in the proper code to summon the lift and open the doors with trembling fingers. “Y-You’d, uh, have to lay low this time, 2B,” she added.

9S took a deep breath. “I think I’m ready.” The staunching gel smeared into and over his wounds had stopped the bleeding from his face and torso, and his skin was beginning to knit the deeper lacerations back together. Depending on how active the nanomachines in his bloodstream were in light of his condition, it could be only a few hours before those deep cuts—almost like canyons gouged into his flesh—would be reduced to tight seams that would eventually fade into scars.

2B stood up, helping 9S to his feet—his legs wobbled like a newborn fawn’s—and when she saw how much trouble he was having standing up despite his renewed confidence, she hooked her arm under the crook of his knees and swept him off his feet.

“Analysis: Unit 9S is mildly dehydrated,” Pod 153 observed. “Proposal: procure at least one liter of water to offset the loss of blood and coolant and replenish levels of self-repair nanomachines.”

“T-Take as much stuff as you n-need on the way out,” Alphys said as the doors to the elevator slid open and she ushered the pair of androids toward it. As 2B passed by her, she reached out and grabbed her by the arm. “O-Oh, and 2B?”

2B stopped, one foot planted firmly on the platform. “Yes?”

Alphys wrapped her arms around her waist and hugged her, resting her head against 9S as he lay
curled up in 2B’s arms. “I—I’m so happy for you two… A-And you, 2B… I’m so glad you’re awake. W-We’ve all been going k-kinda crazy without you.”

“Glad to be of service.” 2B smiled, a certain nostalgic warmth bubbling up in her chest. Being hailed as saviors upon arrival was part and parcel of the YoRHa experience, and one of the few parts of being in that line of work that 2B actually missed at that. “And while I’m here, Alphys… thanks for the sword.”

“Y-You like it?” Alphys asked, her eyes brightening, tail wagging.

“It’s the kind of weapon no one would think to invent except you.” She gestured to the buckler as best she could with her hands full. “Versatile, too. The shield design, in particular, is inspired.”

Alphys grinned. “A-Aww, thanks, 2B! I-It really comes together for the rest of the set. I was gonna, uh, y’know, give you the rest of what I’ve finished, but we, uh… w-we don’t have time for that.”

“I’m willing to wait,” said 2B, remembering that Alphys had intended this sword, as well as the rest of the equipment that went along with it, as a birthday present.

She stepped onto the elevator as Alphys made a beeline for a mop and bucket, and as the doors slid shut and the platform began its descent, 2B held 9S closer to her chest, lifted his head, and lightly nuzzled his cheek.

“I’m glad I found you in one piece, Nines,” she murmured.

“Well, to be honest,” 9S replied, eyeing the empty socket where his right shoulder had once been, “I’m only still in one piece… because I’m pretty sure there isn’t anything left of my arm. So, yeah. Technically.” He rested his head against 2B’s shoulder.

The elevator came to a stop and once the doors had slid open, 2B stepped into the gloomy sub-basement of the lab. The lab was empty and eerily silent; while portions of it showed signs of recent use, many of its winding corridors hadn’t been set foot in over the past ten months and still bore telltale signs on the walls and floor of the harrowing battle that had taken place in here. The amalgamates no longer lived down here: they had been returned to their loved ones and, placated, no longer troubled anyone.

The pods picked up a palette of a dozen disposable plastic water bottles between the two of them; 2B set 9S on the floor, took one of the bottles, unscrewed the cap, and held the bottle to his lips. He took a few greedy gulps at first, depleting the bottle’s contents by half, then winced in pain and resigned himself to sipping the rest. When he was finished, he threw the empty bottle aside and watched it bounce against the floor.

“I-I’m sorry,” he whimpered, lowering his head as his remaining hand rested in his lap. “I need to confess something to you. While you were asleep, I had so much trouble dealing with the Royal Guards on my own that I…”

“I know what you did.”

“Oh.” 9S curled up tighter, hiding his face in his shame. 2B wondered how her Type-E subroutines must have affected him psychologically. And how had they affected his body?

“I could hear you,” she said. “Just… snippets, here and there. And I’m so sorry I couldn’t have woken up sooner.”

“I… said some things to you I’m not proud of.” 9S shook his head. “Like Alphys said, we all went
kinda crazy without you. We should get going,” he said, rising slowly and tentatively to his feet. “Mom’s gonna kill me when we get back, so we might as well get it over with.”

“For what my opinion is worth, I think you’ve been punished enough.” 2B held onto him and helped him up. “Are you sure you can walk?” she asked.

“Yeah. Besides, if we run into any trouble, I wouldn’t want you to be too encumbered,” said 9S.

He walked with a pronounced limp, 2B noticed; she wrapped her left arm around his waist and led him forward through the lab.

With 2B and Pod 042 holding him up, 9S stumbled deeper into Waterfall’s tunnels, his joints protesting his every movement as stagnant water lapped at his boots. Veins of crystalline growths, glowing with slight luminescence, ran through the rocky walls and cast faint and soft violet lights on his pale, bruised skin. The ceiling was dotted with tiny diamonds, glittering under Pod 153’s beacons like twinkling stars. The occasional machine corpse lay in the rocky corridors, some the victims of the psychic pressure of Alphys’ amalgamates, some felled through machine infighting, others bearing the telltale marks of 2B’s own sword.

He was glad to be with 2B again, so grateful to feel her strong arm wrapped around him, to see her so bright and alert after weeks of fruitlessly watching her still and corpse-like body. Having her at his side just made him feel so happy despite the deep and hurtful aches still wracking his body.

It was funny, in a way. Scanners were designed for solo work; 9S’s partnership with 2B was an anomaly, unusual enough that he should have been suspicious of her true purpose right away. But the past month had shown clearly to him how unmoored he’d been without her, how dependent he’d grown on her. A part of him wondered if that was unhealthy.

The two of them intended to follow the thoroughly-mapped but mostly-unoccupied tunnels running underneath the marshes.

But a hastily-erected Royal Guard barricade stood in their path, a sturdy and thickly-layered wall of metal and piled-up rocks. Unable to cut down or blast through the obstruction, 2B and 9S had sought a detour into even deeper and darker tunnels and had soon fallen off the map.

There was no sound but the steady and resonantly-echoing drips of water droplets from the slick ceiling to the floor. Even machines had not delved so deep. This wasn’t a part of Waterfall 9S recognized—deeper than he’d ever gone before, deeper than he’d ever explored. Deep enough, shielded enough by such dense rocks and strange ores that Pod 153 and Pod 042 couldn’t connect to Alphys’ server—or anything else. 2B repeatedly attempted to connect to both Alphys and 6O in vain.

“We should turn back,” 2B suggested, pulling 9S aside. “We might expect more resistance taking a higher road, but at least we won’t get lost.”

“Wait a minute.” 9S was too tired to devote much energy to his usual curiosity, but couldn’t help but wonder if, just as Pod 153 was unable to send a signal out, it also couldn’t probe inward—if this area had escaped even his most rigorous scans. If Chara knew about this place… could they have hidden their stockpile of black boxes here somewhere? “I think… there’s something here. Something… important.”

“Oh, golly gee willickers, I’m flattered.”
It was a voice 9S had never expected to hear again. And in the strong light from Pod 153’s floodlights, dangling from the tunnel’s ceiling, water dripping down its slim and slender body and forming a puddle of brackish water on the floor below, was the ragged and wilting remains of a large golden flower.

It was him again. Him. The creature that had torn his soul out. The creature who had made him feel and say and do such horrible things for no other reason than sick amusement…

“Pod!” 9S cried out, stumbling backward, water splashing around his boots. 2B clutched him tighter as he fell back, pulling him closer to her side—but even her gentle touch couldn’t soothe the fear that had seized him. “Fire! Fire everything!”

Gunfire lit up the tunnel, light and overwhelming sound bouncing off the slick walls. When the ringing cleared from 9S’s ears, Flowey had vanished.

“Ow. Gosh, you sure know how to greet an old—”

“042!” 2B whirled around in the direction of Flowey’s voice. “Kill this son of a—”

“Hey, hey, hey, whoa! Hold on!” Flowey popped out of the ground and raised a pair of wilting, withered, browning leaves. “Hold your fire!” He let out a weak, somewhat forced-sounding cough. “Y-You wouldn’t kill someone who’s dying, would ya?”

Flowey looked near to death indeed—most of the petals ringing his cartoonish white face, curled and brittle and turning from gold to brown around the edges, seemed close to falling off, and several had been charred jet-black. His face, too, was singed and disfigured. 9S wondered how the miserable creature had survived at all. Hadn’t Pod 042 confirmed that Flowey’s vital signs were no longer present? Or had Flowey somehow managed to escape out of the range of the pod’s sensors in the nick of time?

“We might!” 9S retorted, undeterred by Flowey’s sorry state.

“I’ve changed! I’m turning over a new leaf!” Flowey insisted, waving his leaves. “I—I’m really…” He let out a noise that seemed to be halfway between a sigh, a groan, and a death rattle. “Sorry. Is that what you wanna hear? ‘I’m sorry?’ Is it all water under the bridge now?”

“Sorry?” 9S’s legs stopped wobbling, because he was too angry now to feel exhausted anymore. “Sorry?”

2B seemed even angrier somehow, her normally-stoic countenance twisted with rage. “You ripped his soul from his fucking chest and goaded him into trying to kill me and all you can say is—”

“Look, I’m not good at this, okay! But… I’m… well, I regret what I did to you two.” Flowey looked down at his roots. “I was. Um. Jealous.”

“Jealous,” 9S repeated, so incredulous that he forgot to tell Pod 153 to shoot at Flowey. Even 2B seemed dumbfounded.

“Yeah, turns out hatred, spitefulness, and jealousy are, like, the three feelings you’re allowed to have when you don’t have a soul. Which you of all people should know, 9S. Well, when 2B here and her stupid little floating computer blew me halfway to kingdom come, considering how lucky I was to slip away in the nick of time, I did some thinking.”

“And?” 9S asked.
“Well, first off, um… you know… hurting people isn’t any fun,” said Flowey, “when they can hurt you back.”

9S leaned against 2B. “So all along, you’ve just been a garden-variety bully.”

“Watch it, friend-o,” Flowey snarled. “Anyway, um…” He let out a pained sigh. “All this time, since you two fell into this wonderland, I’ve been, um, watching you, you two and the other Asriel, the fake one you cobbled together out of junk, and seeing you all being so cute and cuddly like real family members and having kind old Toriel dote on you twenty-four-seven is like, well… it’s like how me and Chara were. I’m jealous. I want that. I want that back.”

9S let Flowey’s words run through his head and tried to make sense of them. “You want…”

“Yeah. Okay. I want a soul,” Flowey said, spitting the words out as if he couldn’t wait to be rid of them. “So I can be my stupid old self again.”

“Okay, who do you think you’re fooling?” 9S retorted, not willing to fall even a little for the wounded animal routine Flowey was trying out on him. “What, so you’ve had years of being the meanest kid on the playground and now that you’re not, you want everyone to think you’ve changed? You made me almost kill my—”

“I didn’t make you do anything!” Flowey said. “Sure, I, uh, suggested some things to you, but it was all you!”

9S tried to say something cutting and cruel in response, but gagged on his own words. He knew Flowey was right.

“I’m, um… Ugh. I’m sorry, again. There. I said it. Still, you… you remember what it’s like to not have a soul, don’t you, 9S?” Flowey asked, shivering and curling up as 9S glared impotently down at him. “It’s the worst feeling in the world, and… And I’m sick of it!”

9S had to admit… not having a soul was the worst thing in the world. “I can’t just give you a soul,” he said. “Wait, is that why you tried to steal my black box back then? Because you wanted mine?”

Flowey uncomfortably twiddled his shriveled, charred leaves, suddenly mute. 9S took that as an affirmative.

2B clutched 9S’s arm with a vise-like death-grip and took a step in front of him as if to shield him with her body. “You piece of—”

“Life isn’t fun anymore!” Flowey cried out, his squeaking voice echoing across the tunnel walls. “Trying to be all sappy and lovey just makes me feel empty, and being mean will get me killed, so— Nothing I can do or say will make me happy!”

“Then how about I put you out of your misery?” 2B spat. “Pod…”

Pod 042 opened up, revealing its still-smoking machine gun turrets.

“I don’t wanna die!” Flowey wailed. “I don’t want to live like this, but I don’t wanna die, so… so… please, I’m begging you, 2B, Nines—h-help me… I’ll do anything…”

It was sickening to 9S, hearing this monstrous flower who’d hurt him so much call him Nines.

“Anything?” 2B asked.
Flowey nodded. “Anything!”

“Die.”

Flowey screamed and vanished beneath the waterlogged mud as Pod 042 opened fire again. “I just said I didn’t wanna die!” he protested from his hiding spot beneath the mud.

“I don’t care!”

“Fine!” Flowey shouted. “Stay by yourself! But you’ll never find your way out of here without me!”

“We’re fine on our own,” 2B insisted.

“Yeah!” 9S added. “Get lost before we finish what we started!”

“I know my way through this kingdom like the back of my… my, uh, leaf,” Flowey said, wiggling a pitifully-wrinkled and half-burned leaf. “Even this part down here. The part no one’s ever cared enough to map out. Me and Chara spent so many afternoons making constellations out of the diamonds down here…”

*Flowey and Chara both know this place?* “Wait!” 9S shouted out as 2B unfolded the switchblade mounted on her forearm, grabbing her by the shoulder. “Flowey, has Chara been down here recently?”

Flowey smiled. “Perhaps the promise of a soul would jog my memory…”

“You can’t have his,” 2B said, leveling her sword at Flowey.

*His? No, no, that wouldn’t work at all. Our last encounter made that clear—you can’t transplant souls.* Flowey sighed. “Easier to create one, I think.”

“How do you expect us to do that?” 9S asked.

“You’re smart.” Flowey shrugged. “You’ll find a way.”

“Show us where Chara’s been,” 9S insisted. “So we know you aren’t just talking out your ass.”

“First off, I don’t have an ass. Well, I only saw them walk past here,” Flowey said, “but I have a good idea where they were coming from.” Flowey began to trudge on ahead. “Follow me.”

2B glanced at 9S, frowning. She was right not to trust Flowey. But 9S had struggled so hard to find the six black boxes on his own only to come up empty-handed that he had no choice but to take a leap of faith.

“If he tries anything,” 9S said, loudly enough that Flowey could definitely hear it, “he dies.”

▫▫▫

Alphys had just finished scrubbing the blood off the floor when the door buzzer rang. Gulping and double-checking to make sure she’d shoved 2B’s coat and 9S’s cast-off shirt in the incinerator, she waddled to the door, her pulse racing, and checked the outside camera.

She breathed a sigh of relief to see Undyne there, alone, instead of a troop of armed guards, and without hesitation, opened the door.

Alphys wasn’t the most observant person in the world when it came to other people, as detail-
oriented as she was when it came to her work. But she could tell right away that something was wrong with Undyne. She just looked... beaten.

But not the kind of beaten Undyne would usually look like. Sure, she didn’t win every fight—she and 2B were just about evenly-matched in their sparring contests, although 2B had recently pulled just a bit ahead—but Undyne was in no way a sore loser, and though she wasn’t without her pride, she took her defeats with a grin.

Undyne didn’t say much as she made her way inside, shrugging out of her uniform, stripping down to her shorts and a tank top, and freeing her hair from its restrictive ponytail. She said hi to Alphys, patted her on the head, and went straight for the shower, which was probably for the best because her scales didn’t seem to be glistening with just sweat.

“R-Rough day, huh?” Alphys asked, stumbling a little over her words, not quite sure (as always) what to say or how to say it, punctuating her attempt at small talk with a little nervous laugh.

“Nah, it’s been great,” Undyne said, a little bit of forced enthusiasm in her voice lending it a sardonic tone as she pulled off her eyepatch and let it fall to the floor. “I love it when people let me down.”

“Uh, I-I’ve been pretty stressed out today, too. But there’s good news! 2B’s awake, and she and 9S are on their way back home!”

Undyne stiffened. “…Good,” she said, not bothering to turn and look at Alphys.

“Y-Yeah! We’ve got the team all t-together now! Things are… things are gonna get better,” Alphys insisted. “Things are gonna get better.”

“…Yeah. I know.” Undyne finally turned around, laying a hand on Alphys’ shoulder. Her hair, brilliant scarlet except for her snow-white bangs, obscured her left eye in lieu of her eyepatch. Alphys felt a little better seeing the weak smile on her face. “Sorry, Alphy. I’m a little messed up today.”

“Yeah… h-hard to play cops and robbers when everyone else is t-taking it seriously, huh?” Alphys asked, knowing that it must have been so painful for her to act as a double agent, especially tonight of all nights, especially since 9S had gotten… a little carried away.

“Yeah, that sums it up.” Undyne held a hand to her forehead. “Hang on, I gotta wash off.”

Undyne only spent a few minutes in the shower, then came out dressed down for the night, her towed-dry hair, still darkened and sodden, clinging to her scales, her t-shirt taking on a little bit of the dampness from her skin. She was, of course, overwhelmingly pretty, and Alphys would’ve thought she’d be used to that by now, but her heart still skipped a beat at the sight of Undyne’s lean, curvy, muscular…

Undyne fell to her knees and wrapped her arms around Alphys, her damp cheek warm against Alphys’, her lank and waterlogged hair cold. She’d have squeezed the breath out of Alphys’ chest if the sight of Undyne wasn’t breathtaking enough on its own.

“Thanks for being here,” Undyne murmured into her ear.

The weariness from not only Alphys’ exhausting workday but also her night shift as 2B’s remote support melted away as Alphys’ heart skipped a beat and her head grew light. “Aw, th-thanks for c-coming. U-Us girlfriends gotta, uh, y’know, s-stick together.”

Alphys let her choice of words hang in the air.
Had she really said, *girlfriends*?

“I-I meant ’girlfriends,’” she clarified, “like, girls, and friends, b-because we’re girls, a-and friends, and—”

Undyne shut her up by pecking her on the cheek. “Alphys, we’ve been dating for nine months. It’s okay. You can call me your girlfriend.”

“Um… U-Uh… *Dating*?” Alphys sputtered, her brain short-circuiting as heat rushed to her cheeks. “I—I thought… t-thought we were just… y’know… hanging out…”

“Seriously?” Undyne’s smile widened. “Seriously, Alphys?”

“I-I mean, u-uh, you said the word ’date’ a l-lot, but I thought you were j-just being… ironic?” Sure, Alphys had long since confessed her love to Undyne, but she’d never quite brought herself to believe Undyne felt the same way about her.

“Oh, yeah, I *ironically* took you out to dinner, and we *ironically* cuddled while watching sappy romance anime.”

“I-I thought we were hanging out! I-I mean, there’s nothing that says friends c-can’t *platonically*—”

Undyne buried her face in Alphys’ shoulder, then stood up, taking Alphys with her. Her morose expression had all but vanished, replaced with a mirthful grin. “Oh, Alphys, you absolute dork! Wanna watch cartoons until we pass out again?”

Alphys nodded, her feet and the tip of her happily-flicking tail dangling above the floor, and Undyne carried her to bed and sat her down, draping a blanket over the both of them and holding Alphys to her side.

And then she just sat there.

▫▫▫

Flowey led 9S and 2B to a large circular cavern, surprisingly well-lit by luminescent crystals embedded in the walls. “Chara and I… we spent a lot of time down here,” he said, completely matter-of-factly, without a trace of the nostalgic wistfulness that might have been present in the voice of somebody with a soul. “It was our secret place… and our *secret-est* place.” He made his way to the far end of the cavern, where a sheet of smooth white limestone stood out from the craggy walls. Next to the conspicuous patch on the wall, an ancient and weathered upright piano stood, its wooden frame warped and streaked with moss and algae. Its ebony and ivory keys, though, were all polished and wiped clean. The piano had obviously been graced by a performance very recently.

“That’s Chara for you,” Flowey said with a tinge of pride. “They’re so… *extra.*”

“That’s a door, then?” 9S asked, pointing to the limestone. “And that piano’s the key?”

“It most certainly is! How clever of you.” Flowey hopped onto the stool in front of the piano and pressed a leaf on one of the keys and a loud, clear, resonant bell tone rang out; instead of striking a string, the hammer connected to the key must have hit a sheet of metal instead—more like a giant music box than a piano. “One merely presses the right notes in the right order, and…”

“Can you play it?” 2B asked, crossing her arms.

“Of course I can. I…” Flowey played a major scale on the keyboard, an ascending and descending
series of bright, bell-like tones hanging in the air. “Hmm. I had it on the tip of my tongue…” He whistled a few aimless notes. “But I am having such a hard time remembering it. Perhaps a soul would jog my memory…”

“Flowey…” 2B hissed, irritated.

“Oh! That’s right!” Flowey’s head swayed in the air happily. “You promised me a soul in exchange for guiding you two out of here. If you want the melody now, well, that’s a whole separate exchange. What else can you offer me?”

“A swift death,” 2B offered. “Instead of plucking your leaves and petals off one by one.”

“Now, now. We’re all trying to help each other.”

“How about a big ceramic pot with some nice fertilizer?” 9S asked.

Flowey’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that sounds just heavenly!”

“Okay, so what’s the melody?” 2B asked.

“I’m not singing,” Flowey said, crossing his leaves just as 2B was crossing her arms, “until I get my pot of dirt. After all, how sure can I be you won’t double-cross me?”

“Sounds like someone’s projecting,” 9S muttered, although he had to admit that 2B would kill him at the drop of a hat, so Flowey wasn’t exactly wrong. “All right,” he growled at Flowey, “but if you—”

“Oh, please, I wouldn’t dream of double-crossing you. I don’t think I could take another laser to the face at this point. Remember, 2B here took away my resets, so if I die… well… that’s it.” Flowey gave 9S a sardonic smile. “All right, come this way.” He trudged back through the shallow water blanketing the ground.

“Observation: Flowey has given Units 2B and 9S no reason to accept a beneficial partnership,” Pod 153 offered.

“Nines,” 2B whispered, resting his head against her shoulder. “After what he did to us—”

“If he double-crosses us, we’ll kill him.”

9S could tell that 2B still had reservations, but she sighed and helped him follow in Flowey’s wake.

He joined her, but stumbled and felt his knees buckle, reaching out and snatching her arm for support, his curled fingers catching on the edge of the metal buckler on her forearm. Well, he thought, there goes the rest of me. “2B… I th-think I’m ready for you to carry me now,” he mumbled as she supported his weight.

9S felt his world turn upside down as 2B slung him over her shoulder. “Take it easy, Nines,” she told him. “You’ve had a long day.”

“Thanks, 2B. Wake me if you need me.” He closed his eyes and let the motion of 2B’s stride rock him to sleep.

“Um… Undyne? What do you wanna watch tonight?” Alphys asked. “W-We can’t f-finish up Tetsu no Hana without 6O, s-so maybe just put on Mew Mew K—”
Undyne’s hand ran over Alphys’ dry scales and tightened around her shoulder, squeezing the words out of her mouth; Alphys’ train of thought slowed to a crawl as heat spread down her chest. Undyne was holding Alphys much closer now, pinning Alphys’ cheek against her chest while her free hand cradled her chin.

“Oh, Undyne, I—I gotta get up to put the show on…”

“You know… I’m kinda not in the mood to watch cartoons tonight,” Undyne murmured.

Not in the mood? But Undyne was always up to… “W-Well, what do you wanna watch?” Alphys asked.

Undyne just held her tighter. Alphys felt like the luckiest stuffed animal in the world, but there was something a little unnerving about the way Undyne was cuddling her tonight. She seemed needier somehow, more vulnerable.

“I just… feel really alone right now.”

“Rough day?” Rough enough to make Undyne like this? Alphys wondered. “A-Another ultimatum from Chara, huh?” she guessed. “They’re breathing down my neck, too. The—The mobile armor project—they want that, uh, ready for deployment in three days or they’ll, uh, y-you know.” Execute you for treason. “A-And I had such a close shave today! O-One of the engineers came up to me a-asking why the collars of the YoRHa armor had such little armor,” she added, “a-and I had to bullshit an excuse o-on the fly! I-I was so scared, but it felt s-so exciting t-to pull it off—A-And also, one of the p-programmers nearly found the backdoor in the RE:Visor system, a-and—”

“Alphys.”

“Y-Yeah, Undyne?” Was she babbling again? “S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to monopolize…”

“Nah, it’s okay.” Undyne sighed. “It’s just that… for once, I’m not certain I’m doing the right thing.”

“I mean… yeah, undermining our own work for the greater good is just…” Alphys shrugged. It was exciting, exhilarating, but she had to admit that it always felt wrong to sabotage her own work on purpose instead of just letting her self-loathing do it unconsciously for her. “It feels weird.”

“Not like that. I mean… are we being selfish?” Undyne asked.

“W-We’re helping our friends n-not die,” Alphys said, “so, uh… no?” This was a strange line of inquiry for Undyne. Was Chara getting under her skin? Would it be insensitive for her to ask that?

Undyne laughed. It was forced and unconvincing. “Yeah! And that’s what matters! Looking out for our friends!” She made a fist and shook it in the air. “Thanks, Alphy. You’re always there to get my head on straight.”

That sounded almost like a joke coming from Undyne. So much of a joke, Alphys almost laughed out loud. “N-No, that’s your job,” she teased her. After all, it was Undyne who’d stuck with Alphys through her lowest points. Undyne was the perfect image of confidence, the very best friend and companion a girl like her could ask her.

“Well, I can’t do it on my own anymore,” Undyne said, laying her head on Alphys’ shoulder, one hand scratching at the scales on the back of her neck. “I’ve gotta look at hiring an assistant to handle the workload.”

“Oh, d-do I need to show you my resumé?” Alphys giggled.
“I’m serious.”

“What’s the p-pay like? A-And the benefits? Healthcare? V-Vacation days?”

“No health plan… but free gym membership!” Undyne cackled, evidently no longer serious.

“Nooo…” Alphys squirmed as Undyne’s grip around her tightened. “I-I’m bad at that stuff!”

“And as for vacation days…” Undyne flipped Alphys on her back like a turtle and loomed over her, a wild, toothsome, and sharkish grin on her face.

Alphys’ breath caught in her throat. Mainly because Undyne’s mouth was in the way. Their teeth clinked together.

So that was a real kiss, then. Alphys had always read in the trashy romance manga and light novels she’d unearthed over the years that there was tongue involved, but not teeth. Where was—

Oh. There was the tongue.

After what felt like an eternity, Undyne pulled away and flopped onto the floor next to Alphys. “How’s that… for a vacation?”

Alphys still needed a few seconds to start breathing again. “…I’ll take the job,” she panted, her cheeks hot and red, her forehead flushed, her chest heaving. “When do I start?”

Undyne shifted positions, resting her head on Alphys’ stomach like it was a pillow. “You just did. Oh, Alphys. Don’t ever change.”

“Aww.” Alphys buried a hand in Undyne’s hair, twirling her locks around her fingers. “Just f-for you, Undyne, m-my queen, I won’t.”

▫▫▫

“So…” 2B asked Flowey. “Any reason why you’re not going to Chara for help?”

“I kinda burned my bridges with them,” said Flowey. “You know, I always thought Chara was the baddest of the bad. When good things stopped making me feel good—you know, because I was missing my soul, the very culmination of my being—I decided to try and be like them instead. But then… when they came back to life… they got all huggy and kissy and ‘ooh, I missed you sooo much’ with my old mother! It was such a pathetic display, I nearly gagged! My badass robot sibling—reduced to that!”

“But now you want a soul so you can be all… huggy.” 2B let her voice drip with suspicion.

“Yeah, I was wrong, okay? Gosh, you’re just pulling these apologies out of me, it’s disgusting.” Flowey pouted for a bit as he led 2B further through the unmapped tunnels. “Anyway, I took the whole thing poorly, one thing led to another, Chara, um, died, I guess, and, well…”

Flowey let out a long sigh like a deflating balloon. “Chara hates when people betray them, or heck, just when people let them down. They don’t, um, what’s the word? Ah, right. Forgive. Their entire personality basically amounts to three grudges standing on each other’s shoulders, wearing a trenchcoat.

“So,” Flowey concluded, “I’m hoping you might be a little more… you know. Less likely to shoot me in the face.”
“We’ll see,” 2B grumbled.

“Speaking of our interactions,” Flowey said. “You’ve gone a long time without, you know… messing with time.”

2B said nothing.

“I mean, ten months without a reset. Wow. I went for stretches that long too, once. But eventually, the more bored I got, the less interested I was in letting things linger. People, relationships… eventually, you’ve seen all they have to offer. The early months, when I’d just started out, I tried to make people happy. I got everyone hooked up. Toriel got back together with Asgore. Undyne and Alphys got married. Papyrus and Mettaton got everything they wanted—fame, glory, prestige… but then things just got boring. So I started having fun, really messing with people. Turned out, it was way more satisfying to see everyone at each other’s throats instead of locking lips. But… I got less and less patient, and soon, I was resetting every week. Every day.”

That was right. Flowey had mentioned in one of his first encounters with 2B that he’d had the ability she now had.

“When I was getting bored—bored with even the endless possibilities stretched out before me—you came along and made things so, so interesting. I was fascinated by how much you agonized over using the very power I had used with such gusto.”

A voice rang out in 2B’s head.

* It has felt like a curse to you only because you have used your determination purely out of desperation. You have never honed it as you hone your blade. You have never studied how to anchor yourself in the river of time and command its eddies and whorls around you. *

“You know, I set 6E free that night and sent her after Toriel to punish Chara for their sentimentality,” Flowey said, as casual as could be. “But it was so interesting to see how it affected you. The anguish, the—”

2B felt her hands curling into a fist, fingernails digging into her palms. This creature was taunting her. Again. She could no longer contain herself. “Pod,” she spat through gritted teeth, “kill him.”

Pod 042 opened fire.

“I gave you a gift—unwillingly, but still—and there you were, boo-hooing about having the godlike power to change the world!” Flowey shouted out, skittering out of the pod’s line of fire.

“Keep firing,” 2B ordered her pod.

“I can teach you!”

2B ordered the pod to stop firing. “You can…”

“Y-Yeah!” Flowey vigorously nodded. “I-It can be our third trade! I lead you home, you get me a soul… you get me a nice pot, I give you the notes for that piano… and you spare my life, I teach you how to make that determination work for you.”

2B wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“Don’t you believe,” asked Flowey, staring up at her with wide eyes, looking for once vulnerable, “that even the worst person can change? That even the most unforgivable things you’ve done can
just become part of your past instead of controlling your future?”

“You’re manipulating me,” 2B concluded.

“I’m empathizing with you,” Flowey retorted. “That’s what people with souls are supposed to do, right? Just… give me a chance. I’m sick of this… un-life. I’m sick of manipulating. I want to find joy in something else, like… a hug, or a cool breeze on a hot day, or seeing the dumb smile on someone’s stupid face when you do something to make their dull, meaningless lives just a little less dull. And I thought that if I did things for you and your dear brother that were supposed to help you, you’d, well… give it to me.”

“You’re unbelievable,” 2B spat.

“Well, fine.” Flowey went off alone, vanishing into the darkness up ahead. The echoes bouncing off the walls grew stronger as his voice grew fainter. “Find your way back to dear old Mommy—who used to be my mommy, you know—on your own. Figure out Chara’s favorite song on your own. Learn how to make the flow of time itself your slave on your own. See if I care.”

2B shrugged. “Okay,” she said, and with 9S still slung over her shoulder, she continued on her own, and sooner than she expected, whatever veins of strange magnetic ores ran through the rocks down here began to grow thinner, sparse enough that they could no longer block Pod 042’s probing signals.

As the map on 2B’s HUD lit up and Pod 042 began to trace the shortest route home, she smiled and patted 9S on the back. *We’re almost there, Nines. Rest easy.*

Chapter End Notes

Deleted scene:

"So," Flowey asked 9S, "what's in our secret room that you and 2B are so interested in?"

"We have reason to believe," he replied, "that Chara has been hiding a massive stash of ligma down here."

"Ligma?" Flowey cocked his head. "I've never heard of that before. What's ligma?"

9S smirked and slowly extended his middle finger. "Ligma fucking balls."
[E] Premonition

Chapter Summary

Undyne's well-earned sleep is interrupted by a horrible vision.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for (almost) 6,000 hits! You are all beautiful shining stars and I love you all very much. I hope you all keep reading until the end. Route E is gonna be at least as long as Routes C and D combined at this point if not a little longer*, so there's still plenty of ground to cover!

*I call this "Homestuck Syndrome." It's incurable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

9S stood with his back to Undyne, his dark coat hanging loose on his narrow shoulders, the hem brushing the ground. He looked like a kid dressed up in his dad’s clothes, not a murderer.

"Why did you do it?" Undyne asked him, venom lacing her voice, spit flying from the gaps between gritted fangs. Her hands curled into fists so tightly that her fingernails pierced her skin, slid into the gaps between scales, and drew blood.

He said nothing, did nothing. Stood there, head lowered, framed by a narrow doorway, bathed in shadow. On the other side of the doorway was light; behind him, shadow, his own shadow stretching out behind him and lapping at Undyne’s boots. Where the shadow touched, the leather turned crimson.

Undyne stepped forward. “Answer me, 9S!”

Her footsteps splashed.

“Answer me!” She clamped a hand down on his shoulder and turned him around. “What do you have to say for yourself, 9S?”

The entire front of his long black coat was so covered in dust it looked white; covering a scarred face that had once been boyish and pretty was a grimy coating of blood and dust, mixed into an almost pinkish paste. His grin was manic, his teeth sharp, his eyes wide—and red, bright red, hellish red.

Though those eyes were fiery, they turned Undyne’s heart to ice.

“What have you done?”
Her gaze fell to the floor.

To a scaly yellow hand, clawed fingers short and stubby, streaked with crimson blood. The bulk of the body lay beyond the doorway, obscured by 9S’s body, but Undyne knew

**Knew**

who it was.

“What have you done?” she whispered.

9S glanced at Alphys’ corpse and nudged the hand with his foot. It crumbled to dust. “I was finished with your friends,” he said, the first words out of his mouth, his voice nearly a whisper, “so now I’m working through your lovers.”

Undyne struggled to draw breath.

“She’d have betrayed you anyway.”

“No!” Undyne screamed out, her voice ripping at the inside of her throat, a ragged screech that seemed to take everything out of her body and leave her hollow punctuating the arc of her arm as her fist collided with 9S’s nose; he tumbled backward, blood trailing from a nose that crumpled like tinfoil, his body breaking apart like dead leaves as it fell.

The light from the doorway, unobstructed, bore down on Undyne, blazing white, casting a stark, long, black shadow across the bloodstained floor from the pile of dust that had once been—

Sobbing, she crumpled to her knees, burying her hands in the dust, letting it trickle through her fingers. It was so cold. Alphys was so warm, but her dust was so cold, and Undyne brought handfuls of it to her face, smeared it against her scaly, tear-streaked cheeks, hoping against hope that maybe she could feel just a bit of that warmth again.

*Just like Asgore. Why?*

Asgore’s dust had been spread while Undyne had still been helping the androids find shelter in the Ruins. She’d missed the funeral. She’d only seen his death from afar and had lost her chance to say one last goodbye.

The light dimmed, leaving Undyne alone with nothing keeping her company but dust and the sound of her own weeping.

“He was right. She’d have betrayed you anyway.”

A new voice rang out from behind, cold, assaulting Undyne’s earfins like a bucket of ice had been upended over her head.

“She and Father were cut from the same cloth,” Chara said, their footsteps squelching against the puddle of blood pooling across the floor as they drew nearer, crouching down and laying their hands on top of Undyne’s, their fingers curling over hers, upending her hands so she could see her ashen palms. “I know this must be hard for you, Undyne. Beset on all sides by disloyalty… a captain, mutinied against by every member of her precious crew.”
“No."

“Asgore betrayed you. Gerson betrayed you. Toriel betrayed you. They betrayed all of us, turned their backs on the best hope for this kingdom, to soothe their guilty consciences and justify their cowardice.” Chara pressed closer, the weight of their chest on Undyne’s back holding her down.

“And 2B and 9S betrayed you, too, Captain,” Chara whispered. “9S broke his promise to you. He murdered people you have sparred with and shared drinks with—comrades and brothers-in-arms. And 2B abandoned you, slept in peaceful repose like a princess in a fairy tale, when you needed her more than ever.”

“No, no, no…”

“How long will it take for Alphys to show you her yellow belly, too?” Chara curled Undyne’s fingers, balled her hands into fists, cupped her fists in their hands. “How will she betray you? Or has she already?”

Undyne tore her hands away and pulled herself free, whirling around on unsteady legs, standing over Chara for a split second before falling to the ground again, her heart thumping furiously against her ribcage. “Get away from me!” she snarled.

As they crouched down, Chara’s violet robes pooled around them. “Oh, Undyne. I can’t. I’m your boss, first off, and…” They crawled forward, padding on hands and knees with the gait of a wild predator until they were face to face with Undyne, their single red eye glittering, the petals of the flower covering what remained of their right eye just as lustrous. “Asgore was my father. And he was like a father to you, too, right?”

They reached out, their long, pale fingers brushing the hair away from Undyne’s left eye and lingering against her eyepatch. “That makes you my sister.”

Undyne’s scream caught in her throat, her lungs frozen, the gills running along the sides of her neck gaping and flapping desperately for air. She tried to shrink away from Chara, but her body wouldn’t move.

“We have a shared duty, Undyne. Adopted children of royalty, bound not by blood, but united with a common purpose!” Chara tugged at the flower covering their eye and pulled it out, a long stem soaked with blood trailing behind it. A bloody tear crawled from the burned, empty socket down their rosy cheek. “In your heart, you know I’m right. Stay with your friends and abandon everything you claim to stand for… just as Father did… or stand with me… and save the world.”

Chara reached out, and the sharp, thornlike end of the flower’s stem pierced Undyne’s eyepatch and slid into her eye with white-hot, excruciating pain. The scream that had lodged in her throat finally came forth and she convulsed and writhed in agony as the cursed flower lodged itself in its new home. It felt as though the flesh was being torn from her bones, as though every drop of blood in her body had turned to acid, as though every part of her was trying to turn itself inside out. She lashed out with her legs in a desperate attempt to knock Chara back. Her foot struck something hard—

“Ow!”

Undyne bolted awake, a thick blanket falling away from her chest as she sat up, fists clenched around the edges, nails digging into the fabric. Her shirt clung to her sweat-soaked back as she
gasped and panted for air, reaching up to her eye to feel for the flower—the flower that, much to her relief, wasn’t there.

*It was just a dream. It was only just a dream,* she told herself, relieved, as her fingers ran a ring around her eye. “Alphys?” she called out.

“Ugh... owww...” she moaned.

“Alphys!” Undyne rose up on her knees and surveyed the darkened laboratory, conjuring a spear of lightning to her hand and casting flickering aquamarine light across the floor.

She found Alphys curled up on the floor not too far away with her hands clasped around the tip of her snout, a greenish pallor cast on her skin by the light from the spear, her blood appearing black as crude oil as it seeped between her fingers.

“Oh, god, Alphys!” Undyne knelt down next to her, laying her hand on her hands. “Alphys, I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean…"

“Night... mare...?”

“Yeah! Yeah, Alphys, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry...” Undyne pried Alphys’ hands away from her bloodied snout. “Lemme take a look.” She poked and prodded Alphys’ snout, feeling the bone beneath and searching for any fractures. Much to her relief, there were none.

“I didn’t mean to kick you,” Undyne insisted as she helped Alphys up and brought her to the bathroom to wash up. As her hands clasped Alphys’ shoulders, Undyne’s heart ached, and she had to remind herself that what she was feeling, the soft, warm, dry, scaly skin, was real. Alphys was still here, still alive, and what Undyne had just gone through had been nothing but her own subconscious tormenting her. “I was having a really fucked up dream...”

“N-N-N-No, I, uh, I get it,” Alphys muttered, still groggy, still clutching at her snout to stem the flow of blood. “R-Remember the f-first sleepover we had w-with 2B? S-She had a nightmare... and punched you r-right in the face!”

Under the harsh fluorescent glare of the bathroom lights, the bleeding didn’t look so bad, although the sight of that blood, so red, trickling down Alphys’ chin sent a chill up Undyne’s spine and made her stomach do somersaults. “Yeah,” Undyne said as she washed away the blood and held a wad of tissues to Alphys’ nostrils. “Yeah, that turned into one hell of a morning.”

“Y-You two a-are two of a kind, huh?”

Undyne bristled instinctively at the comparison, then stifled that reaction. *I’m not gonna let Chara get to me. Alphys was right. Looking out for your friends is the right thing to do, and 2B’s my... she’s my friend.*

Nevertheless, she shuddered as she thought about what the casualty reports she’d see later this morning might look like.

Alphys chuckled. “You’re as a-athletic asleep as you are awake.”

“Is this gonna be a problem for us?” Undyne asked, nervously joining in on the laughter.

“N-Nah! I’ll j-just wear a helmet to bed if you keep this up.” Alphys said, rubbing at her bleary eyes. “Ugh, wh-what time is it?”
Undyne shrugged. “Early morning, probably. Don’t feel like I’ve been sleeping for more than a few hours.” She pulled the completely-reddened wad of tissues away from Alphys’ nose and tossed them in the waste bin. The bleeding, thankfully, had stopped, but Alphys’ snout looked a little browned where Undyne’s heel had hit her, like a bruised banana. “Does it still hurt?” she asked.

“I think I’m fine,” Alphys answered, sniffling a bit as she wrapped an arm around Undyne’s waist. “Don’t worry about me, Undyne. I-I get it. If there’s a-anything you wanna talk to me about, uh… I mean, I’ve gotten a-all the sleep I’m gonna get for the next eighteen hours…” She looked up at Undyne and flashed an exhausted smile. “And, well, it’s my j-job to help you out, so…”

Undyne matched Alphys’ smile with a toothy grin of her own, her chest still aching as she reached down, hugged her, and lifted her off the floor. Alphys was so warm, so soft and squishy, and hugging her just made everything feel right, at least for a little bit.

Alphys loves me more than anyone. She’ll always stand by my side.

“I guess I owe you an explanation,” she said, squeezing Alphys closer to her chest and carrying her to her bed. Taking a seat on the mattress, Undyne took a deep breath and recounted as much of her nightmare as she felt comfortable retelling.

Alphys cringed. “Wow.”

“Yeah, so…” Undyne scratched at the back of her neck. “When Chara attacked me, I tried to kick them away, and my leg must’ve moved in real life, too…”

“Okay, so, uh, f-first off,” said Alphys, reaching for her glasses and sliding them up the bridge of her snout, “I can’t r-really psychoanalyze dreams or anything, so—so, uh, m-maybe you should s-see a real th-therapist about some of this stuff.”

Undyne laughed at that. Trying to tell a therapist you were nervous about your friendship with notorious fugitives and your ongoing plot to kill your boss would not go over well, confidentiality be damned.

“Second… I-I think you should quit the Royal Guard!”

Undyne opened her mouth to say something and felt her mind go blank for a few seconds, leaving her mouth gaping open like… a fish.

“I’m s-serious. Y-You should march up to King—You should march up to King Chara first thing this morning and resign. I-In fact, we should b-both quit,” Alphys continued, twiddling her thumbs nervously, her eyes darting back and forth behind her glasses. “A-And we could run a-away to the Ruins together. T-Toriel—A-After all, I mean, she’s b-been living there for c-centuries and no one’s found her, s-so we could…”

“Alphys…” Undyne gritted her teeth and sucked air through them. “We can’t run away.”

“I-It’s not running away!” Alphys insisted. “It’s a… a tactical retreat! If we run away together, Chara w-won’t have leverage o-over either of us anymore, a-and we’ll be able to do whatever we want to oppose them!”

How long will it take for her to show you her yellow belly? How will she betray you?

“Exile—That’s the coward’s way out,” Undyne said.

“It’d work! Toriel—”
“The whole Dreemurr family,” Undyne retorted, the words slipping out almost before she could think them, “was a bunch of cowards.”

Alphys had been about to say something, but paused, blinked, and bit her lip. “Y-You don’t mean that.”

“It’s true! First Toriel, the Asgore. They both turned their backs on this kingdom when it needed them.” Undyne balled her hands into fists. “They betrayed us. They abandoned us! They strung us along with false promises and—”

“How can you say that about Asgore?” Alphys cried out, eyes widening, reeling backward in shock. “Undyne, he was—”

“Not you too!” Undyne pounded her fist on the bed, possessed with a wild anger flaring up and coursing through her veins. Why did everyone whose opinion mattered to her act like Asgore hadn’t been a craven, lying coward who’d never intended to make good on his promises—to do right by his people, to perform his duties as king? In her heart, she knew that the most important thing was freeing the kingdom from its agonizing millennia of imprisonment—and why was Chara Dreemurr of all people the only one who seemed to agree with her? Why did her worst enemy have to share her goal, while all her friends turned their backs on it?

“I—I thought I could trust you, I thought I could count on you to be on my side!” she told Alphys.

“What s-side are you on?”

Alphys’ words hung in the air. “I… I…” Undyne struggled to speak, tears springing to her eyes. “I-I…” She choked down her tears. “Breaking down the Barrier is the most important thing in the world to me! We’ll all die if we stay down here! But 2B and 9S… they don’t care about any of that. The Barrier doesn’t matter to them! They’re from space! They could live down here happily with their perfect robot bodies for hundreds of years while the rest of us all suffocate to death! None of them even once thought about offering their souls to free us! And look at what 9S did—how can someone who’s capable of that give a damn about how much our lives are worth?”

“U-Undyne, that’s not true—th-they’ll do whatever they can to h-help us…”

“Why is Chara the only person who cares about the survival of our race?” Undyne added. “I want them dead more than anyone, but—”

She trailed off, hearing beneath her own shouting another sound. Alphys was crying.

“Undyne, stop…” Alphys croaked, hiding her watery eyes with one hand while reaching out with the other and laying it over Undyne’s arm. “Th—This isn’t who you are…”

With a shuddering sob, Undyne collapsed into Alphys’ embrace. The tears came as thick and as fast as blood from a mortal wound, her chest convulsing as cry after cry tore itself from her lungs.

“You n-need to quit,” Alphys repeated, resting her head against Undyne’s breast, the warmth from her cheek reaching Undyne’s heart. “Chara’s g-getting into your head, aren’t th-they?”

Undyne nodded.

“L-Listen. Once we f-find out where Chara hid the black boxes, w-we’ll be home free. We’ll k-kill them, take their soul, a-and then everything will be f-fine.”
“But what if…”

“We’ve g-got to keep our f-faith,” Alphys insisted. “B-Besides… whatever anyone does to the androids, 2B’ll j-just reset if things g-get really bad.”

Undyne recalled the offer 2B had made to her just before she’d fallen into that coma. When 2B had explained, calmly and clearly, the extent of her strange mastery over time, and had given Undyne the chance to invoke it. She remembered 2B taking her hands and guiding them, she remembered her fingers curling around the android’s throat. Those icy gray-blue eyes had held such a deep and depressing sense of resignation. Like any good soldier, she hadn’t wanted to die, but she’d been prepared to.

Why had Undyne been so stupid? Why hadn’t she just squeezed the life out of her and fixed everything? None of this had to have happened. Why had Undyne squandered her only opportunity to reverse every awful thing that had happened and prevent every awful thing yet to come?

Because 2B had been her friend. And Undyne could never kill a friend, even for the greater good. It went against every instinct in her body.

2B was her friend. She had to keep hammering that into her head to make sure it stuck despite Chara’s constant assault with their mind games and silver tongue. 2B. Was. Her. Friend.

“L-Look. You know we can’t let anyone go after the androids anyway,” Alphys added. “N-Not even Nines, no matter how you f-feel about him now. 2B’s u-untouchable, and 6O… she’s totally innocent, and she’s fun! And all she’s e-ever done wrong was just exist in the wrong place at the wrong time!”

Undyne nodded, swallowing a lump in her throat.

“Asgore was r-right, Undyne. He wasn’t a c-coward.” Alphys patted Undyne on the cheek and ran her hand down her neck, stubby fingers brushing past sensitive gills. Undyne shivered and pressed Alphys closer. “He u-understood that it was evil t-to kill innocent p-people… no matter how much good c-came out of it. A-And you’re a hero of justice, U-Undyne. What C-Chara wants might be the g-greater good, but… but it i-isn’t justice.”

Undyne let out the rest of her pent-up emotions in a long, deflating sigh, quenching the last embers of her fiery anger. She fell onto her back, her head nearly dangling off the edge of the mattress, looking up at the dark ceiling.

Justice, huh?

“I’m sorry, Alphy,” she muttered, still fighting back the last dregs of her tears as she reached for her eyepatch and slipped it on.

“It’s okay. It’s tough out here f-for all of us,” Alphys fumbled for her phone, its bright screen harsh and glaring in the darkness. “I-It’s five-thirty. When’s your n-next shift, U-Undy?”

Undyne snorted. “Wh-What?”

“I s-said, uh, when’s your next shift?”

“No, I heard that. It’s at six thirty,” Undyne sat up. “What did you call me?”

“Uh… U-Undy?” Alphys replied.
“You can’t call me ‘Undy!’” Undyne sputtered, feeling her cheeks grow hot.  

“Y-You call me ‘Alphy.’ S-So I need a nickname for you too!” 

“You can’t call me ‘Undy!’” 

“Wh-What about, uh… ’Dynie?’” Alphys asked. “O-Or ’Dynes?’” 

“Anything you want. Just not that. It feels weird and dirty.” Undyne reached for her own phone and scrolled through her messages. 

Her inbox was about as chaotic as last night, in general, had been; looking at all the emails on her phone’s screen gave her a headache. Undyne wasn’t sure if the messages were just nonsense or if she was too tired to read them properly, but apparently, a full twenty percent of the Royal Guard’s active duty personnel were now missing at least two arms? No, that couldn’t be right. 

Undyne groaned and tossed her phone to the floor. It was all enough to make her want to just go back to using Alphys’ soft, squishy tummy as a pillow. In fact, sleeping the day away sounded like a pretty good idea now. But she wasn’t unemployed just yet. 

Alphys stifled a yawn. She might not have been enduring the same sort of proximity to Chara Undyne currently was suffering through, but with all the pressures of her job on top of her double life as a saboteur, the poor girl only slept for four or five hours a night if she was lucky, and it showed. “I guess I’d b-better get to work. Boss wants the m-mobile armor project in full p-production in—” She stifled another yawn—“three d-days.” 

“How’s that coming along?” 

Alphys practically jumped off the bed, revitalized. “Wanna see?” 

Undyne shrugged. “Sure.” 

With stunning swiftness Alphys grabbed Undyne by the arm and tugged her along, bringing her down from the loft and onto Alphys’ laboratory floor and taking her to a sliding metal door tucked away into one of the walls. 

Behind it were two suits of mechanized armor, standing like mannequins modeling clothing in a department store. One was simply a suit of sleek YoRHa heavy armor, jet-black with copper accents; a heavily-modified backpack with short wings, sharp and sleek with a naked skeletal framework like the wings of a bat, was bolted onto it. The other suit had angular armor plating, gleaming bright blue and white under the lights, but was clearly a work in progress: the outer layers were a patchwork that mostly covered the chest, shoulders, forearms, and shins and left much of the black inner layer underneath—which was, Undyne noticed, another set of YoRHa armor—clearly visible. 

“So, uh,” Alphys started, beaming with pride, “I s-started this project for your b-birthday—it’s nanolaminate-coated armor over a s-standardized movable frame, m-modular parts…” 

Undyne smiled as Alphys continued to rattle off technical specifications. Half the words she was stammering made zero sense whatsoever and Undyne was sure she’d made most of them up on the spot, but Undyne loved the enthusiasm with which she said them. “You started working on this for my birthday?” Undyne reached out and laid her hand on the brilliant blue chest armor. It was cool, smooth, and almost a little slick to the touch. 

“The magitek circulation system,” Alphys went on, “ch-channels your magic th-through the suit and u-uses it to power the beam partisan, beam saber, a-and beam shield, a-along with any other p-parts
you swap in, like the backpack from—” She caught herself and realized that Undyne had spoken. “Y-Yeah,” she said, “it w-was gonna be your next birthday present.” With a nervous smile, she took a deep breath. “Surpriiise.”

“I love it!” Undyne’s hands slid across the glossy armor. “This is the most thoughtful gift anyone’s ever gotten for me!”

“I-It’s not finished yet,” Alphys said, “wh-which is why you can s-still sorta, um, see the inner frame—but I’ve done e-enough work to adapt it to the mass production models…”

“Mass production?” Undyne asked. “Alphy, we can’t hand this tech over to Chara!”

“No, no, no!” Alphys vigorously shook her head. “N-No, of course n-not! Look, these suits are only p-part of the mobile armor project s-so I would have a cover to requisition the materials w-without anyone getting s-suspicious! B-But the real project isn’t gonna use any of the good stuff, i-it’s gonna be super cheap! No n-nanolaminate armor, no magitek circulation s-system, the inner f-frame is gonna be, uh, the kind with the weak neck armor we gave to the rest of the Guard…”

Satisfied, Undyne patted Alphys on the head. “Attagirl.” She turned her attention to the other suit of armor, the barely-adorned inner frame with the stubby wing pack on the back. The armor was very clearly too small for her. “What’s this one?”

“Oh! That’s, uh…” Alphys scuffed the floor a bit with her foot. “That’s for 2B’s birthday. All I’ve finished i-is the flight pack and the heat saber, a-and she’s got the saber now…”

“Why does she get wings and I don’t?”

Alphys wasted no time in replying. “Y-You’ll have wings, too! I just haven’t finished them yet. Th-They’ll be bigger, I p-promise, and I-I’m thinking of making them into detachable, r-remote controlled—”

“You’re not making one for 9S, too, are you?” Undyne crossed her arms. Obviously, if Alphys was still on friendly terms with him, she had every right to do something like that, but Undyne couldn’t deny the idea made her more than just a little uncomfortable. Who knew how that crazy bastard would misuse something like this?

“No, um, I don’t r-really think it’s something he’d, uh, want.” Alphys sighed. “S-Speaking of, I know it’s p-pretty early in the morning, but… while you’re still here, wanna call 2B and 9S and see if they’re awake yet? Just… to check up on them?”

“No. Not really.”

“W-Well, I’m gonna. Nines was r-really messed up last night.” Alphys shuffled over to her computer. “Hope he didn’t e-end up in a coma this time.”

“I dunno. That’d make things a lot easier for all of us,” Undyne grumbled.

Incoming transmission from Server Node 1025 to Support Pod 042.

…”

Connection accepted.
Toriel’s humble home was quite cramped now. When 2B had first awoken, she had been in too much of a rush to fully take in her surroundings; now, the quiet morning after, she noticed how truly crowded Toriel’s lone guest bedroom had become.

Most of 2B and 9S’s belongings had been piled in this room in towers of cardboard boxes stretching from floor to ceiling, looming like ancient obelisks; 2B wondered who had brought them here. Papyrus and Sans, perhaps. Even the bed from the lakeside cottage had somehow been dragged in here, standing against the opposite wall of the room (6O was half-buried under its covers, snoozing peacefully with a tiny laptop computer still propped up on her lap). It was a gesture that seemed at once equal parts thoughtful and thoughtless.

2B and 9S sat on the bed at each others’ sides as Toriel stood before them, looming over the two androids with a mixture of sternness and concern writ all over her face. She held a paw over 9S’s cheek, bathing it in the emerald glow of healing magic, and slowly moved up his face, tracing the path of the grievous wounds that ran across his head from chin to forehead.

There were no longer canyons carved in 9S’s fair face—the staunching gel and self-repair nanomachines had done much to heal him already, stopping the bleeding and beginning to knit lacerated skin and muscle back together; Toriel’s magic, hopefully, would speed the healing process along.

2B felt a twinge of guilt every time she looked at his face, but she could not look away. Her eyes were drawn almost magnetically to trace the path of those scars marring his cheek, nose, brow, and forehead out of some morbid blend of horror and fascination.

9S’s favorite blue nightshirt hung on his shoulders, unbuttoned; his exposed torso beneath was riddled with a myriad of pale scars: some short, some long, some straight, some jagged. Beyond the Barrier, it would have been a simple matter to create skin grafts even with the Resistance’s dwindling resources; in the Bunker, 9S could have the damaged flesh easily replaced or simply transfer his consciousness to a fresh body altogether and have the old one recycled for parts. It wasn’t so simple down here, even though Alphys had the technology to fabricate new synthetic skin and musculature.

Toriel tsk-tsk-tsked at 9S, her eyes lowered as she did her work. “I ought to have tied you to a chair the minute you tried to leave,” she scolded him, her voice hoarse and husky and threatening to break with every word. “You have been quite a fool, 9S.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” 9S muttered. “I should’ve let you,” he added in a voice low enough to be just out of earshot.

As he sat and let the old exiled queen administer her treatment, 9S’s remaining arm snaked around 2B’s and tugged her closer to his side. He hadn’t left 2B’s side since she’d rescued him, taking every chance he was given to hold onto her. When she’d brought him home to a silent house (Toriel,
Asriel, and 6O had all fallen asleep waiting for her to return), she’d given him what he’d asked for—a hot bath, fresh pajamas, warm blankets to sleep under—and all the while he’d refused to let go of her (which had made the bath part a little difficult).

2B had lain in bed with 9S’s arm wrapped tightly around her waist and his head cushioned by her chest, as though he’d needed the sound of the muffled hum of her black box through her skin to lull him into a peaceful sleep. But while he’d dozed away, she hadn’t fallen asleep. She’d had enough of that over the past few weeks, and besides, her mind was racing, a single train of thought circling her head like debris caught in a whirlpool.

She thought she had known how much 9S had loved her, how important she was to him, but even after all the time the two of them had spent as a family and everything they had gone through together, he was still managing to surprise her with just how much she meant to him. Not too long ago, she hadn’t thought it was possible for anybody to care so much about her, even knowing full well who she really was and what she’d done. What 9S had done—his actions in their foolishness and destructiveness were beyond the pale—spoke, in their own twisted way, to the frightening strength of his devotion. He really couldn’t imagine life without her.

2B understood that. She’d never been able to imagine life without him, no matter how many times she’d had to endure it.

2B rested her head on 9S’s shoulder and patted him on the chest, feeling the warmth and softness of his bare skin, her fingers brushing against the rough and hard scar tissue running in crisscross patterns across that soft skin. With her ear pressed to his shoulder, she could hear the faint resonance of his black box humming merrily in his chest as the vibrations traveled through his body.

Toriel pulled her hand back from 9S’s face, sighing deeply as she closed her eyes. Though she did not age, her healing magic was still not what it once had been (or so she claimed), and using it took a lot out of her.

“That is all I can do for now,” she announced, holding a paw to her forehead as though the strain of her magic had given her a headache.

“Th-Thanks, Mom,” 9S mumbled, sinking deeper against 2B’s arm and resting his head against hers.

“We’re sorry to have troubled you this early in the morning,” 2B said.

“You knew what you were signing up for when you adopted a pair of soldiers,” said 9S.

Toriel gave the two of them a sad little smile and wrapped her arms around them. “Oh, I have had much worse troubles, believe me. You two may be holy terrors at times, my children,” she told them, engulfing them in a warm, firm embrace, pressing the two of them as close as she could and then just a little more. “But you are still far from a mother’s worst nightmare…”

Pod 042 arose from the floor, hovering beside the bed. “Incoming transmission from Doctor Alphys. Proposal: since this transmission is not urgent, if Units 2B and 9S require additional time for convalescence, the call should be ignored.”

Toriel broke away and yawned. “This appears to be my cue. Take care and rest up, children. I will wake you up for breakfast when it is ready.” With that, and after giving 9S one more gentle pat on the cheek, Toriel switched off the bedside lamp and took her leave.

9S curled up closer as Alphys’ voice issued from Pod 042’s speakers. “H-Hey guys, how are things on your end?”
“Nothing major to report, Alphys.” 2B yanked on the thick, soft bedsheets and wrapped them around herself and 9S. “What about you?”

“2B? Is that you?” Undyne’s voice was the next to emerge from Pod 042. At the sound of her voice, 9S huddled closer to 2B, as if seeking her protection from it.

“Hi, Undyne,” 9S mumbled.

Undyne ignored him. “It’s been a while, 2B.”

The captain sounded different to 2B: more reserved, more subdued. 2B had gotten a short summary of the past month from Alphys and 6O and was aware of the difficulties Undyne currently faced; she also knew that in Undyne’s current position, the trauma of seeing Chara murder Asgore must still be fresh in her mind, among other things troubling her, and yet the altered tone in her voice was still unnerving.

Undyne was usually so free with her emotions, but now, it was as if she’d erected a wall around herself. 2B, of course, knew exactly what those kinds of walls looked like. In fact, 2B nearly felt as though Undyne were trying to mimic her.

“It’s good to hear from you again, Undyne,” 2B answered. “Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Th-That’s okay!” Alphys said. “I-I mean, who among us hasn’t overslept once or twice?” She punctuated her little joke with a nervous laugh.

“Undyne, I need to talk to you about last night,” 2B said. “I did my best to keep casualties to a minimum,” she went on, recalling Alphys’ insistence on Undyne’s behalf that she spare the lives of her foes whenever possible, “but there are limits to my abilities.”

“Huh.” Undyne seemed nonplussed. “I noticed you, uh… cut a lot of peoples’ arms off.”

“If you’re upset with me, I understand,” 2B said. “I know how important your compatriots’ lives are to you, in spite of our current situation.”

“I, uh…” Undyne paused as if struggling to find the right words to say. Pod 042 floated in the air, mute, the way its arms hung somehow managing to reflect Undyne’s speechlessness. “Thanks, 2B,” she finally said. 2B could hear just a little bit of the old Undyne in her voice. A little bit more of her confidence; her brash, chipper, never-say-die attitude rang in the air.

“Well, we’ve, uh, got a busy day ahead of us—not to b-blow you guys off, I mean, well, I-I’m sure you guys need a little more t-time to rest up too,” Alphys butted in. “S-So why don’t we call back l-later today? N-Not that we don’t wanna talk more! No offense!”

“None taken,” 2B told her. “Thanks for checking up on us.”

“Wait.” 9S spoke up, clearing his throat. “Uh… Undyne… I don’t know if this means as much coming from me, but… I understand how important the promise I made to you was, and I’m sorry I broke it. Back then… last night… I wasn’t myself, and that was my fault. If there’s anything I can do to make it up to you… I mean… I know it’d be a challenge to forgive me after what I’ve done, but…”

“Yeah,” Undyne said. “Whatever. See you later, 9S.”

“Oh, wait, one more thing,” 9S said, raising his voice a bit. “We know where Chara’s hiding the other black boxes. Or, well, we can’t get to them yet, but… we have a pretty good idea where they
are, at least. And how to get to them.”

There was silence for a few seconds. Neither Alphys nor Undyne knew how to react to that news.

“Woohoo! That’s great!” Alphys finally cried out. “Dynes, did you hear that? Nines came through for us after all!”

“D— ’Dynes?’” 9S parroted, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Well, wow, look at the time, gotta go!” Undyne shouted. “Talk to ya later, love ya, bye!”

Pod 042 spoke up next. “Connection terminated.”

9S promptly sank into the bed, burrowing deep into the blankets until only his white hair was visible above the covers.

“She’s never going to forgive me,” he whined.

2B gently ruffled his hair and tugged at the covers enveloping him. “There, there,” she consoled him, curling up around him and holding him to her chest. “Give her time. Not everybody trusts as easily as you.”

“You know, now that I think about it…” 9S murmured, “that’s a weird thing to say, ’there, there.’ What’s ’there,’ and why is whatever ’there’ is supposed to make me feel better? I mean… it’s what’s here,” he said, his hand drowsily trailing along the soft fleece collar of 2B’s nightshirt, “that makes me feel better.”

2B couldn’t help but smile. “You’re overthinking it, Nines.”

“Well… you know us Scanners…” 9S trailed off, his voice growing fainter and fainter until he fell silent, placated by the sound of 2B’s black box.

Likewise, 2B laid back, closed her eyes, and allowed herself to rest for just a little while longer.

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who are Qubeley connoisseurs are probably wondering by now why Alphys becomes Otacon in literally every single Undertale fanfic I write.

The answer is, "why isn't she Otacon in everyone else's fics?"
Charade, Part I

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Chara has an intense argument, Alphys is called to once again face her past, and Asriel gets to babysit 9S.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

YoRHa units typically didn’t have to deal with being out-of-commission in the long term, but when they did, it was hell. Especially for Scanners.

Long ago, back on the surface, when he and 2B had still been part of the war effort (it felt like a lifetime ago—it practically was), 9S had suffered severe damage to his limbs during a mission into contested territory—one of the many shifting borders on the Earth between the machines and the Resistance—to open up a supply line to an under-siege camp.

While normally that would have been as trivial for 9S to deal with as uploading his consciousness back to the Bunker, installing himself into a fresh body, and heading back down to reconvene with 2B, the machines had had a powerful communications jamming array in place. Practically immobile, 9S had been stuck convalescing in the camp for nearly three days while 2B had worked solo to bring down the jamming array. It hadn’t taken him more than a few hours to get restless… fidgety… and bored. Inconsolably bored.

Those three days had been awful. The Resistance camp had no other YoRHa units stationed for support, medical or otherwise. 2B had still been standoffish as could be—he’d only been assigned to her about a week ago, which meant, he’d realized in hindsight, that she’d killed him very recently—and besides, she’d had a mission to complete in his stead, so there was little comfort to be found from her (what little comfort she’d given him, though, even if it had only been so much as her hand on his cheek, had meant the world to him).

Seventy hours spent lying on a hard cot with a thin blanket (only marginally worse than what he had in his quarters back on the Bunker, to be frank), trying desperately to pass the time by retreating into his mind and running through hacking routines. Every Scanner had a handful of simulated hostile virtual environments to run through in their downtime to keep their skills sharp. He’d run through all of them. It had felt like he’d spent hours flying around blasting through firewalls and zipping through data ports until he’d popped out to ask Pod 153 for the time and discovered he’d only been hacking for twenty minutes.

When 9S had woken up in the morning after this whole shitshow with the Royal Guard and found that his legs weren’t working—due to widespread, minor damage affecting both legs, failsafes had been engaged while he’d been in rest mode to prevent the damage from worsening and give his body’s limited self-repair systems time to get things back into working order—he’d thought back to that time.

Of course, things were different now. This time he had a soft bed with fluffy blankets, almost more pillows than he knew what to do with, books galore to read and re-read at his leisure, and plenty of company.
9S sat up in bed, the covers drawn up to his chest, as 2B swiped the pillow from the other bed and slipped it behind his back for extra support. “Anything else I can do for you before we head out?” she asked.

9S shrugged. “One more hug would be nice.”

2B smiled and leaned in, wrapping her arms around him. 9S returned the hug. “Hold on,” he added. “Remember our deal.”

“Right. My mistake.” 2B squeezed tighter, nearly crushing him. Soon after he’d originally lost his right arm in Alphys’ lab, he and 2B had agreed that whenever he could only give her half a hug, she would have to hug him twice as hard.

After a long, silent moment had passed, she let go and took a step back, but not before she brushed the hair from his forehead, careful to keep her touch light as her fingers passed over his scars, and planted a soft kiss there.

“Rest up, Nines.” She smiled again, but the smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. 9S could tell that her heart still ached at the sight—and feel—of his injuries. She applied her combat visor, drew a colorful scarf up past her nose, and pulled up the hood of her coat, covering every inch of bare skin and leaving nothing visible but a few locks of white hair. “It won’t take us more than an hour to get back from Snowdin.”

The Ruins, once an ancient city called “Home,” boasted an incredibly small population more-or-less cut off from the rest of the kingdom. It was largely self-sufficient, in what little of a self it had that needed to be sufficient, but unfortunately, its only grocery store had run dangerously low on food these past few days.

Androids didn’t need to eat, but Toriel did, and she was loath to dine on her own and spare nothing for the rest of her household. So Toriel was making an extremely rare visit to Snowdin, in disguise, to stock up on food, and 6O and 2B, also in heavy disguise, were joining her—6O because she was eager to see the town, and 2B because 6O was eager to see the town.

“You sure this is a good idea?” 9S asked. “I’ve got a lot of first-hand experience with bad ideas, you know, and… this kinda sounds like one.”

“We’ll be fine as long as 6O and I don’t pass for androids. Obviously, I won’t be able to rely on my NFCS or Pod 042 if things go south, but after last night, I doubt the Royal Guard has the manpower to give us any significant resistance if we’re spotted.” 2B spoke as though she were preparing for a new assignment from the Commander, not escorting an old woman and a fugitive to go grocery shopping.

“Just be careful,” 9S said, settling into his little throne of pillows. “I don’t want to—”

He had to whisper his next words—they wouldn’t come out any other way.

“I don’t want to—to lose you again.” He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting back tears.

“I’ll be back, I promise.” 2B wiped his tears on her glove and patted him on the cheek, her other hand taking his and squeezing it. “I love you, Nines.”

“I love you too, 2B.” His voice was hoarse.

By the time he opened his eyes again, 2B was gone.
But 9S did not remain alone for long—within a minute, he had a visitor.

Many rumors had sprung up around the new lord of the castle and king of the mountain, only living scion of the Dreemurr family, the outsider from the surface who had taken up the banner of monsterkind with unmatched zealotry, the foretold angel who would deliver an oppressed people to freedom, Chara Dreemurr.

One such rumor was that Chara never slept. That one, unlike the one suggesting that they had stolen Asgore’s soul and bonded with it to gain the old king’s immense power, was true.

*How long can you go without sleeping?* 13B whispered in the back of their mind as Chara struggled to stop their eye from glazing over while going over the casualty reports from last night’s debacle. *Even a top model android like me needs to go into rest mode every once in a while. And once you do...*

Chara’s left hand twitched involuntarily, as it had when they had first come to occupy this body. How had 13B grown so strong as to exert such dominance over their mind after so many months of utter silence? “Sleep is for the dead, dear,” they idly replied, focusing once more on the results of the damage 2B and 9S had wrought.

But their mind wandered yet again. They wondered what they could do to exorcize this willful spirit. 13B’s memory data was still contained within this body; if they could hack into it somehow, or connect it to a sufficiently-advanced computer interface, they could delete everything that belonged to 13B and render themselves once again the sole master of this body.

*You’ll be dead soon enough. You’ve seen what 2B and 9S are capable of. You’ll never win against them... and you’ll never be able to hurt my 6O again!* 13B cried out.

Chara felt the venom behind 13B’s words. It stung, but they retained their composure. “What’s this about 6O? Your 6O?” they inquired. “You barely knew the girl before I came into your life.”

*You lied to her, manipulated her, seduced her... but the feelings you faked, I felt for real! When she came to us after you murdered 7B and 5E and you pretended to be consoled by her, I felt her kindness! When we hugged, I felt it, when she laughed, I heard it, and when you kissed her, I did, too, and it was real to me!*

“Oh, brother.” Chara kept reading the report, leaning back in their throne. The joys of being commander-in-chief. It was almost enough to make them feel the slightest bit of grudging respect for Commander White.

*I won’t let you hurt 6O. If you even get close, I... I’ll take over again! And I’ll do something horrible!*

“You don’t have what it takes,” Chara told her. “I remember you, 13B, bawling, mewling, begging me to spare your wretched friends’ lives. You’re nothing compared to me.”

*And I know who you are now, Number Thirteen, said 13B, spitting out the name. I heard you talk to the Commander. We’re cut from the same cloth. Everything you can be, I can be.*

“And is that what revitalized you?”

*I hate you as much as you hated us. I’m going to do to your precious monsters what you did to 5E... 7B... the Commander... YoRHa... I’ll...*
“Oh? Is your memory faulty? It wasn’t me who destroyed YoRHa. I merely… took advantage of the chaos. Your own fellow androids threw you to the wolves the second your inconvenience outweighed your usefulness!”

Shut up!

“All you ever were… were the standard-bearers for a cosmic lie. Designated martyrs for a fabricated god from the day your sorry lot stepped off the assembly line.”

Shut up!!

Chara pressed on. “Your precious humanity has been extinct for nine thousand years.” They chuckled. “‘Glory to Mankind,’ indeed.”

Shut up! Shut up!!! Chara’s hand curled into a fist against their wishes. I hate you!

“Humanity is long dead and gone. Move past it.”

I’ll kill you! I’ll… I’ll…

Chara felt something slip from their eye. They reached up and brushed it off their cheek; their fingertip came away glossy and wet. “What’s this? A tear? Tears for humanity?”

They’re not gone… it’s a lie… it’s just a damned dirty lie! The machines are playing tricks on us! Humanity… they’re up there! On the moon! Waiting and hoping that one day they can return to the Earth! A-And when they come back… 13B’s angry words dissolved into a rabid, hateful shriek.

“You see, this is why you androids are so unworthy of life. So many millennia and still tied to the memory of mankind. Never learning to live for yourself, never growing, never evolving as a species, repeating the same tired mistakes again and again. This is why the surface will be purged. Androids are an evolutionary dead-end.”

You’re an android too! You’re one of us!

“My dear, I am not one of you.”

Mark my words, I’m not going to let you finish what the machines started! I’m going to make you pay! I’ll make you beg the same way you made me beg—it’s only a shame I can’t make you kill your father a second time—

Chara shot to their feet, the throne room with its gilded walls and ceiling spinning around them, clutching at their head, their fingers curling into their hair, the cold rim of their silver tiara biting into their fingers, their fingernails digging into their scalp; they gritted their teeth and hissed in agony as their head throbbed. Their report from the Royal Guard, now forgotten, slipped off their lap and flopped to the floor in front of them.

It still felt like only yesterday.

The sword running through Asgore’s chest.

The dust.

The dust.

Every part of Chara ached, and their heart most of all, their black box’s whirring pitched up to an audible whine. They’d killed their father. They’d begged him to surrender, but no, no, they had to,
they had to. And as they’d stood there, dumbfounded at their own behavior, surprised they had made good on their threat, there had been laughter.

The laughter they had heard as they’d stood over Asgore’s remains.

It had been hers.

“Shut up!” they cried out. “You killed him, didn’t you? It was you!”

13B’s mocking laughter filled Chara’s mind. I wish I could take credit for that! No, you loved him and yet you murdered him of your own free will!

“No!” Chara doubled over as if they’d been socked in the gut, stumbling over the stairs before the throne and falling ungracefully to the floor. The golden tiles beneath their cheek were cold. “It was you... You... I'll get rid of you! You’re lying! You made me murder my father!”

13B kept laughing.

“STOP IT!”

Chara drew back their fist and plunged it into the floor with all their might, shattering the tiles, lacerating their hand; as the searing pain traveled up their arm and blood ran from their knuckles, 13B’s laughter faded away.

Relieved to be free of their tormentor, Chara rose to their feet, their legs shaky, their knees knocking, panting, their breathing still rapid and shallow; they stood, hunched over, blood dripping from their clenched fist onto the floor.

The door to the throne room swung open and Captain Undyne strode through. “Your Highness,” she spat through gritted teeth in the most diplomatic tone she could muster, “I’m here to report on the—”

Her single yellow eye widened with shock as she caught sight of her king, her words catching in her throat, her mouth agape.

Chara was a wreck, and they knew it.

And within an instant, they knew how to turn this to their advantage.

Their eye widened, and they faked a shuddering, half-choked sob as they stared down at their hands in fascination. “I’m free,” they gasped, drawing on 13B’s voice as they looked up, their eye meeting Undyne’s. “It—it’s me, I—I did it! Chara... they’re gone!”

Undyne’s cold, harsh body language, her ramrod-straight posture, the coldness in her face—it all melted away like an ice cube over an open flame, and without hesitation, she rushed to Chara’s side. Chara wasn’t the least bit surprised—she was truly the type to take action first and think later, and her tendency toward heroics made her a sucker for vulnerability. But Chara could tell that Undyne was surprised by her own readiness to grab hold of them.

Safely ensconced in Undyne’s grip, Chara put on the waterworks. “Oh, thank you! Thank you so much! I... th-they’ve been controlling me for so long, a-and I, I, I had to watch as they did a-all those horrible things...”

“Um... hey, it’s gonna be all right...” Undyne patted them on the back, still a little unnerved. “It’s... so you’re 13B—er, Lucky, huh?”
“Oh,” Chara mewled, sniffling. “I… I really am… I fought Chara for so long, a-and now… it’s over…”

There was an ever-so-suspicious twinge at the corner of Undyne’s mouth. She wasn’t fully buying it.

“I—I know,” Chara said, “you don’t have any reason to believe me… you never knew me… but I’ve fought so long and hard, I’ve struggled so much… I watched as they forced me to murder my friends… all I could do was watch and scream out in my head, and it hurt, it hurt so much…”

“Listen, uh, Lucky. It’s, uh… gonna be okay,” Undyne stammered, her gaze darting across the throne room. Chara could sense the conflict in her heart. She wanted to believe that it was Lucky she was comforting, wanted it badly, but wasn’t quite ready to take the leap of faith.

Chara laid a hand on Undyne’s cheek, caressing her smooth, scaly skin. “I’m… I want to talk to 6O. Is she safe?”

Undyne took Chara’s hand and pulled it away, unsure of what to do with it. “Uh…”

“I… I want her to know that…” Chara squeezed their eye shut and buried their face in Undyne’s shoulder. “Chara lied to her, manipulated her, seduced her… but the feelings they faked, I felt for real! When she came to me after they murdered 7B and 5E and they pretended to be consoled by her, I felt her kindness! When we hugged, I felt it, when she laughed, I heard it, and when… when they… they kissed her, I did, too, and it was real to me!

“I want to see her again,” Chara whimpered. “I want… to show her that… that what we had… it was real. Please, you have to let me see her! I want her to know! I don’t want her to look back on what we had together and think it was all a lie…”

Undyne gave Chara another comforting pat on the back. “I… I’m sorry. I can’t do that.” She shrugged. “Dunno where she is.”

“But you helped her escape.”

Undyne sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know where the others took her. She could be anywhere in the kingdom. Sorry.”

She knew. She knew, and she still only half-trusted Chara. What more could Chara say to draw the information out of her?

“You’re afraid, aren’t you?” they asked. “I—I understand… you think Chara might be listening in on whatever you tell me.”

“Huh?” Undyne gave Chara an incredulous look. “I—I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” she said, letting out a little nervous laugh. “Sorry.”

“They’re gone,” Chara insisted. “I—I fought them and I won.” They took Undyne’s hands and grasped them tightly. “They—They can’t hear a word I say, and even if they could, they’re not coming back. Ever. You can tell me.”

No good. Chara had to offer something to prove their—Lucky’s—trustworthiness.

“I can tell you,” they said, “where Chara hid the other black boxes.”

Undyne’s earfins perked up. “Really?”
“It’s…” Chara closed their eyes and bit their lip, making a big show out of pretending to concentrate. “Tunnels. Dark tunnels, somewhere under… Damp place. Dark and wet.”

“Waterfall?” Undyne offered.

“Yes, yes! Waterfall! That’s it!” Chara nodded.

“I live there!” Undyne grinned, her eye brightening.

“There’s a room with a piano,” Chara went on, “and—”

At just the right time, the door to the throne room swung open yet again.

The royal attendant standing at the door saluted. “Your Highness! Captain Undyne! Your presence is requested at Central Hospital. It’s urgent.”

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This had better be important, Alphys groused on her way to Central Hospital, to drag me away from the mobile armor project.

Those grumbling thoughts running through her sleep-deprived head vanished when she stepped into the lobby and saw at least a dozen monsters of all shapes and sizes, all of them members of the Royal Guard, all of them sorry sights, many still wearing their armor, all of them nursing broken bones as well as severed stumps that had once been arms and legs.

Alphys was not a medical doctor—she was an engineer first and foremost, even if her position as Royal Scientist did require her to have at least a basic understanding in many fields—yet trudging through the mass of the wounded and rubbing elbows filled her with a sense of personal responsibility so overwhelming it bordered on nausea, like she had a duty to help all these people and there were just too many of them and the pressure was crushing her.

She pushed her way through the crowd as gently as she could, mumbling and stammering apologies constantly until she reached the receptionist. “D-Doctor Gaubrieta s-sent for me,” she squeaked out, “s-so, if you’ll just, uh, I don’t wanna h-hold anyone up, s-so…”

The receptionist lazily pointed one of his seven tentacles down the hallway leading to the east wing of the hospital. “First right, third door on the left.”

With a hurried “thank you,” Alphys rushed into the comparatively-empty hallway, taking solace in the emptiness of its pristine, white walls.

Until two medics carrying a gurney between them barreled down the hall at full tilt and nearly bowled her over. Alphys barely managed to pin herself to the wall in time. Her heart leaped into her throat, pounding like a bass drum.

Alphys found a strange sense of foreboding growing within her as she followed the directions to Gaubrieta’s office. Gaubrieta was the chief surgeon of the hospital and renowned as a prodigy in the field of medical magic… but her main claim to fame, just as Alphys’ experiments with the amalgamates overshadowed so much of her engineering work, was that she was the daughter of the previous Royal Scientist, Gaster.

Gaubrieta was tall, lanky, and permanently hunched-over, with an angular and skeletal head like a cow’s skull engraved with a permanent grin, foggy emerald eyes shining like candlelight through smoke in her deep, hollow eye sockets. She wasted no time as she beckoned Alphys into her office
with long, spindly fingers. [Ah, Doctor Alphys. How kind of you to come here with such haste.] she
signed. [I have need of you.]

“D-Did you, uh, a-are you having trouble g-getting into your email?” Alphys asked, taking her tail in
her hands and nervously running her thumbs over the tip.

Gaubrieta’s eye sockets brightened. [Oh, Doctor Alphys, how droll. No, no, the IT department
helped me with that already. I am overseeing a very unique patient and am in need of your
guidance.]

With that, Gaubrieta took Alphys by the arm and left the office, gliding down the hall to one of the
operating rooms.

A unique patient? My guidance? Alphys felt the pit in her stomach grow larger. What could I know
about biology and medical care that Doctor Gaubrieta doesn’t…?

No, it can’t be that, Alphys insisted to herself, putting the thought out of her mind. Maybe the patient
was a machine lifeform, or maybe somebody needed to be fitted with a prosthetic. But what if…

Gaubrieta guided her to her patient and Alphys couldn’t help but gasp.

It was the left arm, bisected torso—cut diagonally from hip to shoulder—and head of a scaly,
snakelike, dragonish woman; the only clue she still lived was in the steady rise and fall of her chest
and the occasional flicking of her thin, forked tongue in and out of her mouth. Alphys noticed a
sickeningly-familiar wet, glossy, translucent-white sheen on the monster’s scaly hide. At the foot of
the surgical bed was a large glass flask filled halfway with thin white goop; on the tray next to the
bed, sitting alongside sharp and shining surgical implements, was a copper orb.

[At first, I could not believe it.] Gaubrieta signed. [Despite suffering such a mortal wound in her
battle with the androids, we found Lieutenant Snaca still clinging to life… but only just.] She glided
over to the table, cradling the copper orb in her long, thin, bony talons before setting it aside. [Her
symptoms were—strange. She was not turning into dust as a monster in her condition would, and she
seemed to be emitting low levels of an obscure form of radiation. I knew I’d read about these
symptoms before…]

Alphys found her breath frozen in her lungs. Her heart skipped a beat.

[… in your declassified reports on the experiments you performed with DT energy.] Gaubrieta ran
her finger along the orb yet again—the orb Alphys now recognized as the core of a machine
lifeform. [One of the other fatalities of last night was a severely-injured member of the mechanized
regiment of the guard. Its body was damaged beyond repair, but its core was intact.]

No, Alphys thought. No, not this. Not again. I put this all behind me.

[The Lieutenant is near death. She will not last more than an hour in this state. Frankly, it is a miracle
she has remained intact this long without turning to dust. But if we give her this, she may last long
enough for us to find a more permanent solution.] Gaubrieta’s eyes bored into Alphys’ as she loomed
over the diminutive Royal Scientist. [Doctor, I need your expertise. Will you oversee the
implantation of the machine core?]

After an interminable pause, an eternity gazing into those foggy green eyes, Alphys said something.

“C-Can I, uh, g-go to the bathroom?” she asked.
A wide grin running from ear to ear, Asriel pulled up a stool and sat at 9S’s bedside. “Good morning, Nines! Mom wants me to look after you while everyone else is gone. Can I get you anything? Some water?”

9S looked over at Pod 153, which had just placed a tall glass of water on the nightstand. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Or, uh, Mom has some books you might like. Or maybe,” the kid continued, an enthusiastic gleam in his eyes, “we could play some hacking games!”

“Whoa, there, kiddo. I’m still pretty tired from last night,” 9S said, sighing. “Oh, yeah… sorry I didn’t bring Alphys back with me like I promised.”

“O-Oh, that’s okay,” Asriel stammered, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “I, uh…” He faked a cough. “We’ll just get this looked at some other…”

“I know you’re faking it.”

Asriel became very interested in the hem of his striped shirt and began kneading it with his paws. “Uh… Um…”

“So, what’s really going on? Why do you want to see her so badly?”

“I wanna tell her…” Asriel paused, then sighed. “I want her to know that… it’s okay. I—I never got to see Dad again because she didn’t tell him about me, and—and I wish I’d—I’d had that chance, b—but…”

Before the kid’s sniffles could turn into full-blown weeping, 9S grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him onto the bed, hugging him as best he could. “Uh… sorry I asked…”

Asriel buried his face in 9S’s chest; 9S winced as the kid’s fuzzy snout brushed against some of his fresher injuries. “I j-just wanna t-tell her that… she did what she thought was right, a-and I don’t blame her…” he sobbed, “I want my dad back, a-and she knows that but… i-if she feels bad because of that, I wanna say I’m sorry…”

“Hey, it’s okay,” 9S said, patting him on the back. Asriel burrowed deeper into his embrace. “It’s okay.”

Asriel curled up on his lap. “I don’t want her to feel guilty… or blame herself… o-or do anything stupid,” he said, “because s-she thinks she has to make up for it.”

*You mean like I did?* 9S wondered. “That’s, uh… surprisingly mature.”

“What do you mean, ’surprisingly?’” Asriel asked. “I’m your older brother!”

9S rolled his eyes. “Oh, not *this* again,” he muttered, suppressing an ugly snort of laughter. “Hey, why don’t we send Alphys a message? You can tell her all about how you feel and, you know. Take care of that.”

“It’s not the same,” Asriel murmured, his voice muffled by 9S’s chest. “Mom always said if you’re gonna apologize to someone, y-you should do it in person.”

“Better than nothing, though, isn’t it?” 9S cleared his throat. “Pod, send a transmission to Doctor Alphys’ personal cell phone.”
What little remained of Alphys’ already-pitiful breakfast stared up at her as she hunched over the bathroom sink, clutching its porcelain edges, her shoulders shaking as she struggled to fill her lungs. Her stomach felt like someone had tied it into knots and wrapped it around her spine; her throat and mouth burned as sour, acerbic bile dripped from her lips into the sink. She gasped for air, shuddering, aware in the back of her mind that deep within her purse, her phone was ringing, but unable to work up the willpower to answer it; unable to do much at all but wipe her lips on a paper towel, turn on the faucet and wash as much of her vomit down the drain as she could, and shuffle back into the hall.

Why did her research have to come back to haunt her? Were the people whose bodies she’d desecrated not enough? Was it not enough that it had already nearly ruined her career once before?

There was no way she could do what Doctor Gaubrieta was asking for. It wouldn’t even be preserving Snaca’s life, really—it would let her exist in that hideous half-melted state, constantly emitting the DT radiation monster’s souls released in a quick burst before death, until she became one of those shambling amalgamates, neither monster nor machine, never again able to enjoy a normal life… It wasn’t an existence she could bear to inflict on that woman.

Alphys made her way back to the operating room shaking with anxiety but knowing exactly what she was going to say. She was going to tell Gaubrieta no. She wasn’t going to do anything that involved cheating death or messing with souls.

When Alphys arrived, she quickly found something more to be anxious about, because standing before the operating table, across from Gaubrieta, were Captain Undyne and King Chara Dreemurr, their attentions torn between the ghastly sight on the table and the chief surgeon’s fluttering hands.

[The Lieutenant was conscious for only a few minutes when we brought her here,] Gaubrieta signed, [but she requested to see the two of you as soon as possible.] The head surgeon glanced away and noticed Alphys, her emerald eyes lighting up. [Ah! Doctor Alphys! I do hope it is okay to have guests—one does not say no, after all, to our sovereign king…]

Undyne and Chara both looked at Alphys in turn, and what struck Alphys first was the different look in Chara’s eye—somehow softer, weaker, fragile…

“Alphy!” Undyne’s eye lit up. “Hey! Wh-What are you doing here?”

“D-Dynes?” Alphys’ voice caught in her throat.

[Doctor Alphys is here,] Gaubrieta signed to Undyne and Chara, [to share with me her expertise. We hope that together we may spare the Lieutenant’s life.]

A flash of worry streaked across Undyne’s face as her eye darted from Alphys to the body of her comrade. “Snaca… Is that you?”

“Un… dyne…”

The voice, raspy and tortured, nearly indistinguishable from a death rattle, came from what little remained of Lieutenant Snaca’s body. Her eyes cracked open; the sclerae were jet-black. She raised her single remaining arm, the forearm split down the middle and fanged like a grotesque dragon’s head, pitifully trembling.

Gaubrieta reached out to lower Snaca’s arm, but Undyne’s hand shot out and grabbed hers by the wrist; with her other hand, Undyne patted her comrade’s arm. “That’s right,” she said. “I’m here.”
Snaca laughed. “Always… ran… behind you… Jealous, much… I get… to do something… first…
this time…”

Alphys wasn’t sure how well Undyne knew her subordinate, but Snaca’s words seemed to have a profound effect on her. “L-Listen, you asshole,” she stammered, letting out a nervous, mirthless laugh, “You’re n-not gonna…”

“King… Sovereign… Chara…”

Chara seemed uncharacteristically unable to think of a response when Snaca addressed them.

“I… tried… damn androids… Did my best… to carry out… your… will… P-Proud?”

[Please,] Gaubrieta signed, [we should not permit the Lieutenant to waste her energy speaking. Alphys, we must begin.]

“Wait.” Undyne took a deep breath. “I need to speak with Alphys in private first. If you would grant us a minute, King Chara?” she asked, bowing politely.

[That may be all we have,] Gaubrieta signed.

Chara sighed, their eyes downcast. “I’ll allow it, Captain.”

As soon as the king gave their okay, Undyne rushed to Alphys’ side and dragged her far down the hall.

“All right,” she whispered, glancing up and down to make sure the coast was clear. “I’ve got a lot to tell you. First off—that person in there is not Chara Dreemurr.”


“Shh!” Undyne held a finger to Alphys’ snout. “At least… they say they aren’t Chara. It’s their host body—13B.”

“Th—That’s happened before,” said Alphys. “Back when—”

“Yes, I know. She says she’s back in control now—permanently. Thing is… I don’t believe them,” Undyne said. “I want to, but…”

“It’s a… pretty hard thing to b-believe, yeah,” Alphys admitted. “S-So, uh…”

“If there was some way for her to prove, beyond a doubt, that she’s the one in control…”

“I got it! W-We could,” Alphys offered, “h-have her do something the real Chara would n-ever do! Like… tell us wh-where the other black boxes are, r-repeal the law making the androids f-fugitives, dem-m-militarize the Guard…”

“Brilliant!” Undyne’s eye sparkled. “Yeah! They’d never disadvantage themselves like that! If 13B agrees to do any of that, we know she’s the one in control!” She grabbed Alphys by the waist and lifted her off her feet. “I love you, Alphy!”

Down the hall, a very stern, very irritated physician poked their head out of one of the doorways and loudly shushed the two of them. With a sheepish grin, Undyne set Alphys back down. “S-Sorry.”

“Now, um,” Alphys went on, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I… I g-gotta talk to you. Dynes, Doctor Gaubrieta wants me to t-turn Snaca into an amalgamate to spare her life. I… I-I c-can’t do
that, b-but I just feel so helpless…”

Undyne cringed. “I—I’m with you, Alphy. But… it’s hard to see her like this, a-and if we could give
her just a few more days…”

“What? B-But you hate Snaca!”

“*Hate*’s a strong word! S-She’s a, uh…” Undyne sighed. “I—I’ve known her since I was little. She
was always trying to copy me. I started training with Gerson, she found another retired old former
guard to train with. I accidentally beat up the mailman, she *on-purpose* beat up the riverperson. I met
Asgore, she started chasing around the Royal Guard and trying to get to crime scenes ahead of them
to beat up the bad guys first… You get the idea!”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, s-she’s a sadistic asshole, a-and gods forbid she’s *ever* in a position with any real power
whatsoever, but… She always had this ‘hero-worship’ thing going on, and…” Undyne hung her
head. “I feel responsible. For where she is now, for what she is now. I-I don’t want her to die.
Especially… not after last night.”

“Dynes, I—I didn’t know. I’m sorry… But,” Alphys insisted. “I-I can’t—I can’t relive those e-
periments…”

“I know!” Undyne shook her head. “I… I know, a-and I’m sorry for asking that of you. If you can’t
do it, then you can’t do it. You’re right.” Her voice cracked. “A few days before she relapses…
that’s no life at all.” She knelt down and wrapped her arms around Alphys. “I’m so, so sorry. I—I
didn’t mean to put that kind of pressure on you.”

Alphys patted Undyne on the back. “I f-forgive you. It’s okay. I—I just d-didn’t know what she
meant to you…”

“*Excuse me, Captain? Doctor?*” Chara called out, striding over to the two of them. Gaubrieta hung
back behind them like a living shadow. Alphys had to admit, there was something in Chara’s face
that signaled a different, kinder personality in control now, but she also had to admit, a facial
expression alone wasn’t very conclusive evidence that 13B was the one speaking. “I do hate to
interrupt, but we’re running out of time. Doctor Gaubrieta has briefed me on the operation discussed
and what it entails.”

“They glanced up at the chief surgeon looming over them. With an audience, if they really were 13B
and not Chara, they still had to pretend that they were Chara.

“I mean,” they said, clearing their throat, “Doctor Alphys, as sovereign king, I command you to
oversee this operation. The lives of our bravest soldiers must be preserved.”

Alphys bit her lip, feeling once again sick to her stomach. She looked up at Undyne, who simply
shrugged sadly.

“I’ll do it,” she said, the words instantly turning to ash in her mouth.
As Alphys’ prerecorded voicemail message played out through Pod 153’s speakers, 9S shrugged. “Sorry, Azzy,” he told Asriel, comfortingly stroking the boy’s floppy ears. “We can leave a message for her, though.”

“N-No, that’s okay.” Asriel rested his head on 9S’s shoulder. “Bad enough not to talk to her face-to-face…”

“I get it,” said 9S, not getting it. “I’m sure she’s busy making something really awesome in her lab right now. Let’s call back later today.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, gonna drop a kinda-but-not-really-spoiler for an upcoming chapter by sharing this commission I got loosely based on the power armor Alphys built for Undyne in the last chapter:

...What? Did you think that wasn't gonna show up again?

(art source: menacing-marshmallow)
Chapter Summary

How far will Chara have to go to keep up their charade?

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, gals, and nonbinary pals, I know it's been just a little longer of a wait than usual for this chapter, but that was because I was having a really hard time getting the structure down and ended up writing a big chunk of the next chapter over the past week as well.

Spoiler alert: It's going to be called "2B's Day Off" and is going to have a lot of 2B/6O content.

Alphys never expected the skills she hadn’t used in years—for good reason—to return to her so readily, for everything she did on the operating table to feel so natural, but as she guided Doctor Gaubrieta’s skillful hands and directed the installation of the machine core into Lieutenant Snaca’s chest cavity—what was left of it—her hands weren’t even shaking. In fact, she felt as though she were watching herself through a camera, as if her hands weren’t moving of her own volition, as if the words pouring from her mouth directing Gaubrieta on what to do weren’t being spoken by her, but by something living within her that acted on its own.

With a deft application of healing magic, Gaubrieta sealed the incision, her bony hands alight with a pale yellow-green glow; the monitors displaying Snaca’s vital signs began to report much happier numbers as her condition began to stabilize.

Saved from the brink of death… but only for a scant few days until the lieutenant still lived, but not life as she’d known it. For all intents and purposes, dead, but undying; deceased, yet immortal; alive, but not as she’d known it—a living ghost, a shambling mass of fragmentary memories given presence.

Snaca’s jet-black eyes cracked open. “Captain… Your Highness… Doctor…” she whispered, “I can’t feel my legs…”

In that instant, Alphys couldn’t feel her legs either, and the sterile white walls of the operating room, pulsing and throbbing from the searing glare of the overhead lights, spun around her.

This was still, she mused to herself before she passed out and collapsed to the floor, a bad idea—but the time when such thoughts would have done her good had long since passed.

Alphys came to on the tiny futon Doctor Gaubrieta kept tucked away in her office. The lights were
the door was closed, sealing away the hustle and bustle filling the rest of the hospital. Gaubrieta wasn’t at her desk, though; instead, Undyne was lounging in her swivel chair, her boots casually propped up on the desk. Despite her relaxed posture, she was watching Alphys like a hawk, and shot to her feet as soon as Alphys lifted her head.

“Alphy!” She rushed to Alphys’ side and helped her sit up. “Hey there… you all right?”

Alphys nodded, still feeling a little lightheaded and just a little nauseous. “H… How long was I out?” she asked Undyne.

“Just a few minutes. The doctor let me bring you over here to lie down. She’s supervising the Lieutenant right now.” Undyne ran her fingers over the small of Alphys’ back in tight circles, massaging away the stress and fatigue tensing up her muscles. “How’re you feeling?”


Undyne understood right away and fetched the little basket littered with crumpled-up prescription pads, bringing it right up under Alphys’ chin, and right on cue, Alphys coughed up a thin, hatefully-acerbic wad of bile, burning her throat, tongue, and nostrils, her stomach twisting itself into anxious knots as it upended itself. She coughed and hacked violently, hot tears burning her eyes as all of the repressed horror and self-loathing that had been building up throughout the operation forced its way out of her by any means necessary.

“There, there.” Undyne ran her fingers up and down the back of Alphys’ neck, the light touch of her gliding fingertips and sharp nails tingling her scales in an almost ticklish way. “It’s all right. Get it all out!”

Alphys heaved again and again, with each cough feeling her stomach fold in on itself and wrap itself around her spine, each time wondering how she was even finding the tiniest dregs of stomach acid to expel until it was finally over.

Once her stomach had calmed itself and the wastebasket had been placed back on the floor (within arm’s reach, just in case) and Alphys had wiped away the bile from her lips with a tissue, she curled up at Undyne’s side, tucking her knees into her chest; Undyne pulled her onto her lap, gripping her in a warm, tight embrace. “I’m so sorry, Alphys,” she murmured.

“I-I’m okay,” Alphys insisted. “I…"

“I’m proud of you. I’m so proud of you, Alphy,” Undyne told her. “I—I know how much it hurts to relive what you did back then, but today, you used what you’d learned to save someone. Snaca—she was going to die in a few hours, but you gave her a few more days. Days she can use to say goodbye to her family, her friends…”

Alphys threw her arms around Undyne’s neck and buried her fingers in her long, thick red tresses, the silky feeling of her hair steadying her.

“I guess… sometimes,” Undyne said, “even the most terrible things we can do can help us do something great later on. I love you, Alphys.” She gave Alphys another comforting squeeze.

“I love you too, Dynes,” Alphys answered, returning the Undyne’s hug with a hearty squeeze of her own. “So where’s Chara, or 13B, or w-whoever’s in control now?” she asked.
“Hung back with Doctor Gaubrieta and Snaca.” Undyne shrugged. “So… what do you think? Who’s in the driver’s seat?”

“Well…” Alphys scratched her chin, her tail twitching behind her as she thought. “I-I can’t really say. None of us kn-knew 13B at all… e-even 6O didn’t m-meet her until after Chara h-had already taken control… s-so if Chara’s pretending to be 13B, then even if they did a r-really bad job, h-how would we know?”

Undyne nodded, crossing her arms. “Yeah. Gotta feel sorry for 13B—if she’s really in there. Everyone who really knew her is… gone. There’s only one way to tell if it really is 13B… As you said, we’ll have to get her to do something Chara would never do. End the war. Demilitarize the Guard. Repeal the anti-android laws. Anything that helps us and hurts Chara. If I were 13B… well, I’d take any chance I could get to fuck Chara over.” She clenched her fist. “C’mon, it’s time the two of us had a talk with our boss.”

Alphys slid off the futon, her head still spinning a bit. She wondered why Gaubrieta had one of these in her office—did she often stay here overnight? The thought of that tall, bony, skeletal woman curled up on a tiny little cot like this brought a hint of a smile to her face. Maybe the two of them had more in common than Alphys had thought.

Undyne led Alphys out of the office and toward the operating room, only to encounter Gaubrieta and Chara on the way.

The four of them stood in the corridor, Gaubrieta towering over the rest even when hunched over. Alphys couldn’t quite parse the look on Chara’s face, but they seemed… mildly confused. In their eyes, normally fierce and focused, there was a lost look, like a child who’d gotten separated from their parents in the middle of a busy mall. Was it an act? Or was that how 13B felt?

[Doctor Alphys,] Gaubrieta signed, her words harder to discern due to the trembling in her spindly fingers as she spun her words like a spider spinning its web, [King Chara has been informing me of your mobile armor project. Perhaps later this afternoon, when Lieutenant Snaca has stabilized, we could retrofit whatever you have into prostheses for her?]

“Uh…”

[I would love to see your workshop. Oh, and by the way,] Gaubrieta went on, [you used to perform maintenance on the androids, didn’t you?]

“I-It wasn’t a crime when I did it,” Alphys stammered.

Gaubrieta shook her shoulders as if she were laughing, the emerald lights in her hollow eye sockets twinkling. [That is not what I meant. I’ve just heard that those androids’ systems are as complex as any biological organism. It’s interesting to think about the similarities between our work.]

“Y-Yeah, it’s, uh, p.pretty interesting stuff.” Alphys felt heat rising up to flush her cheeks. Why was Doctor Gaubrieta being so… friendly? “I-I mean, when you think about it, b-biological organisms a-are the most complicated a-and efficient machines in the universe!”

[What an elegant way of putting it,] said Gaubrieta, flattered. [Even though androids are our enemies, there is so much we can learn from our synthetic cousins. Please give me your personal phone number. And perhaps your UnderNet handle as well?] Gaubrieta fished through the pockets of her black robes and pulled out a cell phone, then handed it to Alphys.

Alphys accepted it with trembling fingers and punched in her phone number. This was surreal. How
could Gaubrieta be fawning over her like this? And what would she think if she and Alphys exchanged UnderNet handles? All Gaubrieta would see would be Alphys’ endless posts about anime and plausibly-deniable vagueposts about her boss—hardly anything that would make her seem like an intelligent, professional individual!

“I-I, uh, don’t have a handle,” Alphys lied.

[Really?] Gaubrieta replied. [But all you young people are on social media nowadays.]

“No me! Too busy!” Alphys handed Gaubrieta back her phone. “I-I’m sorry, Doctor Gaubrieta, but Undyne, King Chara, and I need to have a, uh, meeting, right away. S-So, uh, see ya later?”

[Oh, yes, pardon me. I won’t keep you.] Gaubrieta reached out and patted Alphys on both shoulders. [By the way, my friends call me Gabby.]

“You have friends?” Alphys blurted out, instantly mortified at what she’d let slip out.

[I am not as much of a workaholic as my reputation would have you believe. Take care, Alphys.] With that, Gaubrieta turned around and made her way back to her work.

Undyne let out a low whistle as Doctor Gaubrieta left, then patted Alphys on the head. “Look at you, Alphy! I’ll have to be twice as good to you if I wanna keep you all to myself!”

Alphys felt her entire face and probably her entire head redden. “Sh—She, uh, she wasn’t f-flirting w-with me…” she insisted.

“Yes, she was,” Chara spoke up, crossing their arms and smiling. “Trust me. I’ve seen this a dozen times before. YoRHa’s population is ninety percent women and all of them flirt with each other all the time.” They sighed, the smile vanishing from their face. “Well… they did.”

“Sounds like it would’ve been my kind of place,” Undyne said.

“You two would have loved it,” Chara said wistfully. “…I miss them… I miss them so, so much…”

As their voice cracked, Chara all but fell into Alphys’ arms and held her tight, all but weeping into her shoulder. As Alphys felt the frailty of their body, she was convinced.

The person crying in her arms over the deaths of her friends… was, beyond the shadow of a doubt, 13B.

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“I still think this is a bad idea,” Asriel said, nervously clutching a tub of chocolate ice cream in his paws as he sat at 9S’s side. “A-Are you sure Mom won’t…”

“Nah, it’s fine,” said 9S, slipping a spoonful of ice cream into his mouth, letting the delicious treat melt over his tongue, filling his mouth with its overwhelmingly rich and decadent taste before he swallowed it. “When you’re sick or injured and you go to a hospital, you get to eat all the ice cream you want. I saw it in one of Alphys’ historical documents. It helps you recover!”

“I dunno,” said Asriel. “If that were true…”

“Trust me,” 9S replied, reaching out to scoop up another spoonful. “Mom’s gonna be okay with it. Besides, I’m only taking a few bites.”
Asriel stared into the tub. “You’ve, uh… had like, half of this already.”

“Well, cut me some slack. We don’t have chocolate on the surface.”

“Really?”

“Well.” 9S finished his next spoonful. He already felt better. “There’s so much we don’t have on the surface. Chocolate, pizza, hot dogs, buffalo wings… On the surface, buffalo don’t even have wings! Also, they’ve been extinct for over ten thousand years. Crazy, huh?”

“I’m, um…” Asriel slipped the lid back onto the tub. “I still think this is a bad idea, Nines.”

“No, it’s fine!” 9S wiggled his spoon in the air. “Pod, back me up here!”

Instead of offering 9S its support, Pod 153 began to ring loudly before interrupting itself. “Incoming transmission. Statement: this support unit is being hailed by Queen Toriel’s cellular telephone. Proposal: accept call immediately.”

“Uh-oh,” Asriel whispered, clutching the tub of ice cream closer to his chest.

“All right, pick up.” 9S sighed. “Don’t worry, Azzy, Mom doesn’t have to know about—”

“Know about what?” Toriel asked as Pod 153 emitted her voice.

“About what a great time the two of us are having together!” 9S answered. “Asriel is… reading… his favorite book to me!”

“Oh, how sweet! And you are feeling better?”

9S bent his knee—barely. The failsafes preventing his motor systems from functioning were loosening up as his body’s limited self-repair functions did their work. “Y-Yeah. I think I’ll be able to walk again in… six to nine hours, maybe?”

“Wonderful! Now, you two, I just called to let you know that 2B, 6O, and I will be returning a little later than we expected. I am making sure Papyrus’ latest culinary… exploration does not burn his house down. Take care, you two… and behave!”

“Yes, Mom!” Asriel answered, guiltily stowing away the ice cream.

“Yeah, yeah.” 9S sank back and leaned into his pillows.

“A single affirmation will suffice, 9S,” Toriel replied, giggling girlishly.

9S rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on, Mom, not you, too.” 2B had taken her old admonishment and turned it into a running joke, much to his dismay. “Tell 2B I’ll never forgive her for this, okay?”

“We will call you again if anything else comes up,” Toriel said. “Do take care, my children! I love you!”

“Love you too, Mom,” Asriel and 9S answered in unison.

Pod 153 went silent. “Connection terminated,” it said in its own voice.

Asriel slid off the stool and made his way to the door.

“Hey!” 9S called out. “Where do you think you’re going?”
“I’m not gonna let you make a liar out of yourself!” Asriel called back as he slipped out of the bedroom. “I’m gonna go get my favorite book!”

“Azzy, wait, no, I—”

Asriel was already gone.

9S sighed. “Pod,” he asked, “do you have, uh… Undyne’s phone number?”

“Affirmative. However, this support unit would advise against calling Captain Undyne, as audio communications can easily be intercepted in her current position.”

“I just want to send a text message,” he clarified.

“Acknowledged. Text-based communication carries a lower risk of accidental interception. Proposal: Unit 9S will speak his message aloud, and this support unit will transcribe and transmit the text to its intended recipient.”

“Okay.” 9S took a deep breath, patting his pod on the arm. “Here goes.” He cleared his throat. “Un—”

He shook his head.

“Start over. Undyne, this is your friend. You know who. I want to apologize. I didn’t mean to offend you. Send text, Pod.”

“Message sent.”

As Pod 153 made that announcement, 9S felt his blood freeze. “C-Can you take it back?”

“Negative. Data, once transmitted, cannot be recalled.” It was an obvious fact and one 9S definitely knew, but Pod 153 was not the least bit condescending in reminding him. “Proposal: If Unit 9S wishes to correct an error in the previous text, he should send another text rectifying the error.”

“Right.” 9S cleared his head. “Okay. Let’s send this. Undyne, sorry about my last text. What I did wasn’t wrong because it offended you. What I did was wrong because it broke a promise I made with you. That’s what’s important. Please forgive me. Send text.”

“Message sent.”

9S took the time to reflect over his words again, wondering that perhaps next time he should take that step before saying ‘send text.’ “Oh, shit. Pod, we’ve got to send another text.”

“Ready to receive message.”

“Okay. Here goes. Undyne, I really do need to apologize to you. Not for offending you. Not for breaking our promise. But for betraying your ideals. I made a mockery of everything you value last night. I’m sorry. I hope you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me.” 9S thought very hard about his choice of words. “Pod, send text.”

“Message—”

“Oh, shit!” 9S exclaimed. “We gotta send another one. I got that wrong,” he told Pod 153.

“Acknowledged. Standing by to receive next message.”
Asriel rushed back into the bedroom, book in hand, and all but leaped onto the bed at 9S’s side, his long ears flopping as he excitedly flipped through it. “Okay, Nines! I found it!”

“Oh, boy,” 9S said, not entirely interested in being read to.

“Who were you talking to?” Asriel asked.

“Oh, uh…” 9S couldn’t help but feel a little hot under the collar. “I kind of messed things up for a friend of mine, and I was just trying to get in touch with her so we could patch things over.”

“Okay,” Asriel set the book down on his lap. “But it’s better to—”

“Yeah, yeah, I should apologize in person. But Undyne isn’t gonna talk to me unless I really prove to her that I’m ready to do that.”

Asriel nodded. “I guess that makes sense. Want some help?”

In all of New Home, there was no place more private than the Dreemurr family’s estate (appropriately named the Royal Castle), and within the home of the Dreemurr family there was no more private place than Chara Dreemurr’s bedroom; and that was where Alphys and Undyne spoke with what seemed more and more likely to be the original owner of Chara Dreemurr’s stolen body.

13B sat on the side of the bed, flanked by Undyne and Alphys, fretfully twiddling her thumbs as she detailed everything Chara had done to her. Alphys felt her stomach churn as 13B recounted the things Chara had put her through—the torment, the torture, forcing her to watch helplessly as her closest friends died by her own hand—and she realized just what kinds of heinous things Chara was capable of doing to those who got in their way… and compared to what had happened to 5E and 7B, the way they’d been treating her and Undyne was practically merciful.

“…They cut my hair,” 13B said, “and even changed the color of my eyes… I—I don’t even look like me anymore…” With a trembling hand, she reached up and felt the flower covering her right eye. “They took everything away from me…”

Alphys patted her on the knee. “D-Don’t worry, 13B! It’s all over now.”

“Yeah! You’re back in the driver’s seat for good now, right?” Undyne asked. Alphys could still hear a twinge of suspicion in her voice.

13B nodded.

“Well,” Undyne said, a hard gleam in her eye, “let’s take everything away from Chara, too. It’ll be… cathartic—Alphys, what’s that one word again?”

“C-Cathartic?” Alphys offered.

“Yeah!” Undyne pumped her fist. “C’mon, 13B. Let’s fuck up every single thing Chara’s done since they got here. We’ll start… with where they hid the other six black boxes.”

13B nodded again, her eye hardening into a determined glare. “Right. Chara hid them in…”

With Asriel’s help, 9S kept trying to dictate the perfect message to express himself to Undyne, but even then, he kept messing up. He sent and another, and another. He lost track of how many
messages he’d sent after that one until Pod 153 interrupted him.

“Statement: Unit 9S is about to send his fourteenth text message on the same subject to Captain Undyne in the past half-hour. Observation: according to ancient human records, such rapidity and frequency of one-sided text communication was considered excessive and counterproductive. Proposal: Unit 9S should wait until a reply is received before sending another text message.”

Defeated, 9S groaned and slumped over in bed, sinking into the pillows propping him up. “Oh, all right.”

“I think we’re gonna get it for sure this time!” Asriel said. “C’mon, Miss 153, just one more text…”

“No, it’s got a point. I—I guess I have a habit,” 9S admitted, “of getting kinda… carried away with things. And I guess maybe I can be a little cli—”

Pod 153 immediately interrupted him with a loud ring. “Incoming transmission. Statement: this support unit is being hailed by Captain Undyne’s cellular telephone. Proposal: accept call immediately.”

“She called back!” Asriel exclaimed. “We did it!”

“All right, pick up.” 9S sat up straight. “Undyne—er, uh, Captain. Did you get my texts?”

“Huh? Oh, I’ve been super busy. What texts?”

9S’s spirits fell. “Oh, uh, n-never mind. So why are you calling?”

“I wanna confirm something with you. You said earlier this morning you and 2B found out where the black boxes are, right?”

9S nodded. “Yeah. There are a bunch of caverns deep in Waterfall that none of our scans could penetrate. Down there, there’s a big room—”

“With a piano in it, right?” Undyne asked, her voice picking up in excitement.

“Uh, yeah,” 9S answered, wondering why Undyne knew that. “You have to play a song on the piano—”

“To open the door to a hidden room!” Undyne finished. “Thanks, you really came through for me, 9S!”

“What’s this all about?” 9S asked, just a little confused.

“I just needed to, uh…” Undyne’s voice dropped to a whisper. “See if the person telling me was trustworthy.”

“And who’s that?”

Asriel grabbed 9S by the arm. “H-Hey, what’s this about a piano room? Why do you guys wanna know about me and Chara’s secret hangout?”

9S was shocked, but not quite surprised, to hear that Asriel remembered that place. The kid’s memories of his past life were spotty at best. But if he knew the place, then maybe he remembered which notes on the piano triggered the door!

A new voice came through Pod 153 before Undyne could reply. “As—”
It drove an icy spike through 9S’s mind.

That was…

Chara’s voice?

“Chara?” Asriel squeaked out in shock, his voice barely a whisper.

“N-No,” Chara answered, “I-I’m… YoRHa Unit 13, Type-B. Chara… isn’t in control of my body anymore.”

9S recalled the day Chara had taken over the kingdom—how close they’d come to killing him and 2B and everyone else, only to be stopped by a sudden resurgence of Chara’s host’s consciousness at just the right time.

13B, a YoRHa Battler unit, known to her friends (such as 6O) as ‘Lucky.’

9S supposed he and his friends were overdue for some good luck, but this… this just seemed too good to be true. “13B, huh?” he asked, unable to prevent a darkly suspicious undercurrent from seeping into his voice. “I hate to rain on your parade, Undyne, but are you sure this isn’t just Chara playing a trick on us?”

“W-Well,” Alphys interjected, “s-since you just corroborated what she t-told us, that’s a p-point in her favor, and she’s being pretty cooperative with e-everything else we’ve had her d-do to prove she isn’t, uh, Chara pulling a fast one.”

“So, yeah,” Undyne said. “We trust that she’s the one in control now.”

“Permanently?” 9S inquired.

“After today,” Undyne answered, “it won’t matter. We’re dismantling their entire power base. If they do take control of 13B again, there won’t be anything they can do to hurt us.”

“9S? Is that really you, 9S?” 13B asked, a vein of enthusiasm running through her voice. “Y-You and 2B… you two were war heroes! The only survivors of the 243rd Descent Operation, the heroes of Blue Ridge II… You two single-handedly took down Adam and Eve and crippled the machine network, a-and you helped us escape the Bunker… It’s an honor to meet such a distinguished soldier!”

9S was taken aback by such overwhelming praise—especially considering 13B was obviously praising him for things his doppelganger on the surface had done, not him—but still felt flattered nonetheless. “U-Um…”

“What’s so important about our secret hangout?” Asriel repeated, tugging on 9S’s sleeve. “Nines?”

“That’s where Chara hid the six souls,” Undyne explained. “Hey, kiddo, you wouldn’t happen to remember how to open the door, do you? Lucky here says she remembers the melody from the last time Chara played it, but wouldn’t be able to play the rest on her own.”

“‘The rest?’” 9S asked.

“It’s a complete song,” 13B interjected. “It isn’t just a few keys pressed at the right time. And it needs to be played perfectly. Chara has it memorized… but I don’t.”

Asriel nodded. “That’s right! Chara and I would always play it together. They’d play the left hand,
“Well, it can’t be too complex,” Undyne reasoned. “Asriel, 13B, if the right hand is the melody, do either of you recall what the left hand sounds like? Is it blocked chords or broken chords? Can either of you remember the chord progression?”

“I didn’t know you played piano,” said 9S.

“‘Played’ piano?” Undyne let out a proud, boisterous laugh. “I taught piano!”

“I-I don’t s-suppose you have any, uh, sh-sheet music for this song?” Alphys asked.

“I dunno,” Asriel said, scratching the back of his head, “but, well, uh, then it wouldn’t be a secret song, I guess. I’ll ask Mom when she gets back. She’ll know!”

Undyne sighed. “Well, at least we know more now than we did before. Thanks for your help, Asriel. And you too, 9S.”

“Glad to be of service,” 9S replied. The fact that Undyne had thanked him felt like a breakthrough.

“Oh, 9S,” 13B spoke up. “Are 2B and 6O with you? I—” She choked on the next few words. “I hope they’re both okay. After all… the four of us are all that’s left of YoRHa.”

“They’re fine,” 9S assured 13B. “6O actually talks about you a lot,” he added. He decided not to mention that when she talked about 13B, she was usually talking about how betrayed she’d felt to learn that all the romantic moments the two of them had shared had all been nothing more than part of Chara’s plan.

“Yeah,” Asriel chimed in. “They’re out doing errands right now!”

13B sighed in relief. “Oh, 9S… I’m glad they’re safe and sound. I—I’d love to meet 2B myself; she was always one of the best Battler units there was! But sorry for, uh, fangirling. When you get back… can you t-tell 6O that… I love her? I—I really did. It wasn’t just Chara pretending. Please tell her that. And… I hope we can see each other again. Soon.”

9S shrugged. “Sure. Nice to meet you, 13B.” There was a strong undercurrent of sincerity in 13B’s voice, and considering how cooperative she was being with Undyne and Alphys, 9S felt his own suspicions recede.

“We’ve got a busy day ruining all of Chara’s schemes ahead of us,” Undyne said. “So we’re gonna let you guys go. Take it easy, you two.”

With that, Pod 153 fell silent. It spoke up a few seconds later. “Transmission terminated.”

9S sighed and laid back. This was a lot to process. 13B was back in control of her body and was handing Undyne and Alphys Chara’s entire plot on a silver platter… it seemed like way too easy of a solution. But if Undyne took hold of the six black boxes Chara had hidden away, then it really would be over for Chara, no matter what. If Undyne absorbed even one of those black boxes she’d be able to crush Chara into a fine paste with a single blow.

“Nines?” Asriel latched onto 9S’s arm, resting his head against his shoulder. “So… Chara stole that lady’s body, right?”

“Right.”
“Why?”

9S shrugged. “Had to have a body, I guess.” He was being glib, but that was only because he couldn’t bring himself to tell Asriel what he really thought of Chara’s disgusting body-borrowing ways.

“Stealing her body… killing Dad… forcing you and 2B and Miss 6O to hide here… why?” Asriel asked, sniffing. “Why are they doing all these awful things?”

“I don’t know,” 9S lied.

“Is there something wrong with them?”

“Might be.”

“Could you… fix them?”

9S pondered Asriel’s question. What was there to fix? “Maybe,” he said. He ruffled Asriel’s fur and scratched behind his ear, thinking of a way to change the subject before the kid’s questions got even harder to answer. “Hey, what’s that book about?” he asked, glancing at the book on Asriel’s lap.

“Oh, yeah, this!” Asriel picked the book up, rifling through its yellowed pages. “It’s a bunch of stories—fairy tales. Human stories, monster stories, all about princes and princesses and dragons and knights…” His mood brightened as he spoke. “M-Mom would read me these before I went to bed, a- and, and Chara would, too…I actually liked it better when Chara read to me. They always did different voices for all the characters, and they were really good at it.”

“Hmm. Well, if they’re bedtime stories, then they must be boring enough to put you to sleep.”

Asriel got defensive. “No! They’re not!” He flipped over to a random page halfway through the book. “I’ll prove it!”

Eagerly, he started to read, and 9S patiently listened as Asriel read himself to sleep, curled up peacefully at his side with the thick book of fairy tales slipping from his paws onto the soft blankets. As Asriel snored quietly, 9S laid back.

He could enter rest mode whenever he wanted, of course—one of the benefits of being an android. But there was something that just felt right about letting fatigue catch up with you and lull you off to sleep, slowly, subtly, leaving no clear delineation between sleeping and waking. He was actually looking forward to joining Asriel in a little early-afternoon nap, just so he could have that experience of drifting off to sleep again. Nearly a year down here and it still felt like a novelty.

Just as he’d been about to nod off, of course, somebody knocked on the door, jolting 9S awake.

“Who is it?” he called out. Had Papyrus and Sans snuck in? No, that wasn’t their style. “Pod, get the door.”

Pod 153 wasted no time in hovering over to the door and yanking it open.

Flowey stood on the other side, a rusty arm from a machine lifeform lying before him, looking for all the world like a housecat that had just brought a dead bird to its master. “Hiya, Nines. It’s me, your best friend, Flowey!”

9S screamed. “Pod! Sh-Shoot him!”
“Hey, hey, hey, whoa, wait!” Flowey hurriedly shouted, picking up the arm and holding it aloft as if it were a peace offering. “We’re friends now, remember, buddy? See? I even got you a gift!”

Pod 153 examined the arm. “This is the right arm of a medium biped machine lifeform. It is in exceptionally good condition despite its surface corrosion. No threat detected.”

“I couldn’t help but notice,” Flowey said, making his way inside, “that you were missing an arm, Nines. So I brought you one!”

Undyne, Alphys, and 13B looked over the killing blow to Chara’s machinations one more time, checking and double-checking everything.

Three new royal decrees on three sheets of royal stationery, all three emblazoned with the Dreemurr family crest on elegant letterhead, all waiting eagerly for Chara Dreemurr’s signature.

13B’s pen—a beautiful quill pen made from the shimmering amber feather of a long-extinct bird called a ‘phoenix,’ passed down through the family line for generations before the war—hung over the first of the legally-binding decrees.

**EXECUTIVE ORDER DECLARING AN IMMEDIATE END TO THE SECOND HUMAN-MONSTER WAR**

She signed it, then moved onto the second page.

**EXECUTIVE ORDER IMMEDIATELY RESCINDING THE MILITARIZATION OF THE ROYAL GUARD**

13B signed this one as well, her hand trembling; as the ink of Chara’s forged signature dried on the page, Undyne sighed in relief. No more military-grade armor, no more manhunts, no more of Alphys’ inventions being twisted toward evil. The Royal Guard was once again a simple police and peacekeeping force, just as it had been under Asgore… just as it always should have been.

13B addressed the third and final order.

**EXECUTIVE ORDER IMMEDIATELY REPEALING THE ANDROID BOUNTY ACT AND THE BAN ON HUMAN SOULS AND YORHA BLACK BOXES**

She signed it.

And just like that, it was over.

As soon as these decrees were officially filed, there would be no more war, no more military, no more hostility toward androids. 2B, 9S, and 6O would be free. And once the six black boxes were liberated from their hiding place and Chara’s own soul joined them… the kingdom would be free, just as all its inhabitants had dreamed of for over ten thousand years of solitude and stagnation. Just as Chara had wanted. And ironically, they would play an instrumental role after all… just not the one they had considered.

Alphys’ phone began to buzz with text messages, push notifications flooding her screen. “O-Oh, hey,” she said, fumbling with the touchscreen as she stood up and pulled on her coat. “Doctor Gaubrieta’s ready to bring th-the lieutenant to the lab f-for the prosthetic work. I-I’d better get over there!”

Undyne shuffled the stationery together and stood up alongside Alphys. “Go ahead, Alphy. I’ll take it from here and make sure 13B files the new executive orders.” She bent down and planted a kiss on
Alphys’ forehead, delighting in the way the doctor’s cheeks lit up crimson.

“And I’ll make a televised speech tonight,” 13B said, “to make sure everyone in the kingdom knows about them.” She clasped her hands together. “Thank you so much for believing me, you two… You girls…” She wrapped her arms around Undyne, burying her face in her chest. “I don’t know what else I could have done to make things right…”

Undyne watched a grateful tear roll down 13B’s cheek and was amazed to find that she no longer sensed any of the menacing, strength-sapping aura she’d always felt roiling off of Chara, no matter how similar 13B’s appearance looked. The last of her mistrust had vanished.

This was the end of Chara Dreemurr.

□□□□□□

Chara hardly cared what they were giving up, lost as they were in thought; in two thoughts in particular that buzzed in their mind endlessly like a hive of honeybees, two thoughts that would not leave them.

*My brother, Asriel, is alive.*

They couldn’t imagine how, but that voice had been unforgettable. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, their brother… not Flowey, but what Flowey had once been… was back from the dead.

The second thought running through their head made up for everything that Chara had lost today.

*The androids have been hiding with Toriel in the Ruins all along.*

Chapter End Notes
[E] 2B's Day Off

Chapter Summary

While helping Toriel with groceries, 2B and 6O get some time to themselves.

Chapter Notes

Happy 50th Chapter-versary! Thanks for sticking with this fic for so long!

Judging from my outline, this fic probably won't hit 60 (I'm shooting for 58, which would make Route E just as long in terms of chapter count as the previous 4 routes combined), but... we'll see. Could be more, could be less.

As a side note, how does food work in the Underground? It's made of magic... so why don't you just conjure up a pie whenever you want one? (see: why Asgore can never get pie right, how Asriel and Chara made the pie with buttercups) So is the agricultural industry in the Underground just some monsters with the right kind of magic conjuring up raw materials, meat, milk, eggs, veggies, etc? Would "real" ingredients be a delicacy, kind of like how in Star Trek DS9 people went to restaurants when they wanted better and more "authentic" food than their replicators could make?

My headcanon is yes to all of that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The grocer's shop in Snowdin was open-air; meat and produce was lined up and packed on ice in quaint little stalls under the roof of an airy pavilion (refrigeration, after all, was a nonissue when the air temperature never rose above freezing). On display were foodstuffs from all over the kingdom, including things that trickled down from the surface that were in short supply underground—such as real, not magically-conjured meat worth almost its weight in gold. These displays came so rarely this far into the outskirts of the kingdom that when they did, it was practically a holiday.

Toriel's eyes, just barely visible between the hood of a white cloak that had seen better days (what better disguise for a queen-in-exile than rags?) and a thick woolen scarf, lit up as she browsed through the goods. She ambled from stall to stall like a bumblebee looking for the right flower to pollinate, happily humming as she did so, her euphoria over the diverse spread overwhelming even her discomfort with the crowds of people surrounding her on all sides.

If 9S were here, he would have said Toriel looked as happy as "a kid in a candy store," and would immediately explain to 2B that it was an old human idiom (regardless of whether she knew already). 2B would say, though, that Toriel looked like... well, she looked as happy as Nines in a data center.

"There are so many things we do not have at home," Toriel gasped, marveling at the displays. "Look! Salmon! Cod!" She gestured to cuts of striated reddish-pink and off-white meat. 2B didn't want to remind her that androids had much less capacity to eat physical food than the magically-conjured stuff monsters typically dined on.
Toriel continued to salivate (metaphorically, of course—she had her manners) over the display. “It’s been centuries since I’ve laid eyes on real salmon—imagine, you two, how good it would be smoked! And this beef here—just right for stew! Oh, how long has it been…”

Like last night, the town looked the same as it ever had, but now carried a menacing aura. 2B kept a suspicious eye on the rest of the town’s inhabitants as they milled around the open-air market and nearby town square, charting their orbits around the decorated tree that had been put up, hyperaware of everybody’s movements, knowing that if anybody saw through her disguise or 6O’s, it would put everybody here in danger. Her hand ached for the hilt of her sword, the Joyeuse hanging heavily at her side underneath her cloak, a dull black sheath hiding its brilliant blade and a cloth obscuring its gilded hilt.

Instead, 2B’s searching hand, unbidden, found comfort in 6O’s—or, rather, her mitten.

6O clasped her hands around 2B’s. Under her scarf, her smile was impossible to see—just like the veil she’d worn as part of her uniform on board the Bunker, back in the old days—but the merriment reached all the way to her bright blue eyes. “This is great!” she whispered, the hushed giddiness in her voice somehow intoxicating. “2B, I can’t believe you and 9S lived here!”

“It was nice,” 2B said. “Cold. No risk of overheating.” She wasn’t quite sure why she chose to say that. But she did feel a little overly warm, somehow.

6O laughed as she took in her surroundings, holding 2B closer. “The ground’s all… white. White and dazzling. It’s like…” She sighed. “It’s like home.”

Home. 6O must have meant the Bunker. What else, after all, did she have to call home? 2B wondered if she still missed it. She must have—6O hadn’t had the same life there as combat units and other field models. For her, the Bunker hadn’t been a temporary respite, if it could even be called that, in between missions. Until that day everything had come crashing down, it had been the only world she had ever known, and her life since then hadn’t exactly been stress-free.

“What’s all the sparkly stuff hanging off of everything?” 6O asked, batting lightly at a piece of silver tinsel hanging from the roof of the pavilion.

“Decorations. For a holiday.” 2B glanced at the town square again and noticed that the communal pile of firewood she’d once helped keep so well-stocked. It looked pitiful without her contributions.

“What holiday?”

“It’s called, um… Holly Day,” said 2B. It was a celebration of the winter solstice, despite there not being any seasons down here, and it wasn’t for another three months. The people of Snowdin liked to get a head start on their festivities, though.

“The people here aren’t good at naming things, are they?” 6O asked.

“No. Not at all. But it’s endearing in a way.”

Toriel thrust a pair of bags laden with cuts of various meats wrapped in butcher paper into 6O’s hands. “Here, dear, hold onto these,” she said before darting back into the market for more.

6O hefted the bags as best she could. “I think Toriel’s happy to have some extra pairs of hands.” She nudged 2B’s shoulder. “No wonder she brought us along. Watch out—I think you’re next!”

2B patted the Joyeuse as it hung in its sheath at her hip. Normally her NFCS would keep it hovering at her side, ready to spring into her hand at a moment’s notice; the sword’s weight was unfamiliar to
her. “I hope not,” she said. “I need one hand free to draw my sword.”

6O leaned closer, resting her head on 2B’s shoulder. It was astounding how clingy she was… and how little 2B found herself minding it. “That reminds me. 2B…”

As Toriel reached for the brightest and juiciest of the tomatoes on display—rare tomatoes that had been grown, not conjured, in one of the few patches of garden still standing in New Home—her hand met the oversize red glove of the tallest, handsomest, and most dashing and debonair inhabitant of Snowdin.

“Ah, it’s you!” Papyrus shouted out. “Hello, Queen To—”

Sans, ever-present at his side, nudged him in the ribs.

“Oh! I mean, hello, mysterious woman I have never met before and do not know the name of!” Papyrus corrected himself.

“Ah, Papyrus!” Toriel shook his hand. “It is good to see you again.”

“And those two,” Sans said, pointing at 2B and 6O, “must be Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel.”

“You’re Sleeping Beauty,” 6O whispered to 2B.

“Not anymore.” 2B waved at the two skeletons. “Good morning, Papyrus!”

“Oh!” Papyrus nearly leaped out of his favorite suit of armor at the sight of 2B, recognizing her immediately even though she was covered from head to toe. “Good morning! How wonderful to see you up! My extra-spicy wake-up spaghetti must have had a delayed reaction!”

“Sure,” said 2B, resigning herself to one of Papyrus’ bone-crushing hugs.

“This calls for a celebration!” Papyrus cried out, dragging 2B along as he rushed home. Now that you’re awake, you can taste that dish for real! It’s a masterpiece, if I do say so myself—I guarantee you, you will never taste anything even a tenth as… explosive!”

“Wait!” 2B cried out as her boots dragged against the snow. “I told Nines we’d only be gone for—”

“Oh! Speaking of him, where is he?” Papyrus asked. “He would love to be here right now! I let him try some of the pasta before I gave it to you, and after he regained the ability to speak, he said it was the most interesting thing he’d ever eaten!”

As Papyrus whisked 2B away, Toriel hurriedly paid for her groceries and followed along.

▫▫▫

2B and 6O sat on the couch in Papyrus’ and Sans’ living room while Toriel busied herself in the kitchen making sure Papyrus unlearned everything Undyne had ever taught him about cooking. 6O certainly looked relieved to be stripped of her heavy coat and scarf; 2B had to admit, she was glad to be rid of such stifling garments herself as well.

For 2B, the sight of 6O without her standard Operator uniform was still a jarring and unusual sight; the only part of her appearance she had in common with her old uniform now was her hair, re-braided into two cascading tresses, a hairband holding her bangs in place. The thick lavender cardigan she was wearing, at least two sizes too large for her and crocheted with holes big enough for her to poke her thumbs through, resembled more closely an alien entity attempting to devour her
than clothes.

“So, um, 2B,” 6O murmured, reaching down and laying a hand on the hilt of the Joyeuse as it leaned against the side of the couch. “I… I want to ask you… C-Can you teach me… how to use a sword?”

2B nearly laughed at the strangeness of her request. “Excuse me? 6O, you’re not a combat model. You don’t need to know how to fight.”

“But… but I want to.” 6O’s voice cracked; 2B noticed the shift in her facial expression, the wateriness of her eyes that, she knew from her time spent with 6O as her Operator, predicated an emotional outburst. 2B ran her hand softly up 6O’s back, her fingers catching on the cardigan. It was like 6O was wearing a very woolly fishing net.

“I… still have nightmares all the time,” 6O told her. “12H and 40D, and everyone else on the Bunker… Everyone’s gone. All the other Operators, everyone…”

“You shouldn’t be dreaming so frequently in rest mode,” 2B pointed out, curling her fingers around the back of 6O’s neck. “Our REM sleep limiters exist to prevent us from being exposed to—”

2B cut herself off. She wasn’t sure why she’d said that.

“I—I know. I can’t help myself,” 6O admitted. “Every night, I go to bed and tell myself, ‘Okay, 6O, tonight you’re going to have a good dream for once!’ And it ends up being… being all blood and flashing red lights and… they all died,” she said, hiccuping, her voice wavering, “a-and I couldn’t even run away on my own, you all had to drag me along like dead weight…”

Dead weight. Was that why 6O was asking 2B about swordfighting?

“You’re not dead weight,” 2B assured her, patting her on the back. “You don’t need to learn how to fight to make yourself useful.” The idea of 6O risking her own life, wielding a weapon… 2B had to admit, somehow the idea disturbed her.

“There were five of us,” 6O said. “And only four flight units. I wanted to stay behind—I’d just be useless to everyone—but the Commander insisted she stay on the Bunker, not me. I—It should’ve been me instead of her! If it was her down here right now instead of me, everything would be different. She’d know what to do, she wouldn’t just sit around crying and being useless…”

That was it, then. Survivor’s guilt. 2B shouldn’t have been surprised. That, she understood perfectly. “Don’t let yourself think like that,” she said, cradling the back of 6O’s head as the poor girl wept into her shoulder. “Commander White’s judgment was sound.” She couldn’t think of much else to say.

6O laughed weakly, her voice muffled against 2B’s blouse. But before 2B could take in some small amount of self-satisfaction for making 6O feel just a little better, the poor girl began to sob even harder, clutching at her as if something were trying to drag her away, her fingers digging into 2B’s collar. 2B found herself rocking 6O back and forth to soothe her, and eventually, 6O seemed to calm down a little— enough to speak again, at least.

“You and 9S and everyone else have sacrificed so much to keep me safe,” 6O said, “and not just that—King Asgore… he… he gave his life for me!” she wailed. “He’d only just met me and he got himself killed to protect me! Just like the Commander—All these strong people, her, him, you—I don’t understand! Why do such great, kind p-people have to die… for someone as small as me?”

2B recalled every time Commander White had given her the order to terminate 9S, every time she’d tried to muster the will to hate her for it only to come up short… because she had always somehow been able to sense how hard it was for a leader to throw away her own subordinates’ lives and
condemn them to such misery without recourse. For a leader like her… the guilt must have been crushing. Perhaps sacrificing herself, beyond simply being appropriate to the decorum of the Commander’s position, had been a form of atonement.

“I don’t want good people to die for me,” 6O said. “I—I want to be able to take care of myself and not be a princess stuck in a tower.”

6O pulled away, her eyes still misty; 2B laid a hand on her cheek and brushed away her tears with a gentle flick of her thumb.

“Come with me,” 2B told her, standing up and helping 6O to her feet.

As she and 6O slipped out the back door, 2B caught sight of Toriel teaching Papyrus how to peel onions and garlic before adding them to his sauce. To say the old ex-queen had her work cut out for her would be an understatement.

2B brought 6O to the shed in Papyrus’ and Sans’ backyard. Inside, it was shockingly neat and well-organized, with plenty of floor space—it must not have been of much use to Sans, 2B figured, otherwise it would have been a pigsty. Currently, the half-dozen bags of groceries Toriel had amassed were sitting in the corner, kept sufficiently-chilled by the cool air that seeped through the uninsulated walls. Puffs of warm, condensed air trailed from both androids’ mouths with every breath.

She handed 6O the Joyeuse, hilt-first, and 6O wrapped her fingers around it and slowly, gently slid it out of its sheath. The tip of the blade buried itself in the floor.

“I-It’s, uh…”

“Heavy,” said 2B, noticing how much the weight of the sword tugged on 6O’s arm. “Too heavy?”

“It’s okay! I’ll get used to it,” 6O said, trying to yank the blade free while also holding the hilt as gingerly and cautiously as if she were holding a venomous snake. “Um, s-so how do I…”

2B took her hand and molded her grip like soft clay, prodding her fingers into a more proper position. “Let’s start with this. Position your hand with your wrist like this and point forward with your thumb, like this. The inside of your thumb should pinch the grip against your palm just below the index finger. Then, squeeze with these two fingers to tighten your grip and provide power. You want your grip to be sturdy, but not so tight that it strains your tendons unduly or causes too much vibration.”

6O nodded along with her instructions and lifted the sword, smiling a bit as she grew more comfortable with its weight. 2B made sure her grip on the sword was sufficiently firm, then slipped behind her to guide her stance.

“Now, about your stance,” she said. “The way you stand is as vital as the way you hold your sword. Here’s a basic one. Place your feet about shoulder-width apart, with your leading foot slightly forward. Balance on the balls of your feet and keep your knees slightly bent to lower your center of gravity.” 2B laid her hands on 6O’s hips to guide her posture. “And—”

The words evaporated from 2B’s mind, vanishing like fog in late-morning sunlight, as her hands moved ever so slightly of their own accord to trace the curves of 6O’s body.

“And relax,” 2B finished after a moment’s hesitation to collect herself. “A stiff posture won’t do
anything for you. Nothing good, at least.” She felt 6O’s muscles relax just slightly as she tried to incorporate 2B’s advice. “Okay. Moving on to ‘on guard’ position. Hold the sword out, tip pointing upwards, guarding your shoulder with your sword arm.” 2B leaned in closer, pressing against her back as she took hold of 6O’s hand and guided the sword. “This is, um…”

2B struggled to put her words in the right order in her head. Why was she having so much trouble keeping her thoughts straight?

“Relax your wrist,” she said, “keep it in line with your forearm, and adjust your arm until you feel your shoulder and triceps bearing the brunt of the sword’s weight.”

“O-Okay.”

“And relax,” 2B reminded her, sensing renewed tension in 6O’s grip and posture. “Your body should f—you should feel loose and springy.”

Come to think of it, 6O wasn’t the only one who seemed tense. 2B felt as though a million insects were fluttering around inside her.

“Is this working?” she asked 6O.

“Huh? Um… yeah,” 6O answered, her voice fragile, “I-I think. Did you have to learn all this stuff like this?” she asked.

“No, it’s a part of my programming. Every stance, attack, guard, parry, riposte, footwork, it’s all instinctual… as natural as breathing.”

6O laughed. “Maybe you could install—”

“No,” said 2B, not wanting to dwell on how much 9S had hurt himself by trying to incorporate her instincts into his programming. “Anyway, you can install instincts, but not experience. It’ll take you a long time to master the basics.” After a brief pause during which she wondered if saying that would discourage her, she quickly added, “But just because you’re an Operator doesn’t mean you can’t do it.”

2B let go of 6O and took a step back as 6O incorporated her advice.

“Good work,” said 2B, hastily walking in a wide quarter-circle around her to look at her from the side and survey her posture. “Now, cut down and forward with the blade.”

6O waved her arm with all her might, swinging the blade downward in an imprecise, inelegant arc. “Like this?”

2B shook her head. “No. Right now, swinging like that will tire you out, and you could hurt yourself. Start out with small, subtle movements from your elbow or shoulder to move your sword’s center of gravity instead of moving your whole arm. You’ll get a nice, straight, quick strike out of that.”

It took about a dozen more tries and a little more coaching, but finally, 6O got it right, and as the Joyeuse cut through the air in a glittering, sparkling arc, 6O’s face lit up. “2B! I did it!”

It was at that moment that 2B realized why she’d been feeling those intermittent pangs of discomfort. When 6O held that sword so confidently and had such an elated grin on her face, she looked too much like 6E.
Of course, 6O and 6E shared the same basic personality template, and they both had so much in common. Both were affectionate, sometimes overly so; both could be clingy, emotional, and just a little obsessive; what set them apart was nothing more than the experiences that had shaped them and the differences in their programming.

Strange how those small differences, though, could set them apart from each other: 6E’s affectionate behavior had always carried with it a palpable undercurrent of malice and cruelty, making even her slightest touch almost painful; but 6O could do the same things, hug just as tightly, touch just as tenderly, and all she would be was simply kind.

Was it irrational for 2B to worry that if she taught 6O how to fight… she might erase those little differences?

That she might recreate her old tormentor, just as 6E had wanted to recreate herself in 2B?

“Good work,” 2B said, hiding her inner turmoil behind an impassive mask of stoicism. “I think… that’s enough for today.”

“Really?” 6O lowered the sword, her smile shrinking ever so slightly. “Well… this was fun, I guess,” she said, “and I do feel a little better. Maybe we can practice more tomorrow?”

2B crossed her arms. “Maybe.”

“What’s wrong?” 6O asked.


“You’re acting the way you do when something’s eating at you.”

2B plucked the sword from 6O’s grasp and sheathed it, then made her way to the door. “I’m acting the way I normally do,” she replied, a little more defensive in her tone than she’d intended. “Come on, let’s—”

“You are acting the way you normally do,” 6O agreed. “The way you do when something’s eating at you.”

2B’s hand, already curled around the frigid doorknob, froze in place.

As she caught up with 2B, 6O laid a hand on her shoulder. “I’m your Operator, 2B,” she said. “I’ve been watching over you all my life—I know when you’re upset, I can feel it.” She placed her hands on 2B’s waist, her skin still warm in stark contrast to the bitter cold air. “You’re worried… that if you teach me to fight, I’ll get hurt like 9S did, right?”

That thought, morbid as it was, hadn’t even occurred to 2B.

“You know how the first month of a YoRHa combat unit’s life is spent in training?” 2B asked. “The instincts are programmed in, but intuition, expertise, true mastery—those things have to be lived. My teachers,” she went on, “were YoRHa Units 14E and 6E.”

“So that’s how 6E knew you…” 6O gasped, her hands tightening reflexively at 2B’s sides. “But… why were you taught by Type-E units, if you’re a…”

“You figured out that the reason 9S’s memory kept getting erased,” 2B said, her mouth dry, “was because the Type-E division kept having to terminate him, didn’t you?”
“Y-Yeah,” 6O admitted. “I-It was an open secret, everyone knew…”

“I was the one who had to… who had to do it.” 2B’s hand slipped away from the doorknob and hung at her side as she hung her head. It had been so long since she’d confessed to 9S, so long since he’d absolved her, so long since the two of them had finally been able to live without any bloody secrets between them… yet here, now, confessing those same things to a new audience ripped the scars open again and left those old wounds bloody and gaping. “…I’m the Type-E… who had to kill him…”

Her tears, hot as they left her eyes, were cold by the time they dripped off her chin.

6O leaned into her, pressing against her back, her hands slipping across 2B’s abdomen as she tightened her grip. “Oh, god, 2B,” she whispered, resting her head in the crook of 2B’s shoulder and neck. “I… I didn’t know…”

6O wrapped her arms around 2B in embrace so tight, so firm, it rivaled Toriel’s hugs; then, resting her head on 2B’s shoulder, she began to rock gently back and forth, the motion carrying 2B along with her.

Hearing the faint sound of something inside her creaking under the strain as 6O squeezed her, 2B wondered if the lovelorn Operator’s chronic lack of romantic prospects back aboard the Bunker had had anything at all to do with how forthright—not to mention forceful—she could be when it came to expressing her affections to her peers. She didn’t seem to know her own strength, and for a non-combat model, she seemed to have an awful lot of it.

“Type-E units don’t just teach you how to fight, 6O,” 2B told her. “They teach you what it feels like to suffer, to struggle, to die. They teach you agony. They break you down. They build you back up in their image. It’s an awful way to live… and few of us make it out intact,” she said, recalling 14E, who’d all but committed suicide to free herself from the mounting pressures of her assignments (and she hadn’t been the only one). “The ones who do,” she added, a phantom echo of 6E’s mocking laughter ringing in her ears, “become… vile.”

“But not you.”

“…I can’t teach you,” 2B said, sinking to her knees on the cold floor. 6O came down with her, still clutching her tightly. “I can’t make you like her—I can’t make you like me.”

“Oh, 2B… I’m so sorry for asking.” 6O reached up to lay a hand on 2B’s cheek. “I know you did it to make me feel better, but… but i-if you’d have told me, I’d have understood…”

“I didn’t know myself,” 2B admitted, “until now.” She sighed. “I thought… I thought I could do it.”

“Well… if you can’t make me more like you,” 6O pondered, “then what about… what if I made you more like me?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you…” 6O’s face broke out in a grin. “Do you know how to dance, 2B?”

“I’ve… I’ve never done it before,” 2B admitted. “Unless you’d consider swordfighting…”

That was all 6O needed to hear. She shot to her feet, pulling 2B up along with her, and began coaching 2B through the basic steps to a waltz. 6O led, keeping her right hand firmly on 2B’s left shoulderblade as she guided her through the simple, elegant three-beat rhythm of the dance. She’d make eye contact with 2B, but only for a split second before sheepishly glancing away, her cheeks
lighting up bright pink as an awkward smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“I don’t get a lot of practice,” 6O warned 2B. “I mean, I don’t usually have a partner, so…”

“Seems you know more than I do,” 2B replied.

They went on. It was a strange feeling. The lightness, the grace, the swiftness of her feet 2B always called upon in combat—to be refocused toward this, something as far from fighting as could be. It was… fun. Incredible. The next time 6O looked her way, 2B smiled back at her, which served to make 6O’s cheeks light up an even brighter shade of red.

One slight error, one single misstep, one clumsily-placed foot later, and the two of them had toppled to the floor together, their legs tangled around each other as 6O lay beneath 2B.

2B hurriedly picked herself up, worrying she might have damaged 6O, but her Operator just laughed at her profuse apologies.

“No, no, 2B, it’s okay! You’re doing great,” said 6O, still smiling. “It’s easier to keep the rhythm with music to go along with it, but we’re making do pretty well. Wanna keep going?”

2B caught her breath and nodded, and she and 6O stood up, took their positions, and began again.

They picked themselves up and tried again. 2B had to admit, she was having much, much more fun learning to waltz from 6O than she’d had teaching 6O how to swing a sword. The two of them kept dancing.

“So, uh, 2B,” 6O stammered, “You know… I always sorta fantasized about doing this with you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. But… you were always on missions with 9S, a-and you were always so cold and professional… Even if I’d ever worked up the courage to ask, I couldn’t imagine you’d do anything other than turn me down.”

2B wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to agree with her assessment, even if it was completely correct.

“But I still really related to you. You didn’t seem to have any friends, or be interested in making any friends, but I could sense that it wasn’t by choice. And as for me, well… I feel like I tried too hard to make friends. So we were both alone, sort of.

“But you’ve changed a lot since you came down here,” said 6O. “I don’t feel that wall around you anymore. There’s… more life in your face. Last night, when you woke up, for the first time I heard you laugh.”

It was true. 2B had never had much to laugh about on the surface… save for her first few weeks with the first 9S. Since then, she’d rarely so much as cracked a smile for the next two years and change of her miserable life.

“I… I miss YoRHa. I miss the Bunker and everyone in it. I miss my quarters and all the pictures of flowers you sent me. I miss 21O and all the other Operators. I miss everyone I ever dated and everyone who dumped me,” 6O said. “But for you and 9S… it wasn’t a happy place, was it?” She sniffled, looking like she was beginning to cry. “It’s hard to believe… that a place I loved, that the only home I knew, was… so toxic to you. That it kept you from being the you that you’ve become…”
2B broke formation to hold 6O closer, the steady rhythm of their silent dance forgotten. “That’s the price of war, 6O. When you’re always fighting for your life, when each day is a struggle to survive, when circumstances command you to make painful choices for the greater good… everywhere you go is toxic. There’s no avoiding it. YoRHa, the Resistance, the Bunker, the surface… behind or in front of enemy lines, when all you have to look forward to is subsistence, knowing everything you stand to gain can be wiped out in an instant, you don’t have room to heal or grow.

“Love can bloom, even on the battlefield… but it withers quickly, dies easily. Easier to close yourself off than to take that risk,” 2B murmured. “I wish… I’d been your friend earlier, 6O.”

6O leaned in and planted a kiss on her cheek, her soft lips tickling 2B’s skin. “Me too.”

2B wasn’t sure if she had made the first move after that, or 6O had, or maybe both of them at the same time, but when their lips met, it left a shock running all the way from her head to her toes as potent and fleeting as a bolt of lightning.

In her surprise, 2B lost her footing and fell backward, inadvertently dragging 6O down with her and sending the both of them tumbling to the cold, hard floor once more in a tangled heap. 6O skittered off of 2B, her eyes as wide as saucers, her hand half-clasped over her gaping mouth.

“I-I’m so sorry!” she stammered, stumbling over her words as much as she stumbled over her feet as she tried to help 2B up.

The electric, almost intoxicating tingle on the surface of 2B’s lips did not fade quickly; rather, like rolling thunder, it lingered far longer than she’d expected. Why, 2B wondered, did that—almost-kiss—feel so different from all the other times she’d kissed someone? It wasn’t a chaste, familial kiss, and it wasn’t like the way 6O had all but smothered her last night. If she had to compare it to anything, it was like…

Like the time Undyne had taken her on a date. Something behind the kiss, an impulse, a hunger, almost magnetic in its force of attraction. But this time 2B felt it, too.

2B’s breath was still short, her black box whining in her chest, as she sat up. “That was me. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t expect you to…”

“Me neither.” 2B let out a long sigh. “6O… I’m glad I can finally be friends with you, without reservations. Just like Nines and I could finally be a family, the way I always wanted. I’m glad you survived.”

She reached out and laid her hand on 6O’s cheek. “Maybe,” 2B said, “Commander White could tell.” With a wry little smile, she added, “maybe she sent you along because she wanted you to teach me how to dance.”

6O smiled, once more fighting back tears—but this time, bittersweet tears. She raised her hand in turn and held it out, cupping 2B’s cheek in her palm.

“I love you,” she said, her voice catching in her throat.

2B nodded. “I know.”

6O slowly leaned forward, closing her eyes, pursing her lips, tilting her head slightly; 2B closed her eyes as well, her hand sliding to the back of 6O’s head and her fingers worming their way into her braided hair. Her breath short, her black box whirring madly, a tingle running up her spine, 2B felt
the tip of 6O’s tongue gently part her lips.

“Sup.”

The mood ruined, 2B’s eyes snapped open as 6O stumbled back.

Sans stood at the door to the shed, hands in his pockets, grinning like he knew exactly what he’d been interrupting. “Tori told me to come get you guys. Am I interrupting anything?”

Frustrated, 2B stood up, taking a deep breath. “I’m going to kill you,” she told him.

Sans kept smiling as he led the two androids back into the house. Outside, the sky was already beginning to darken; shocked at how quickly time had passed without her noticing, 2B felt a pressing urge to check in on 9S and let him know she was all right.

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Papyrus and Toriel were standing in the living room, their eyes glued to the television, when 2B and 6O returned with Sans in tow. Papyrus had a pad of paper and a pencil in his hands and was furiously scribbling notes. There was an inscrutably confused look on Toriel’s face that seemed to hold a thousand conflicting, contradictory emotions.

As 2B drew closer, she heard the voice emanating from the TV before she could see the screen, and what she heard was none other than Chara Dreemurr.

“…cost of our war filling our hospitals, taxing our physicians to their limit,” Chara said. “I have seen this morning a premonition of the grim fate awaiting our bravest soldiers. One in five of our Royal Guard has been crippled after the events of last night. One in five maimed, mutilated. I can no longer bear to see my people suffer. Henceforth, I have signed three new executive orders, effective immediately.”

On the television screen, Chara stood at an elegantly-carved oaken podium on the same stage where, just weeks ago, they had slaughtered their father. They wore the same outfit they had worn when 2B had first encountered them in that sparse battleground within her mind: a white chiton and sleeveless tunic sewn from violet silk, the Delta Rune stitched in white fabric across their chest. A silver tiara circled their forehead, and covering their right eye was a single yellow flower; the other scarlet eye gazed out wearily.

“First, I hereby announce the official end of the Second Human-Monster War begun by my late father. Second, the Royal Guard will no longer be a military organization, and will be reverted back to a peacekeeping and law enforcement office. All authorization for the use of military-grade equipment is hereby rescinded, and all new recruits from the Military Expansion Act, including those from the Mechanized Regiment, are hereby dismissed from their positions with back pay and severance. Third, I am repealing the Android Bounty Act, the ban on the possession of human souls, and the ban on the possession of YoRHa black boxes.

“The events of last night have made it clear that no army can match in might the androids we have declared our enemy. We must learn to live with them and compromise with them for the glory of monsterkind. Tonight,” Chara said, “I announce the end of an era of foolishness… and urge you all to welcome a new era of peaceful cooperation and co-prosperity. In this brave new world, mortals must do what angels cannot.”

2B was shocked by what she was hearing. Papyrus’ jaw dropped, unhinging from his skull and falling straight to the floor. Toriel looked on, dumbfounded. For a few seconds, utter silence filled the
60 was the first to speak up.

“W-We’re… we’re free?”

Chapter End Notes

So I think you can all guess my OTP by now!

Just kidding. I don't have Nier Automata OTPs. Everybody who loves 2B is valid.

I've been replaying and watching some LPs of Nier Automata in what little free time have that I don't spend writing, and it's really jogged my memory with regards to just how philosophical, insightful, and downright poetic 2B can be when she gets the chance, like in the "spiral of life and death" monologue in the prologue and her recorded message to 9S about "memories of pure light" when he finds her crashed flight unit in Route C.

It's an aspect of her character I've planned to devote more to exploring in some of the side stories I've been drafting to flesh out the Route D-E timeskip in this fic, but I feel like I've been neglecting it a bit in the main story, especially recently.
Chapter Summary

We now return to your regularly-scheduled programming.

Flowey glanced eagerly at the arm he’d deposited on the threshold of the bedroom, then back to 9S, then back to the arm, then back to 9S again. “Well?” he asked. “Don’t’cha like it?”

9S took a few deep breaths to calm his nerves. “…No thanks,” he mumbled. He glanced over at Asriel—still sleeping. Good. He wasn’t too keen on the idea of the boy coming face-to-face with his doppelganger.

“C’mon… aren’t friends supposed to give each other a hand?” Flowey asked. “And you seem to be in need of one…”

“‘Friends’?” 9S repeated, incredulous.

“Come on, don’t you wanna indulge me, if only out of pity? Take a good look at me. Shriveled up, half-dead… how much time do I have left? Months, weeks, days?” A sardonic smile split Flowey’s burned, scarred face. “Heck, I might keel over any second now.”

“Gee,” said 9S, “wouldn’t that be nice.”

“I mean, knowing that it’s almost the end… and there’s nothing I can do to stop it, or run from it… and that there’s nothing to look forward to without a soul, without determination… it makes you want to do whatever you can to make things right. To make amends, to make yourself whole in the last few days you have to spare…” Flowey smiled. “And this is the response I get. I guess I’m finally getting my just desserts?”

“Sure sounds like it to me.” 9S shrugged. “Are you really dying?”

“Look at me.” Flowey wiggled a shriveled-up petal. “Does this look like a happy, healthy flower to you? I’ve been half-dead ever since your sister shot me in the face—for the second time, by the way—and now I’m probably, like, ninety-eight percent dead. Look, if I just had a soul to call my own, one that was compatible, then I could die in peace. I wouldn’t be the Flowey you knew and hated anymore. I’d be…”

Flowey’s gaze fell upon Asriel’s sleeping form as he lay curled up by 9S’s side. For a few seconds, he was speechless, his mouth agape, eyes wide.

“I’d be myself,” he finished.

9S laid a protective hand over Asriel, not knowing what sick plan Flowey had in mind and not wanting to know. “Don’t even think about—”

“Him? He’s incomplete. Nothing but fragments of a greater whole, a handful of childish memories bouncing around in an echo chamber that you so kindly built a cute little doll around. He’s a simulacrum, and barely one at that!”
9S felt vindicated to see Flowey’s true colors exposed. “So what if he doesn’t have all his memories? That doesn’t make him any less of a person—”

“Oh, and you would know, wouldn’t you, 9S?” Flowey spat.

“Okay, now you’re pissing me off!” 9S clenched his fist. “Get out before I make you!” He turned to face Pod 153. “Pod, if Flowey isn’t gone ten seconds from now, shoot him!”

“Affirmative.” Pod 153 opened up, its hull unfurling to reveal its machine gun turret. “T-minus ten…”

“Oh, and you would know, wouldn’t you, 9S?” Flowey spat.

“Okay, okay!” Flowey shouted. “I’m going! Geez!”

Asriel picked the worst time possible to wake up. “Who’s going?” he asked, yawning.

“Go back to sleep, Asriel,” 9S told him, keeping an eye on Flowey as the malevolent weed hurried for the door.

Flowey paused. “Hiya, Asriel! I’ve been looking for you all over!” he shouted out, grinning brightly.

“…One. Countdown complete. Commencing firing.”

“Wait!” Asriel cried out, bounding off the bed and rushing over to Flowey, arms outstretched.

“Don’t shoot him!”

9S held back Pod 153. “Pod, abort. Asriel, get away from him. He’s dangerous,” he warned the boy.

“He’s hurt,” Asriel retorted, dropping to his knees and offering Flowey his paw. “Hiya, I’m Asriel. What’s your name?”

“F-Flowey. Flowey the Flower.” Flowey laid a half-burned leaf on top of Asriel’s paw in some approximation of a handshake. “Golly, it’s so nice to finally meet you! I know all about you, y’know.”

9S rolled his eyes. Oh, god, I can’t believe this, he thought. Asriel, you stupid little kid.

“He just says that to everyone,” 9S insisted, dragging Asriel backward. The kid sure was growing into a curious little individual. Too curious for his own good. Not for the first time, 9S wondered if
too much of himself was rubbing off on Asriel. “He doesn’t mean anything by it. And, need I remind
him, he was about to leave.”

“Hey, Asriel, remember our, uh… ninth birthday?” Flowey asked. “Mom got us a little model of the
solar system, and we asked her what all the planets were named, and she only named seven of
them?”

Asriel nodded. “Yes! She said one of them was a dirty word, because—”

“Humans had mean senses of humor!” he and Flowey finished in unison.

“Lucky guess,” 9S grumbled. “Asriel, this guy’s trouble. Stop trying to talk to him! He tried to kill
me once!”

“Oh, that’s an exaggeration,” Flowey said. “Also,” he asked, “do you remember how you had to
teach Chara how to sew, so they could make a sweater for Dad’s birthday, and they didn’t want to
ask Mom because it had to be a surprise to her, too?”

“Okay, that’s obviously garbage,” 9S countered. “Asriel doesn’t know how to sew.”

“Yeah, I do,” said Asriel.

“Since when?” 9S asked, letting go of Asriel in his shock.

“Since always.” Asriel shrugged. “I couldn’t do it when I was stuck in that robot body, though. My
fingers were all wrong.”

“Now do you believe me?” Flowey asked.

“I already believed you,” Asriel said.

9S cleared his throat. “Well, it doesn’t matter, because if Flowey says one more word—”

“Nines, stop.” Asriel turned around to look straight at 9S. He had a miserable, pained look on his
face. “Y-You guys never tell me anything. If it’d been up to you a-and 2B and Mom, y-you never
would’ve even told me what happened to Dad…”

9S felt a current of guilt stir in his heart. He knew exactly how Asriel felt, and he felt responsible for
it.

“If Mr. Flowey here can tell me anything, then I want him to,” Asriel said.

“And if you don’t let me talk,” Flowey told 9S, “Asriel here will tell Mom that you’ve been teaching
him swears.”

“What? Oh, come on, that’s bullsh—”

“But how are you me?” Asriel asked Flowey as he hopped off the bed and went back to Flowey’s
side. “I mean, you don’t sound like me… you don’t act like me… you don’t look like me…”

“Yeah, don’t rub it in. Anyway,” Flowey said, coughing into his leaf to clear his ‘throat,’ “listen
closely, Asriel, to my sad tale. You know how you were created after you died, right?”

“I died?” Asriel asked.

Flowey shot 9S a withering glare. “Didn’t even tell him that much, did you? Yes, Asriel. We died.
I’ll spare you the gory details. It was really awful and I didn’t like it at all! And then Doctor Alphys accidentally brought us back to life! You see, she was experimenting with a flower from the garden where you died, a machine core, and determination. The machine core became you, the flower became me, and the rest is history…”

“So… you’re like… half of me?” Asriel asked.

“The better half,” said Flowey.

“The worse half,” said 9S at the exact same time.

“You see, a loooong time ago, there was a human with a stupid name,” said Flowey, “who came up with the idea that people were made up of three things—ego, superego, and id. The superego is like the little voice in your head that tells you right from wrong and makes you feel bad for doing bad things. The id is the part of you that doesn’t care about anything except yourself and tells you to do whatever you want. And the ego moderates those two sides. Tell me, Asriel… you think it’s important to behave yourself, don’t you?”

Asriel nodded.

“And you feel guilty a lot?”

Asriel nodded again.

“And you feel guilty a lot… often for no reason, or over things that aren’t actually your fault?”

Asriel nodded so vigorously that his ears started flopping. “Yes, all the time, Mr. Flowey!”

“That’s it!” Flowey exclaimed. “See, I don’t feel any of those things, ever! I just do whatever I want, whenever I want, and I never feel bad about it! It’s great, until people start trying to kill you for it!”

“So much for trying to turn over a new leaf,” 9S grumbled. “You haven’t changed at all, have you, you little bastard?”

“Do you know what this means, Asriel?” Flowey asked, ignoring 9S. “You’re my superego! And I’m your id! We’re both fragments of a whole, cookies without cream, butterscotch without cinnamon!”

“S-So, uh,” Asriel asked, “do I, uh, p-put you inside me or something? Or, like… I-I don’t gotta eat you, do I?”

“Nope.” 9S stood up, much to his surprise, the blanket covering him falling away and sloughing onto the floor. His legs were still stiff and achy, but supported his weight just enough to let him stand. “Nope. Nope. No one’s eating anyone or putting anyone inside them. I’m putting my foot down.”

He took a single step forward to shoo Flowey away and promptly fell flat on his face, his nose cracking painfully against the floorboards. Or rather, the floorboards cracked painfully against his nose. Either way, it hurt.

So he still couldn’t walk yet. 9S wished he’d found out in a less embarrassing way.

“Nines!” Asriel rushed to his side and tried to lift him up. “A-Are you okay? I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…”

“Look, you don’t have to apologize for everything,” Flowey scoffed. “It’s his own fault he tripped
over his own damn feet.”

“Don’t talk about Nines like that, Mr. Flowey,” Asriel responded. At this point, Pod 153 had taken hold of 9S’s shoulder and was bearing the brunt of his weight. “You and Nines need to get along better, okay?”

“What?” Flowey looked scandalized. “His sister nearly murdered me twice!”

“He tore out my soul,” 9S protested, just as shocked by what Asriel was saying, “and tried to turn me against 2B!”

“And it was easy!” Flowey countered. “You’re a really hateful person deep down, you know?”

“Stop it, both of you!” Asriel said, stomping his foot, crossing his arms, and puffing out his cheeks. “You’re acting like babies.”

“I have nightmares because of you!” 9S spat at Flowey.

“Oh, and you don’t think I have panic flashbacks every time one of your stupid pods so much as looks at me funny?” Flowey retorted.

“Good!” 9S tried to cross his arms, realized he only had one arm at the moment, and clutched lamely at his side in a half-approximation of crossing his arms as Pod 153 set him back on the bed. “Pod, remove Flowey from this room. Use any means necessary.”

“Affirmative.”

“No, Miss 153,” Asriel said with a dismissive wave of his paw, “don’t hurt Mr. Flowey.”

“Affirmative.”

“Wh—” Flabbergasted, 9S glanced from Pod 153 to Asriel and back. “You don’t take orders from him!”

Pod 153 wrung its hands. “Statement: Unit 9S is a subject of the monster kingdom; Prince Asriel belongs to the ruling class. This support unit has concluded that in the absence of YoRHa chain of command, Prince Asriel and Queen Toriel are Unit 9S’s superior officers. This support unit will follow Prince Asriel’s commands so long as such commands do not conflict with its primary task to render support to Unit 9S.”

“Since when?” 9S protested, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“Statement: this support unit has taken hierarchy into consideration in light of the damage suffered by Unit 9S against Queen Toriel’s wishes. Observation: this is what Queen Toriel refers to as ‘grounding.’ This support unit believes the term arose from disciplinary actions taken against flight-based combat units.”

“This is ridiculous,” 9S said, pouting.

“So you can give orders to these pods, huh?” Flowey asked Asriel, scratching his chin. There was a devilish look on his half-burned face. “Hmm…”

“Asriel,” 9S cautioned, trying out his best ‘older-brother-knows-best’ voice, “take it from me. And ask 2B if you need to back up what I’m saying. Flowey is bad news. The only thing that makes him happy is hurting people. Toss him out of here right now before he decides to start having ‘fun’ with
“Did you listen to a word I said last night?” Flowey asked.

“On account that you were probably lying through your teeth,” 9S said, “no. No, I didn’t.”

“Look, I’ve done so much for you,” Flowey pleaded. “I showed you where the six souls were! You owe me a nice pot for that!”

“The pot was in exchange for you teaching us the song that opens the door,” 9S reminded Flowey.

“Oh, right. So how about it?” Flowey asked.

“Mom has all sorts of gardening stuff,” Asriel pointed out. “C’mon, Nines. You and Mrs. Undyne need that song, don’t you?”

9S sighed. “All right, Flowey. You win. Let’s find you some nice dirt.”

It didn’t take long for Asriel to find a big, orange ceramic flowerpot to house Flowey, as well as a bag of potting soil (he’d needed Pod 153’s help to carry it), but to 9S, it felt like it took forever. And as he set Flowey’s new home on the dining room table and began filling it up with dirt, Flowey acted as though he were enjoying the facilities of a five-star spa and resort.

Flowey sighed deeply as Asriel repotted him, packing fresh soil around his frayed roots. Black dirt clung to the prince’s paws as he tamped down the soil. “Ah,” he said, closing his eyes in bliss, “this… this feels so good. It’s like a pedicure! You two non-plants, you couldn’t hope to understand…”

“The song,” 9S reminded him.

“I need a piano,” said Flowey. “At least thirty-six keys.”

Asriel’s face fell. “But… but this house doesn’t have a piano. The castle does…”

“Oh, boy! I love getting what I want for nothing!” Flowey cackled.

“Hold up.” 9S raised his hand. “Pod 153, generate and display a laser-light touch-pad piano keyboard on the floor, C3 to B5.” He couldn’t rely on any augmented-reality projections or touch-screens without a visor, but a laser-projected image that detected touch feedback, though a primitive solution, would more than suffice.

“Affirmative. Compiling MIDI input software.” After a few seconds, Pod 153 displayed a matrix of lasers against the table in a two-dimensional wireframe approximation of a piano keyboard stretching three full octaves.

9S tapped on the A4 key, producing a clear 440 Hz tone from Pod 153’s speakers. “Sounds good. Make sure you’re recording this. As for you, Flowey, I think you owe us a performance…”

“Well, fair is fair.” Flowey let out a resigned sigh, curled out ten long, green tendrils, and laid them just above the keyboard. “Are you recording my masterpiece?”

“Affirmative.”

Flowey began to play.
Asriel closed his eyes and began to hum along, a knowing smile playing on his face as the memory came back to him.

The memory of a song he’d long forgotten… but Flowey had remembered.

9S didn’t trust Flowey as far as he could throw the leafy little bastard. But deep down, he couldn’t help but wonder… was Flowey really Asriel’s missing half?

Was Asriel really missing anything? Sure, his memories were incomplete—he didn’t remember how Chara had gotten sick and passed away, or how he’d died—but wasn’t it a mercy of sorts, for Asriel to be missing such traumatic and painful memories?

Was it a mercy to be missing those memories, even if this song that had meant so much to Asriel had vanished along with them?

Flowey was right about one thing, that was certain. 9S was in the same boat as Asriel. His model had gone into production on January 30, 11942, but as far as his memories had been concerned, 9S had not come into being until over two years later. More than two-thirds of 9S’s life had never happened to him.

He tried not to let it be a source of angst for him. 2B kept stewardship of those lost lives, though both holding onto them and divulging them were painful to her. As much as 9S wanted the missing years of his life back, he never pressed her for details: he trusted, respected, and loved 2B too much to ask for anything else. Instead, he let her dole out tidbits of his past lives at her discretion because he didn’t want his curiosity about his past to come at her expense.

Besides, they weren’t his memories—they were memories of him. They were him—as 2B had seen him. Moments of his life he’d spent away from her side (few of them as there were)—those were gone forever, as irretrievable as data from a hard disk drive whose disk platters had been melted into slag. And the thoughts he’d had, the things he’d learned, the discoveries he’d made… All gone. No backups. No recordings, no testaments, no stewards.

That fact… the fact that there were parts of him even 2B had never known, parts that had vanished entirely with every execution order from Commander White…

That, when 9S let himself dwell on it, was what got to him. 2B could tell him so much about his past… his exploits, the feats he’d accomplished, the ways he’d helped her out of dangerous situations, the jokes he’d told, the ways he’d gotten under her skin time and time again… but he’d only ever see those long-gone selves through a glass, darkly.

If 9S could have his memories back… if he had that chance to genuinely restore himself… he would take them back without question, without hesitation. He even occasionally felt a dark, morbid sense of curiosity, gut-wrenching as it was, when he pondered what it must have been like each and every time 2B had executed him.

If Asriel could have that chance, didn’t he deserve to take it?

But, 9S reminded himself, this was Flowey who was offering this chance.

If Flowey really was Asriel’s other half, his ’id,’ then what would a ’complete’ Asriel look like? Would he be a good kid? Nice? Fun? Would the kid brother 9S had gotten to know be gone, transformed into something unrecognizable? Maybe incomplete was better…

But who was 9S to make that decision? Wouldn’t that make him just as bad as Commander White, the woman who had forced 2B to kill him and erase his memories time and time again?
The song ended, and the last notes faded away, echoing through the quiet, empty house; the sudden silence broke 9S free of his musings. Asriel was clutching his arm, his furry head resting against 9S’s shoulder, his eyes closed. The fur on his cheeks was wet and glistening, and 9S could hear quite clearly that Asriel was trying very hard to keep his quiet, restrained half-sobs to himself. 9S patted him on the knee.

“There you have it. Nocturne for Asriel and Chara in E Major.” Flowey bowed. “Sorry, no encores.”

“Audio and MIDI input recorded,” Pod 153 announced. “Proposal: MIDI data gathered here should be converted into standard notation and transmitted to Captain Undyne.”

“Good idea.” 9S nodded. “Pod, convert the data and send it to her phone. And give her a call, too.” He wished he could gleefully rub his hands together. If anything could put water under the bridge between him and Undyne, it would be this.

“Transmission error. Contact could not be successfully established between the pod network and Captain Undyne’s cellular telephone.” Pod 153 once again wrung its hands apologetically. “Observation: Captain Undyne’s phone could not be detected, indicating that it, as well as herself, may be in an area of the kingdom where pod sensors cannot penetrate. This support unit will continue to attempt transmission every thirty seconds until contact is made.”

“The tunnels,” 9S pondered. “The room with the piano! Maybe Undyne’s already on her way there…” Without the music? Or did 13B help her find it?

...Or is she heading into a trap?

And if she was, was there anything 9S, here with no weapons, no functioning NFCS, and barely any strength to walk, could do to help her?

▫▫▫

Deep in the dark, barely-explored tunnels beneath Waterfall, deep below the dark and marshy caverns and underground lakes and ponds Undyne called home, she leaned against the slick, stony walls, slumped over.

Pinning her to the side of the tunnel was a long, ragged sword buried up to its hilt in her side and running through the rock. Blood trickled down her leg, leaving a widening stain down her pants as other rivulets ran down the cobbled-together hilt of the scrap-metal sword and dripped onto a growing puddle on the ground.

Feeling like a butterfly in some freak’s collection, Undyne grasped fruitlessly at the sword’s hilt, her fingers slipping off the blood-slicked steel. Her hands shook as her vision blurred and darkened. This couldn’t be the end, it couldn’t, not when victory had been so close at hand…

Walking over to Alphys’ lab, Undyne felt more exhilarated and invigorated than she had in weeks. She didn’t even mind that even the briefest jaunt through Hotland was enough to leave her a sweaty mess. The future finally seemed bright. She and 13B were on their way from City Hall, where they’d just dropped off the new executive orders. The befuddlement on the clerk’s face had been a sight Undyne would never forget.

But laws were laws, and right now, Chara Dreemurr was done for. Legally.

“Hey, Undyne?” 13B asked, wiping beads of sweat from her brow. “When you found
“Me this morning… you called me Lucky, didn’t you?”

“Uh… Yeah. That all right with you?”

“Well, uh… only close friends call me Lucky. Most people just call me Thirteen.” 13B smiled nervously. “S-So… how’d you know to call me that?”

Undyne shrugged. “That’s what 6O called you.”

“She… still calls me that?” 13B’s eyes widened as she stumbled to a halt, frozen in shock. “Oh, 6O…”

Undyne clapped her heartily on the shoulder. “It’s all right. Tomorrow, when this is all over, I’ll bring you over to her!”

“No you think she’ll be happy to see me?” 13B asked.

Undyne paused. Probably not, she wanted to say in all honesty. 6O was a delicate girl and Chara had done a lot of emotional harm to her while posing as 13B. Maybe she’d never be able to look 13B in the eye again. Undyne still had lingering chills looking at Chara’s face, even if 13B didn’t have the same frightening aura they did.

“Yeah!” Undyne said.

13B smiled, her cheeks flushing pink. “Th… That’s…” She kneaded the hem of her tunic. “That’s great…”

Undyne tugged her along, eager to get to Alphys’ lab and out of the oppressive heat. “C’mon. Let’s go see how Alphys and Doctor G’s medical robotics stuff is going!”

There were more people on the floor of Alphys’ laboratory than Undyne expected to find—Doctor Gaubrieta had about a half-dozen medical technicians in white smocks accompanying her, and Alphys had a few hired hands on her side as well. Undyne had never seen so many people on the laboratory’s production floor. Alphys usually did everything herself, but with Chara’s demands requiring far more mass production output than usual, she’d needed extra help.

On the operating table, behind a nearly-impenetrable barrier of physicians and physicists, was a mangled mass of flesh and machine. It looked like Alphys and Gaubrieta were trying to stuff what little remained of Lieutenant Snaca into one of those black suits of mechanized armor Alphys had designed based on YoRHa schematics like ground meat being shoved into a sausage casing. The part of Undyne that wasn’t creeped out by seeing one of her old “friends” and rivals reduced to hamburger thought the whole thing seemed oddly familiar.

Undyne crept behind Alphys and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, how’s the patient?”

Alphys nearly leaped out of her scales, hurriedly pulling the tool she’d had in the suit’s innards away to prevent any damage to the patient. “Aah! O-Oh, h-hey, Undyne. Sh-She’s fine. Or, well, uh, she will be in a f-few minutes. W-We’ve got some jerry-rigged l-life support in the suit and servos hooked up to the inside to f-fill in for her missing limbs. What’s up?”
“Nothing,” Undyne said. “Their Royal Highness and I were just at City Hall filling out some boring paperwork.”

13B pushed past her. “Excuse me, Doctor. May I… see the patient again?”

“You’ve sure taken a lot of interest in her, Your Highness,” said Undyne. She felt a twinge of discomfort she couldn’t fully explain nor simply ascribe to seeing her rival under the knife. Maybe it was because with an audience surrounding her, 13B had to slip back into pretending to be like Chara, and she did it so readily…

“Why shouldn’t I? She’s amazing.” 13B said, leaning over Lieutenant Snaca, her hands hovering over the sleek black armor encasing her. “So brave, and so tenacious, too… do you think she might be the strongest monster in the kingdom, Undyne?”

“Um…” Undyne involuntarily sucked air through her clenched teeth, pondering a question she really didn’t want to answer. She’d always been steps ahead of Snaca, from the orphanage to street rats to Royal Guards, and now to think she’d fallen behind here of all places, now of all times? She didn’t want to admit it, because it felt so dirty and ugly, but… her pride had taken a bit of a hit.

“I-I think it’s a moot question,” Alphys interjected, picking up on Undyne’s discomfort. “We’re using this h-heavy armor to f-fix her, but… it’s n-not like she can ever fight again. I-It’s just to give her some quality of life for the f-few d-d-day she has left…” She let out a long, melancholy sigh. “B-Before she becomes just a memory.”

“Is she conscious?” 13B asked.

Alphys turned her head, a shocked look on her face. “I-Is she what?”

“Yes,” one of Gaubrieta’s entourage, translating the doctor’s hurried signing, answered. “But only barely. We’ve had to suspend her in a state just above sleeping so we can make sure the circuits in the prostheses and her nerve endings line up properly. But it’s okay. She can’t feel any pain. We’ve made sure of it.”

“That’s… morbid,” Undyne said. “But… good, I guess.”

13B crouched down beside Snaca, laid a hand on her scaly forehead, and whispered something to her. Whatever they said was completely inaudible under the ocean of low murmuring and babbling filling the air from the dozen medical and engineering professionals chipping away at their experiment.

Their head solemnly bowed, 13B stood up. “We should be going, Captain,” she told Undyne. “If you don’t mind?”

Undyne nodded. “Not at all, Your Highness. Lead on.”

The next stop on Undyne’s agenda was the room where Chara had allegedly hidden the other six YoRHa black box units… the other six souls needed to break the Barrier. As Undyne followed 13B into tunnels deep below the civilized part of Waterfall, deeper than even the machines had settled in, she felt a leaden lump settle in her stomach.

Hours seemed to pass. How deep did these tunnels lead? These were a part of Undyne’s home turf even she hadn’t ever been to.
She checked her phone. The signal strength grew weaker with every step deeper into the bowels of the Earth, and Undyne could see the bars on the little icon on the corner of her screen tick away like a countdown. Counting down to…

What would she do once 13B had revealed the six souls to her?

Undyne tried to distract herself. 9S had written a lot of apology texts in the past half-hour or so. It was actually kind of sweet of him, if a little overbearing and annoying. Damn that kid. He had to have gone and done something so horrible as murdering people, and he just had to be so contrite about it. How the hell was Undyne supposed to stay mad at him?

He was just a kid. He’d been desperate. He’d gotten carried away. But was that any excuse for seeing to it that a couple of kids out there with parents in the Royal Guard would never see them again?

“You sure do like spending time with Doctor Alphys,” 13B pointed out, distracting Undyne from her reverie.

“I sure do,” Undyne agreed. “We’re girlfriends!”

“Really?”

“Yeah!” Undyne felt her smile tug at her cheeks as her mood lightened. “Hey, the two of us should go on a double date with Alphys and 6O sometime!”

13B laughed and slung the scrap-metal sword she’d plundered from the mangled remains of a machine in one of the tunnels higher up over her shoulder. Undyne had told her she didn’t need to carry a weapon—Undyne was, after all, the best protection a girl could have—but 13B had insisted. Wrapping her grip around the blade seemed to comfort her, which Undyne supposed made sense—she was, after all, a combat unit.

“No, make it a triple date! We’ll find someone for 2B to go with! Like…” Undyne mentally ran through the Underground’s eligible bachelorettes. Or maybe 2B was into guys, too? That would widen the dating pool considerably. Or maybe 2B wasn’t into anyone, and that was okay, too, it was valid to not be attracted to anyone, although it would make her a bit of a fifth wheel on more romantic outings…

“Undyne?” 13B asked, interrupting Undyne’s train of thought.

“Yeah?”

“Even with Chara gone… you still need to trigger a reaction from seven black boxes to break the Barrier, right?”

The thought hadn’t crossed Undyne’s mind, or at least, not her conscious mind. Deep down, she’d known.

Her plan all along had been to claim the six already gathered, then take Chara’s, but it wasn’t Chara’s black box anymore—it was 13B’s. Lucky Thirteen. A poor girl who’d done nothing wrong besides being the victim of… how exactly had Chara ended up in her body, anyway?

But there needed to be seven. 2B was right out, as her dying would trigger a reset and wipe everything out anyway. 9S, too, wasn’t on the chopping block, because he wasn’t
so bad that he deserved to die, and besides, 2B would kill Undyne if anything happened to him. And, of course, 6O couldn’t offer up her black box, either, because that was the exact thing Undyne and all her friends had been working so hard to prevent.

“Um…” Undyne’s mouth went dry. She checked her phone again. No signal. Chara’s secret room must not be too far away, she reckoned. “Don’t worry about that! We’ll find another way! There’s always another way!”

13B smiled again, but sadly this time, as though she doubted Undyne’s words.

The two of them walked on.

*There has to be another way,* Undyne kept telling herself. She prayed that maybe Chara would wrestle control of 13B’s body away from her at just the right time and give her a chance to run them through without a second thought. It would be okay to kill Chara, even if it killed 13B, too. In fact, it would be a mercy to free 13B from that torment if Chara retook control of her body. That was the only way Undyne could think to morally justify taking her black box.

Eventually, Undyne recalled why she so rarely gave herself to introspection. It was when 13B had run her scrap-metal sword through Undyne’s stomach before Undyne could react, lost as she was in the moral conundrums swirling through her head.

13B’s face swam before Undyne’s eye, a dark tunnel blacking out everything beyond that pale face as Undyne’s vision faded and the air began to drain from her brain. It was the face of…

*Chara?*

Had Undyne been played a fool all this time?

But… she was important to Chara’s plan. Only she could absorb the seven souls with no risk! How could Chara abandon her here of all places, now of all times?

“Ch… Chara…” she gasped, feeling the strength fleeing her body with every beat of her heart, the magic draining from her body along with her blood. “Y… You… You can’t…”

“Chara?” Chara cocked their head. “Chara who? It’s me… Lucky Number Thirteen.”

“But…” Undyne gasped like a fish out of water. “It doesn’t… it doesn’t make sense… The plan… destroying Chara’s ambitions…”

13B laughed. “Don’t you worry, Undyne. It’s nothing personal.”

“But…” Undyne tried to comprehend what 13B was saying, but it didn’t make any sense, and it was getting harder and harder to think clearly… “But… we’re on the same side… L-Lucky… What about… revenge… against Chara…”

“Oh, I haven’t forgotten.” 13B’s grin darkened. “This… This is my revenge. I’m going to tear their kingdom apart. I’ll burn it all to ashes. Chara’s precious little monsters… the people they love more than their own kind… I’m going to make sure every last one of them dies in agony, and I’m going to make Chara watch!” Her eye was wide and wild, her bright scarlet iris glittering in the gloom. “It’s the most perfect revenge I can think of!”

13B took hold of the sword’s hilt even as Undyne continued to scrabble against it and yanked it free, freeing Undyne as well. The misshapen, rusty blade was dark with smears of blood.
Undyne fell to the ground, gasping in pain, her face wrenched in a silent, anguished scream as she clutched at the wound running through her side. The blood was flowing more freely now, mingling with the brackish puddles dappling the stony ground, tendrils of scarlet running through the water. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Like I said, it’s nothing personal, Undyne,” said 13B. “If you hadn’t been a monster, I’d have been honored to be your friend. But unfortunately, well… all genocides have to start somewhere. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a speech to make.” She threw her head back and laughed, her laughter bouncing off the walls, then walked away, her sword slung over her shoulder.

“Glory,” she called out, her words barely managing to penetrate Undyne’s earfins as the captain struggled to cling to consciousness, “to Mankind!”

Undyne conjured a spear with the last of her strength, aquamarine light flickering through the tunnels, arcs of electricity leaping across the damp stone, and threw it, hoping its aim would be true.

That if she died down here, she would take Chara—or was it 13B—or did it matter either way?—with her.

The spear did not fly true. It caught a lock of 13B’s hair and nothing more before embedding itself in a far wall, shining like a beacon for a few seconds before it faded away.

Undyne reached out with a trembling hand as the darkness enveloped her, grasping at thin air, silently lamenting the injustice of it all.

I’m sorry, Alphys.

Alphy…

Oh, god, Alphy, I just wanna see you one more time.

I can’t die here. I can’t… I… I have to…

It had taken a few hours, but at last, the work on Lieutenant Snaca was finally done. And Alphys had to admit, she was… almost beautiful, in a way. Sure, she was more machine now than monster, and the prostheses were a rush job, but… it was a rush job that would give Snaca time to say goodbye properly to her friends and loved ones in what little time she had left. And then she’d become one of those amalgamates, or a Memoryhead as Alphys called them, a wispy, phantom fragment of a person, but even that…

Well, as long as she was loved, it wouldn’t be too bad.

The gentle rise and fall of Snaca’s chest was proof enough that she lived, but so too was the alert spark in her pitch-black eyes as she lay on the table, awake but seemingly too weak to speak or move. However, she seemed content.

Even so, though, Alphys couldn’t help but feel the pervasive, foreboding dread that had built up inside her over the past few hours, despite everything good that had happened today. She tried to dismiss it—of course, when you were used to things going wrong, whenever they went right, it felt like the universe was playing a prank and was just getting ready to pull the rug out from under you—but it felt like there was more to it than that.

Alphys compulsively checked her phone and found a voicemail message that had been left nearly an
hour ago. She held the phone up to her ear with a trembling hand and played it.

“Hey, Alphys?” It was clearly 9S’s voice on the other end. “I’m trying to reach Undyne. We found the song she’ll need to open up Chara’s vault. Pod 153’s been trying to call her for… well, it feels like hours. Any idea where she is?”

Alphys felt the dread curl around inside her tighter than before. Undyne had gone down to the deep tunnels with 13B, and… Shouldn’t she be back by now? But why else would she not be answering her phone unless she’s deep enough that she can’t get a signal?

Undyne couldn’t be… hurt? Or worse?

No. She couldn’t allow herself to think those things.

Gaubrieta, noting Alphys’ pensive state, laid a bony hand on her shoulder, loosening at least a little bit of the tension filling her body. Her assistants finished cleaning up and started preparing to leave, which Alphys was incredibly grateful for.

Then one of them found Alphys’ TV remote, which Alphys was extremely ungrateful for.

“Hey,” one said. “My phone says King Chara’s broadcasting an emergency speech from City Hall. I wonder what for?”

“Well,” said another, “we’d better do our patriotic duty and watch it, huh?”

Before Alphys could protest, the TV was on, and Chara’s face—13B’s face—was on it, their voice filling the room.

“…end of the Second Human-Monster War begun by my late father. Second, the Royal Guard will no longer be a military organization, and will…”

Gaubrieta whisked Alphys off her feet and pulled her over to one of the messy, junk-laden corners of the laboratory with surprising roughness. Alphys’ pulse pounded as panic struck her. What was she doing?

[Listen to me very carefully,] Gaubrieta signed once she’d set Alphys down. [I have a very keen sense of hearing. Those of us who dwell in silence often do.]

Alphys nodded, not sure where this was going and entertaining the possibility that Gaubrieta was going to, for whatever reason, use those spindly fingers of hers to gut her like a fish.

“…for the use of military-grade equipment is hereby rescinded, and all new recruits from the Military Expansion Act…”

[I heard what King Chara whispered to the Lieutenant,] Gaubrieta continued. [Clear as crystal. It was an order for your execution.]

“Execution?” Alphys gasped, sparing a sideways glance at Snaca’s prone body. Her? she thought. Ordered to kill me?

“The events of last night have made it clear that no army can match…”

[They said there would be a trigger phrase in tonight’s speech. ’Mortals must do’…]

Tonight’s speech…
Alphys dashed toward the cluster of assistants crowded around the television as they hung onto King Chara’s every word. Despite Gaubrieta’s silent protests, the doctor lost her protective grip on Alphys.

“Turn the TV off!” she screeched, hardly able to understand how she could yell so loudly with her heart pounding so hard and so fast, her mouth so dry, her throat so tight. “Turn the TV off!”

“In this brave new world, mortals must do what angels cannot.”

Alphys barely felt the fangs bury themselves in her neck.
Every shallow breath, every fragile pump of her heart, brought Captain Undyne another second closer to death. Funny… somehow it was *funny* how much it felt like falling asleep at the end of a long, hard day.

She didn’t want to fall asleep. Not yet. Not now. Not here.

And she… she *wouldn’t*. She could *feel* it. Something inside her, something burning, something filling her up almost as quickly as the pain and blood loss was hollowing her out.

Cut down with a single strike by an insane android… clinging to life…

This intensity within her…

It all felt…

Somehow, it all felt *familiar*.

And because of that, Undyne knew she could hold on.

Asgore was waiting for her, somewhere out there, beyond the abyss… but he was a patient man. And Undyne had more work to do. She had to get to Alphys… she had to see her again, even if it was only just *once*… and she had to find that traitorous 13B and kick her ass.

The one benefit of 13B and Chara sharing a body was that Undyne could kill them both at the same time.

There was no sound in the dark and winding tunnels but the constant, echoing dripping of water in the distance, and each quiet, ringing *plop* of a droplet from the ceiling into the puddles dotting the ground served as a reminder of the blood ebbing from Undyne’s body.

She had to stop the bleeding. Placing a palm over the wound in her gut—the blood was
so warm coming out, it was almost hot —she tried to conjure a spark.

Heat had only ever been a byproduct of Undyne’s lightning, and not one she’d ever paid much thought to—not until 2B had nearly burned her hand off grabbing one of her spears.

Heat—searing heat, crisping, charring heat—Could she…

Undyne’s scream rang through the tunnels, echoing off the walls. As the electric current ran through her muscles, she convulsed, curled into a ball, and rolled over. The shallow puddle she lay in was frigid compared to the heat roasting her flesh.

She lost count of how many times she’d passed out from the pain. And how long passed between each minuscule blackout? Seconds, minutes, hours? By the time she managed to muster up the strength to burn the exit wound shut as well as the entry wound, she felt like she’d been trapped down here for days.


But it was getting cold. The water was cold. The air was cold. Undyne shivered, huddling to conserve as much body heat as possible as she dragged herself centimeter by agonizing centimeter trying to find drier ground.

Time slowed to a crawl and stretched out. Every so often, when she began to feel weak and faint and her fingertips began to grow numb, she administered a tiny shock to her heart, just enough to keep it pumping. She couldn’t keep track of how many times she had to do that or how many times she fell unconscious. Hours? Had hours passed?

Undyne just needed to work up the strength to stand up. Stand up… stand… stand…

She stood.

She fell. She heard something snap beneath her and a dull, throbbing ache ran through her hand.

The monotonous sound of dripping, trickling water began to fade into silence, and what little Undyne could see began to blur and darken. Despite her best efforts… she was…

She was falling asleep.

Undyne clutched at her waking mind and clung to consciousness. It couldn’t end like this. No! No, it couldn’t! It wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t just! Heroes lived noble lives and died valiant deaths… that was the way it should be. They didn’t bleed out alone after getting stabbed in the back.

Stand up. Stand up, Undyne! Get on your feet and start walking…

There was a bright light, shining directly in Undyne’s eye, overwhelming the darkness. It pulsed, pounding itself into Undyne’s head, throbbing. It hurt.

There was a voice, too. Loud, ringing, low, authoritative.

Undyne reached out to it.

Dad?
No. Too monotone, not deep enough.

Before the darkness claimed Undyne, her fingertips brushed against cold metal.

Papyrus frantically scribbled notes on his notepad as the news began to dissect Chara’s bombshell of a proclamation. “Wow! King Chara’s been hovering around a very low D-minus for a few weeks now,” he exclaimed, breaking the silence, “but after this, I’m prepared to bump them up to a high D, maybe even a D-plus… or a C-minus!”

“A-A what?” 2B asked, still reeling from the shock of hearing Chara announce their surrender.

“He’s been grading all of the king’s public appearances,” Sans explained.

“You’ve been giving them… a passing grade?” Toriel asked Papyrus, cringing.

“I had faith they could be a good king if they just applied themselves,” Papyrus said. “They must have read my letters!”

Before 2B could ask about that, Sans spoke up again.

“He’s been organizing a letter-writing campaign since they passed the Android Bounty Act,” said Sans, practically glowing with fraternal pride. “Three letters a day, seven days a week, for almost seven whole weeks now! And he hand-writes each one himself!”

“And each one is different, too! That’s how they know I’m sincere!” Papyrus said, beaming as he laid his hands on his hips. “I decided to put training for the Royal Guard on hold for as long as they were going after my friends… and took up civic engagement instead! I think I’m a natural at it!”

2B couldn’t help but be suspicious of the proclamation she’d just heard, let alone Papyrus chalking it up to his deeds. Would Chara’s heart be swayed by such trivial things as letters? She doubted their ruthlessness could be tempered in such a way. If this wasn’t some kind of setup to draw her, 9S, and 6O out of hiding, though, then surely she deserved some credit for it due to the losses she’d inflicted on Chara’s little army.

“You’re amazing, Papyrus!” 6O gushed, throwing her arms around him and planting a kiss on his bony cheek.

2B inched past Papyrus to catch a clearer view of the television. The broadcast had moved on from Chara’s speech; Mettaton was now on screen, shoving a microphone in front of random subjects on the street in front of City Hall and badgering them about their opinions.

“…looking forward to not having armed guards on every street corner,” one monster was saying. “They don’t make me or my larvae feel any safer; they just make me feel like we’ve got more to be afraid of.”

“Well, I think it’s disgraceful for the king to cut and run like this,” the next interviewee, this one clad in a Royal Guard uniform, said. “We’re so close; we should just finish the job.”

“All these Dreemurrs do is string us along with false hopes and bail out when we get too close to victory. Personally, I’m a little fed up with them.”

“Everyone knows the Android Bounty Act was just about justifying excessive force against petty crime. I’m glad common sense won out for once.”
“It’s a travesty! If we give up now, then all the soldiers who risked their lives last night will have suffered for nothing! I say we drag those damned androids out of hiding and tear them apart for scrap metal!”

“King Chara is right. I don’t want any more people to get hurt.”

“After everything they’ve said and done, King Chara has no right to back out like this!”

“So we’re just going to let those violent criminals do whatever they like with us? No thanks!”

“What did Chara bother killing Asgore if they were just going to do the same thing anyway? So much for the ‘Angel of the Underground.’ They’re a charlatan, just like their old man!”

“My brother is in the hospital because of those androids. I don’t care what the law says, if I see them around here, I’ll…”

Toriel’s soft, furry paw clasped around 2B’s hand and gently drew her away from the broadcast. “Dear,” she said in a low, soft voice that could not hide her concern, “perhaps we should be going.”

2B nodded in agreement. Hearing those immediate reactions made it clear that while Chara may have thrown aside their military might, their actions had only further solidified the antagonistic feelings toward androids they’d drummed up among their subjects over the past few weeks… and tonight, stinging from their betrayal, those subjects—most of all, whatever members of the Royal Guard still had the will to fight—would be baying for blood.

She recalled 6O’s account of the end of YoRHa. How, just when the machine network had seemed to be at its weakest and most vulnerable, the machines had launched a counterattack so devastating that scarcely a handful of YoRHa’s hundreds of units had escaped with their lives. And she wondered if right now, Chara’s followers were poised to finish what those machines had started.

2B turned away, sheathed her sword on her belt, pulled on her gloves, and wrapped herself in her cloak. “We’d better get going,” she told 6O, lifting the bundle of heavy winter garments 6O had used to disguise herself for her sojourn out of the Ruins and tossing them over to her. “I doubt the Royal Guard here will be happy about this.” She felt like she’d been doused with a bucket of ice water; the walls of the house felt very thin and the weight of the air outside very heavy.

“You really think so?” 6O asked. “But if they’ve been given orders—”

“If they’re angry enough, there’s no guarantee they’ll obey Chara’s decrees. The Royal Guard is not as disciplined as YoRHa,” 2B answered. “Mom, I need to borrow your phone.”

“That is nonsense!” Papyrus insisted. “The Royal Guard is the very model of discipline! Sans, how many times have they disciplined you for selling water sausages and calling them ‘organic, all-natural corn dogs?’”

“Oh, sure.” Sans crossed his arms. “When I do it, it’s a crime. When Mettaton does it, he’s an entrepreneur…”

Toriel handed 2B her cell phone—a very simple clamshell-like model compared to what other monsters used, with nothing but a number pad and a small, low-resolution LCD screen. 2B flipped it open and keyed in the number that would connect to Pod 153.

She held the phone up to her ear. “Nines?” As she spoke, her tongue became thick and heavy in her mouth.
“Hey, 2B! What’s up?”

2B closed her eyes and let out the barest hint of a relieved sigh, though she felt a worrying note of tension in 9S’s voice that kept her from fully relaxing. “6O, Toriel and I are on our way back. Something… very strange is going on out here.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve been trying to contact Undyne and Alphys for a while now and haven’t heard a thing from either of them.”

“Really? Neither of them?”

“Yeah. Now, Alphys, you know how she is, she’s either too busy or too anxious to answer. But Undyne…”

“Maybe she’s busy, too.”

“It’s not that. We can’t even connect to her cell phone. I think she might be in the tunnels we found last night. It’s… It’s a long story, but I’m worried for her safety, so I asked Pod 042 to head out and look for her.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Like I said… long story. Let’s catch up when you get back.”

2B nodded. “We won’t be long. Take care, Nines. Love you.”

As those last two words left 2B’s mouth, she was almost awestruck at how easily and casually they had come to her. All her life, she’d never been able to bring herself to say such a thing. Not to 9S, not to anybody. Not just because of YoRHa’s rules to discourage of emotional expression—2B’s old mantra embodying that rule to its extreme—but because she’d never had the luxury of expressing that love without hurting herself.

6O had been right. To simply say that 2B had become an entirely different person down here did not capture the magnitude of her transformation.

“Love you, too, Toobie. Take it easy.”

“See you soon.” 2B pulled the phone away from her ear and prepared to end the call, but as her finger hovered over the button, she heard another voice on the other end.

More specifically, she heard the sound of something shattering in the distance and Asriel shouting, “Mr. Flowey, no! That ice cream is for dessert only!”

“Nines, what’s going on?” 2B asked. What was Flowey doing in Toriel’s house?

“Um… long story! D-Don’t worry, everything’s okay here!” 9S insisted before abruptly hanging up.

2B handed the phone back to Toriel. “Mom, there’s an evil flower in your house. We have to get going.”

Undyne didn’t know how long she’d been out, but when she came to, she was in a much drier part of the tunnel system, propped up against the stone wall. Her mouth was dry, and to her surprise, her body felt surprisingly fuzzy rather than achy as she’d expected.
Then again, she hadn’t expected to be feel anything at all.

She squinted against the light as her eye adjusted. Floating in front of her, a package of medical supplies clutched in one of its claws, was none other than Pod 042.

Undyne tried to wet her mouth. “Pod…?” she croaked. “What are you doing here?” She pressed her hand to her side and found it coated in a thick layer of gauze. The wrapping was dry, yet squished as if there were some sort of gel beneath it. She felt an electric jolt of pain run up her side, but it wasn’t anywhere near the anguish of having been impaled. However, she felt a similar jolt run up her middle and ring fingers on her left hand, which she soon noticed were wrapped together and held in place with a makeshift splint. Funny—she didn’t remember injuring her hand… maybe she’d fallen on top of it at a bad angle as she’d lost consciousness?

“Statement: Unit 9S directed this support unit to search the cave network for Captain Undyne. This support unit was able to detect its target’s location by analyzing the map data collected earlier and using sonic telemetry to pinpoint the position of Captain Undyne’s verbal emissions. Upon discovery, this support unit ran medical diagnostic scans and administered—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the picture.” Feeling a burst of confidence, Undyne tried to stand up and found it surprisingly easy to do so. “Thanks.” I guess I owe 9S my thanks, too, she thought.

“This support unit has been given explicit instructions to provide thorough assistance to Captain Undyne. Proposal: Captain Undyne should state her intentions.”

“Get me to Alphys,” Undyne ordered. If Chara—or 13B, or whoever the hell was in charge now—saw fit to dispose of her so readily, Undyne concluded, then they probably wouldn’t keep Alphys around for much longer either.

“Affirmative. The most direct route to Doctor Alphys’ lab is through the basement levels. The nearest entrance is approximately seven hundred fifty meters from here.”

Undyne checked her phone. No service—still too far down. “All right,” she said, forcing herself to her feet. It wasn’t as hard as she expected. She certainly didn’t feel near death as she once had. In fact, a part of her seemed more alive than ever. “Let’s go.”

As she moved forward, the pod floating in front of her with its high-powered flashlight lighting the way, Undyne picked up speed until she was sprinting, gasping for air. She could hear her pulse pounding through her chest, her throat, her fins.

She had so many unanswered questions now. She wanted to know why 13B had betrayed her so suddenly. Had she been hiding her loathing for monsterkind all along? If so, why had she taken such an interest in Snaca? Was it really 13B, or just Chara putting on the performance of a lifetime? If so… why would they dispose of Undyne, the linchpin of their plan to break the Barrier? Had they gained confidence in their backup plan, the soul-eating sword Mourning Star? Or…

No, no, all that could wait. Undyne had more pressing concerns.

Right now, she wanted to know if Alphys was okay. That was the only thing that mattered.

Undyne checked her phone as she ran. She was starting to get the barest slivers of a cell signal, and with a trembling hand thumbed in Alphys’ number.

Please pick up.

Undyne held the phone to her earfin and let it ring, her heart pounding harder and faster with each
Please tell me you're okay, Alphys.

She wasn’t going to let anyone take anyone else away from her.

The phone rang and rang until finally, Undyne heard Alphys’ voice. Her spirits lifted. “Alphys! It’s me, Undyne! Listen, whatever you’re doing, wherever you are—”

“…p-please, uh, leave a message. I’m probably b-busy with, um, stuff. Th-Thanks for calling!”

Voicemail. Undyne was so angry she almost crushed the phone between her fingers.

No. It was okay. It didn’t mean anything. Sometimes Alphys was too busy to answer her phone. And sometimes she was too “busy,” and by “busy,” she meant “having an anxiety attack.” Undyne didn’t want to dwell on worst-case scenarios.

But she did.

With each step she took, with every sound of the water splashing under her boots, vision after vision flashed before her eye of all the possible misfortune that could befall Alphys. A sword through the stomach, like what 13B had done to her, or maybe decapitation or a slit throat. Or maybe it wouldn’t be quick, maybe 13B would take her time, taking a few of Alphys’ fingers, then a few toes, working up her arms and legs, slicing inch by inch away from her tail as if she were carving a Holly Day glazed ham, reveling in the screams of pain and fear…

Pod 042 blew down the door to the Royal Laboratory’s sprawling sub-basement as Undyne neared, giving her no impediments as she dashed into the lab and began to run through its sprawling, labyrinthine corridors. It stayed in front, guiding her along, shooting away any obstacles that presented themselves to keep her route as brutally efficient as possible.

What a good friend to have. These pods really were something else.

Arcs of turquoise lightning leaped off Undyne’s body and onto the walls, dancing across the concrete and ceramic as they probed for electronics and wires to cling to. A few bolts struck Pod 042’s silver hull, but were too weak to leave anything more than a few tiny black scorch marks. She wasn’t consciously channeling any of her magic, as far as she knew—it was like it was just leaking out of her—but she was too preoccupied to think about that.

As her muscles strained and burned, her blood singing in her ears, Undyne felt her dread grow stronger and stronger. She quelled it as best she could—people like her didn’t give into despair. They didn’t dwell on the worst that could happen. Undyne had been falling lately, failing to meet her own standards, so stressed and burned out by her exposure to Chara and her double life that she’d been losing herself.

But she had to remember.

A real hero smiled, even when things were at their worst.

Undyne threw herself into the elevator, jabbed the button to close the door and begin the ascent so hard it nearly broke, and tried to keep her smile plastered on her face even as she gasped and panted for breath.

The wait as the elevator rose was interminable, each second passing like an hour, but Undyne kept smiling. When she saw Alphys… Alphys would see that smile, and she’d know that everything was
As the cloud-wreathed stone sky above began to grow dark, 2B hurried through the town of Snowdin as quickly as she could. Papyrus had led the way through most of the town, then had to turn back when he remembered he had promised to walk a neighbor’s dog, wishing 2B and company the best of luck in crossing the next few meters of Snowdin. While her left hand held onto a few of Toriel’s grocery bags, she still had one hand free to use her sword if things got ugly; however, she couldn’t help but wish she had an extra set of hands to make sure Toriel and 6O wouldn’t fall behind.

The atmosphere of the town felt more crushing, stifling, and hostile than before—as if she could feel the simmering resentment of the Royal Guard coming closer and closer to boiling over—and 2B silently lamented that Papyrus and Sans had to live on the east side when Toriel’s home lay so far west. Crossing the entire town felt like crossing machine-controlled territory, and to make matters worse, she was doing it while escorting two non-combatants. She’d have no problem taking care of herself… but 6O would, and Toriel…

2B shivered, but not from the cold, and tried to rationalize away her fears.

She ran down a mental list of the most senior members of the Royal Guard here in Snowdin. Dogamy and Dogaressa were in charge, for all intents and purposes, and they were mostly by-the-book. 2B didn’t doubt that if Chara ordered them to lay down their arms and leave her alone, they would do it. Greater Dog and Lesser Dog did whatever they were told, and they mostly listened to their superior officers. The four guards 2B had dispatched yesterday, however, might have had a bone to pick with 2B, but she had threatened to do more than wound them if they crossed paths with her again, so hopefully, they would value their lives more than their pride if it came to that.

As she came up to the western edge of town, 2B saw a few furry monsters and a handful of machines loitering on the pathway into the forest and up the slopes leading to Snowdin’s frozen vistas. She recalled that some machine lifeforms had enlisted in the Royal Guard since Chara’s takeover. Machines would follow the orders they were given, though.

Then again, 2B remembered that Chara had just discharged every machine who’d enlisted. Perhaps they’d want revenge for losing their jobs.

The closer 2B came, the more audible the loiterers’ mutterings became.

“…so, back pay and severance, yeah, it’s nice we’re not getting tossed to the curb, but… I liked being part of something, y’know? King Chara and the Royal Guard… saving the kingdom, together…”

“Yeah… and now, if they march into town tomorrow, we’re supposed to let ’em?”

“Well… it’s not like they’re all pardoned, it’s just not illegal for them to exist anymore. No one ever said they can’t still arrest them for other things.”

“For example: assaulting a Royal Guard.”

“Yeah! That’s a crime!”

“You know… I just had a thought. The androids used to live here. What if they’ve been hiding out in this town all along?”
“We’d have found them.”

“What if they were hiding in the woods?”

“You think an android would do that? Just go out and hide in the woods like some animal? What if they need to recharge their batteries?”

“Or maybe they’re in disguise, just walking among us.”

“I think I know a way to tell if any of those androids are here in Snowdin…”

As she trailed close behind 2B, 6O let out a nervous gasp. 2B kept moving, neither speeding up nor slowing down. To not draw suspicion, the only way to react was not to.

“Hey!” one of the loitering former guards, a white hare in a black coat, called out to 2B as she passed by. With her uniform and white fur, from a distance, she almost looked like YoRHa. “Where’re you three going with those bags?”

2B froze. “They’re groceries,” she said, calm as calm could be.

“Groceries.” The former guard stomped through the snow. “And you’re going where with ’em? There’s nothing out that way but snow and trees.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” one of the other former guards, this one a white fox dressed in the same black coat, spoke up as he caught up to his compatriot. He and his companion were young. Teenagers, maybe. Too young for the Royal Guard, although considering 2B was both a seasoned soldier and three years old, she did not have room to talk. “You there,” he said, gesturing to Toriel, and then to the woods, “you’re that weird hermit who lives out there, right?”

“Um…” Toriel took a deep breath. “Yes I am, my child. I am that weird hermit who lives out there. And these two model citizens are helping me with my groceries.”

“That’s so nice of you guys!” the second guard said. He gave the first guard a pat on the shoulder. “Don’t mind Peri here. She’s a naturally suspicious person.”

“Or perhaps,” Toriel interjected with a little giggle, “she is Peri-noid?”

Peri wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes, as if she’d heard that pun a thousand times before. Since she lived in the same town as Sans, she probably had. “All right, well, go on, I guess. Not like we could stop you if you guys were up to no good, anyway.”

Toriel curtsied. “It was nice to meet you, Peri and…”

“Dot,” the second guard offered.

“Peri and Dot. I would shake your hands,” Toriel said, “but I have my paws full…”

“That’s okay. Have a nice day, ma’am,” said Dot.

Keeping her relief to herself, 2B trudged onward.

“Excuse me,” one of the stubbies spoke up. “You two with the heavy coats.”

2B came to a halt again; 6O nearly walked into her. “Yes?” she answered innocently.

“You two are very overdressed.”
2B’s right hand migrated to her sword beneath her coat. Did this machine have suspicions as well?

“You do not seem to like the cold,” it said. “Maybe you should move to Waterfall.”

“N-No,” 6O stammered. “It’s too wet. We, uh, like the snow.”

“Understandable. Have a nice day.”

Thoroughly relieved, 2B pressed onward into the forest, leaving the former guards behind. As she left, they began to talk among themselves yet again, their voices growing quieter with every step that grew the distance from them.

“So, what if the androids really are living here in town? How would we find ‘em?”

“We could smoke them out with some EMPs, I guess. Right, Ratchet?”

“It is possible. An android’s systems would be heavily affected by an electromagnetic pulse.”

“Wouldn’t it break everyone’s computers, though?”

“Not break. Merely temporarily disable. No permanent harm would be done.”

“Look, Dot, I know we’re not guards anymore, but why don’t we…”

Knowing and fearing what was coming, 2B and 6O broke out into a run, the snow crunching underneath their boots, low-hanging branches from the pine trees flanking them whipping past them. An EMP would only have a radius of a dozen or so meters, and if they got out of range quickly enough…

The hairs on the back of 2B’s neck stood up as a barely-audible humming filled her ears. The nausea came next, twisting her stomach, then an odd feeling of weightlessness as parts of her body, inside and out, felt as though they were being pulled in every direction at once.

All of these were a prelude before the full force of the pulse hit her.

It felt as though a bomb had gone off inside her head, the force of the explosion rattling the interior of her skull. Her vision broke down into a solid field of monochromatic static as an indecipherable noise comparable in its intensity to a gunshot at point-blank range filled her ears.

2B collapsed to the snowy ground with such force she nearly burrowed into the snow, alternating waves of hot and cold running through her body, her nervous system screaming with confused, contradictory signals. Red error messages streamed across her HUD.

She’d had the foresight to clamp her teeth down on her tongue just before the pulse hit to keep herself from screaming out; blood poured into her mouth with a rich, overpowering coppery taste and scent. 6O, though, hadn’t thought to take such precautions and let out a shrill, piercing shriek that cut clearly through the crisp, cold air.

2B tried to pull herself and 6O to her feet, battling against a body that no longer seemed to know left from right or up from down, her ears still ringing, static still speckling her vision as bright flashes of color danced over a grayscale world. She spat out the blood filling her mouth, staining a small patch of snow red, as Toriel grabbed her by the shoulder and helped her steady herself. 6O clung to her tightly, still whimpering from the pain.

“2B, 6O are you all right?” Toriel asked, her voice coming out as an urgently-whispered hiss, her
eyes wide with worry.

“Dot, go get the guards! I’ll make sure whoever just screamed doesn’t run off...”

2B tried to nod. “We’ll be fine. We just have to...” Still reeling from the pulse, she racked her brain to remember proper protocol for these situations. Machines equipped with EMPs were a rare sight on the surface, and she had to admit, she didn’t have much experience with them, and especially not with being hit at this close a range. That, along with the lingering effects of the pulse, was making it hard to recall what to do in the event she’d been hit by one.

“Hard reboot,” 6O gasped. “Resets everything... flushes out any corrupted cached data...”

“Do what you must,” Toriel told 2B and 6O, conjuring a wall of lavender fire behind her to slow the pursuers that would soon be coming. “I will look after you.”

It was hard for 2B to put her trust in Toriel and count on her for protection as old memories bubbled through the haze still filling her mind. She was far from the protector she wished she could be; if she hadn’t been able to protect Toriel, a woman she’d grown to love as a surrogate mother, then how could she have faith that Toriel could protect her? Of course, the queen-in-exile would defend 2B and 6O to her dying breath... but 2B couldn’t allow such a thing to happen.

She pulled herself free of Toriel’s grip and drew her sword. She didn’t have time to reboot—a hard reboot took precious seconds, during which she’d be completely vulnerable. “’I cn t’care’r m’self,” she slurred, trying to will away the wobbling of her legs and the buckling of her knees.

Toriel scooped her up before she could collapse and headed off. “Obstinate child,” 2B heard her mutter. “One of these days, you will be the death of me.”

The words stung 2B more than Toriel could have know. She had been the death of her once... twice. But of course, Toriel couldn’t have known that.

Being carried under the queen-in-exile’s arm was far from a smooth ride; in fact, it was more than enough to agitate the residual nausea causing 2B’s insides to squirm. Trying her best to ignore the piercing discomfort, she squeezed her eyes shut and rebooted.

soon[

The doors to Alphys’ home slid open and Undyne dashed from the elevator platform into the light, expecting Alphys to run to her with such great certainty she could already feel her girlfriend’s pudgy little arms wrapping around her waist. “Alphys! I...”

Silence greeted her.

Silence and...

And dust.

The tiled floor of the lab—the lab, brightly-lit and fully-illuminated but utterly void of people—was smeared with gray-white dust, the occasional spatter of blood (in several colors), and scraps of torn clothing—a large, ragged swatch of dark fabric that might have been Doctor Gaubrieta’s cloak being the most prominent.

The lab was a wreck. The operating table that had stood in the center of the production floor was overturned; Alphys’ desk and computer terminal in one corner was a blackened, smoking wreck; in the other corner, her robotics workstation, still loaded with parts from scrapped machine lifeforms,
was in similar disarray.


There was no response. Her footsteps through the lab were the only sounds she could hear, and their solitary echoes were deafening. The dust on the floor clung to her sodden boots, creating a sickly gray paste; she tried to tread lightly, and though the last thing she wanted to think about was who it all belonged to, she began to fear the worst.

“All… C-Come on… You’re hiding somewhere, a-aren’t you?” Undyne called out, casting her gaze upward to the mezzanine to see if she could spot any sign of life. “That’s a good girl… hide from the bad guys… i-it’s okay… I’m here now…”

She flung out her arms.

“You hear me, Alphys?” she shouted out. “I’m here now!”

Nothing.

“No life signs detected,” Pod 042 chimed in. “Observation: if Doctor Alphys is still alive, she is likely no longer at this site—”

“Shh.” Undyne interrupted, holding out her hand. “She’s got anxiety. She knows how to hide really well. That’s my Alphy!”

“Query: by what mechanism would Doctor Alphys successfully mask her vital signs?”

“She’d science something up. Reverse the polarity of the neutron flow or something.”

“Response: neutrons do not have polarity.”

“Shut up!” Undyne snapped. “That was just an example.” She wracked her brain for an answer.

“Proposal: Captain Undyne should—”

“Shut up.” Undyne snapped again. “I’ve got this.” Enraged, she tore through the laboratory, scattering scraps of machinery across the floor, toppling server towers, exposing every nook and cranny from top to bottom. Tools, projects, even Alphys’ personal belongings—all cast aside as she left no stone unturned. Alphys couldn’t be gone, she had to be here somewhere, hiding or hurt or unconscious.

She just had to find her.

Undyne turned the lab inside-out from top to bottom, but found nothing.

“It is possible that Doctor Alphys may have escaped the laboratory,” Pod 042 offered. “Proposal: Captain Undyne should investigate the surrounding area.”

Undyne took a deep breath and stormed outside, surveying the baking Hotland landscape. It was desolate, as empty and silent as the laboratory. She ran along the perimeter of the building, hanging close to its featureless white walls, roasting in the hot air.

After a fruitless search, Undyne grabbed her cell phone and pulled up Alphys’ number again. She’d call and call and keep calling until Alphys answered. She’d have to answer eventually. Alphys may have often been too stricken with shyness or anxiety to pick up whenever she was called, but she never went anywhere without her phone—she spent more time socializing through a screen than she
Undyne waited with bated breath to hear Alphys’ voice.

Commencing System Check
Memory Unit: Green
Initializing Tactics Log
Loading Geographic Data
Vitals: Green
Remaining MP: 73%
Black Box Temperature: Normal
Black Box Internal Pressure: Normal
Activating IFF
Activating FCS
Initializing Pod Connection
Launching DBU Setup
Activating Inertia Control System
Activating Environmental Sensors
Equipment Status: Green
All Systems Green
Combat Preparations Complete

It seemed like a normal enough boot sequence, but when 2B cracked her eyes open, her visor was still streaming error messages to her, and her insides still felt like they were filled with wriggling worms.

Lightheaded, too; she tried to sit up and the trees spun around her. Still in the forest. The sky was a little darker, but 2B couldn’t tell how much time had passed or how far they’d traveled… or, worryingly, why a hard reboot seemed to have taken more than just a few seconds.

She recalled what Alphys and 6O had told her about how her repairs had rendered her more vulnerable to electromagnetic weapons. She’d never bothered to ask how vulnerable; now she wouldn’t need to.

“2B?” 6O asked, helping her sit up. “You were out for a few minutes. Are you okay?”

2B nodded. “No lasting damage.” At least, none that she knew of. She took stock of the area. Toriel had brought her and 6O off the trail and deeper into the forest, where the trees clung more closely to each other; nearby was a clearing with a frozen-over, snow-covered pond.

Toriel was sitting beside her, huffing and puffing with exertion as she leaned against the trunk of a pine tree. Carrying two androids—nearly 300 kilograms of weight in total—could not have been easy for her.

Somebody was yelling in the distance. No, two people. As 2B’s headache slowly dissipated, she focused on the voices.

“If either of you were still Guards, I would have you stripped of your ranks!”

“What were you thinking? Didn’t you see the broadcast?”

That was Dogamy and Dogaressa, taking turns as they berated… 2B focused on the other voices.
The rogue former guards, among them Peri, Dot, and Ratchet. The whole group stumbled over their words, struggling to get a word in edgewise.

“You do not have the authority to harass subjects of the King!” Dogaressa shouted, silencing the rabble.

“Yes! Only we have that authority! And we do not harass law-abiding subjects!” Dogamy chimed in. “You two were the ringleaders here, weren’t you? You are coming with me. It’s about time you saw the inside of a jail cell!”

With the last word, Dogamy grabbed Peri and Dot by the ears and dragged them off, leaving Dogaressa behind with the others.

“Oh! I nearly forgot!” Dogamy emerged from the trees yet again, still dragging Peri and Dot by the ears, and leaned into his wife, giving her a peck on the cheek. “I love you, darling!”

“I love you, too, sweetie,” Dogaressa said, responding with a kiss of her own. “Take care! I will be right behind you.”

As her husband retreated, Dogaressa gathered the strewn-about bags of groceries and set them down one-by-one in front of Toriel while the remaining former guards waited on the sidelines. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

Toriel nodded. “Yes, thank you. I just needed to catch my breath. Children, are you two all right?” she asked 2B and 6O.

“No,” said 6O, raising wriggling her left hand. “I’ve got a left side, too.”

“I am so, so sorry,” Dogaressa said. “Those delinquents do not speak for us. The Royal Guard enforces the law, not any ideology. Rest assured Captain Undyne will not stand for this behavior, from former or current guards. And neither do we.”

“Thank you,” said Toriel as she pulled herself to her feet. “Especially for getting our groceries.”

“You’re welcome. And you two,” Dogaressa said, helping 2B and 6O up next, “are welcome back here in Snowdin whenever you wish. The law is the law, after all.”

“The law,” 2B said, a little more frostily than she’d intended, “seems to change very suddenly these days.” She knew more than anyone else what it was like to subordinate one’s own will to a higher power regardless of one’s personal desires or beliefs, to live a life beholden to the whims of one’s leaders, following whichever way the wind blew instead of one’s own heart. In a perverse way, one could say the Royal Guards who still hated androids no matter what the law said were more virtuous than those who simply did whatever they were told…

“Yes, well, who knows what goes on in that king’s mind?” Dogaressa asked,shrugging. “They seem to be of two minds about a lot of things these days. Anyway, I have to take the rest of these hoodlums down to the garrison. But if you would like to wait here for a bit, my husband and I would be happy to come back and escort you three to… where is your home, ma’am?” she asked Toriel.

Toriel took a few of her grocery bags. “Not far,” she lied. “The three of us will be fine. But thank you for offering, officer.”

“Oh, it’s no fur off my hide, Miss… I’m sorry, what was your name?”

“I’m… just an old lady who likes her peace and quiet,” Toriel answered. “That is all.”
Dogaressa stroked her chin. “I’m sorry, ma’am. You just remind me of somebody I used to know. Did you set those violet fires near the outskirts of town?”

“Me? No, no,” Toriel insisted. “It must have been some natural phenomenon. I hear potassium chloride can make fire a very vibrant purple. Perhaps a vein of it runs under the town.”

“Oh, I see. There was a monster who had fire magic like that, but she has been gone for a long, long time. She and her husband were Number One in the Nose Nuzzle Championship for three hundred years running…”

6O rested her head on 2B’s shoulder. 2B could swear she heard her sigh and mutter something about ‘nose nuzzle champs.’

“And… and who,” Toriel asked, her voice growing hoarse, “is Number One now?”

“My husband and I!” Dogaressa answered, beaming. “We’re on track to break their streak in just a few decades!”

Toriel was silent for a few seconds. “Good luck!” she finally said, full of false cheer.

“Well,” Dogaressa said, putting an end to the interminable conversation with a polite bow, “you take care of yourself, Your H—er, um, ma’am.”

“And you too, officer.”

At last, one of the surlier ex-guards, an antlered hare of some sort, had had enough. “Traitors!” he shouted out. “You two should be ashamed of yourself! Doesn’t freedom mean anything to you?” His cohorts angrily murmured in agreement.

In the blink of an eye, the agitator was dashing toward 2B and 6O, a hatchet in his hand. “You murderous hunks of scrap metal, I’ll kill you!”

Dogaressa conjured a massive, double-edged battleaxe, but the horned hare was far faster than her and slipped past her before Dogaressa could put herself between him and the androids.

2B’s sword met the ex-guard’s magically-conjured hatchet, but her footing was still unsteady from the residual effects of the EMP. She stumbled backward into the clearing, her boots skidding against the icy sheet covering the pond. The guard, though, all but frothing at the mouth in his rage, kept his footing much more easily as he pushed 2B back.

It was hard enough for her to control her movements on solid ground, but on ice, it was nearly impossible. 2B slipped and fell, sliding across the ice as the ex-guard bore down on her. She rolled out of the way as he swung his hatchet down, the blade sticking in the ice. As the ex-guard struggled to liberate his weapon, 2B lashed out with her leg and drove her boot into his side, snapping a few ribs like twigs and knocking him off his feet. The ice creaked and groaned ominously.

Dogaressa struggled to hold back the other former guards; a tall, bulky machine lifeform slipped past her, its optical sensors glowing a searing red as it closed in on 6O and Toriel.

“No!” 2B struggled to right herself, slipping and sliding on the ice. She couldn’t get traction, no matter how hard she tried. “6O! Mom!”

The machine raised its axe—

“Stop!”
The world came to a stop, 2B’s outcry echoing through the clearing as the only sound in the world; even the snowflakes twirling down from the clouds above froze in the air, hanging like a shimmering curtain. It was just like before—this strange ability, seemingly stopping the flow of time for a scant few seconds, was the same power she’d called upon to save 9S the other night, the same power she’d called upon to step in front of Undyne and parry (and bear the brunt of) Chara’s killing blow. A power she’d never consciously been able to call upon—until now.

Somehow, she’d done it—willfully.

Still, though, 2B struggled to pull herself off the ice. How many seconds did she have before the flow of time resumed? If she spent all of her time struggling—and failing—to reach the machine bearing down on 6O and Toriel before it was too late, how long would it be until she could call upon this ability again?

Even here, even like this, was she powerless?

Frustrated, 2B drew back her arm and threw her sword through the air like a javelin, aiming directly for the machine’s head.

The sword slowed as it flew, coming to a stop nearly a meter away from the surface of the machine’s orb-like head, as if its immunity to the flow of time had begun to fade as soon as it had left 2B’s hand. It hung in the air, impotent.

Now what?

The flow of time resumed, and the sword regained all its momentum immediately, finishing its journey and burying itself in the machine’s head. As sparks flew from the punctures in its chassis, the machine reeled backward and collapsed.

Five seconds.

From start to finish, time had stopped for, from 2B’s perspective, only five short seconds. She’d been lucky those five seconds had been enough.

6O hurried over to the edge of the pond and stepped onto the ice, holding out her arms for balance as she shuffled over to the center of the pond. “2B, are you all right?”

2B nodded, taking 6O’s hand to steady herself, and the two of them inched their way back to land. She had to admit, with her motor systems still a little off from the EMP, she wasn’t sure how easily or how gracefully she could get back to shore, and was thankful for 6O’s assistance if only to make her look less embarrassing.

“You know,” 6O said, smiling, “this would be a lot easier if we had ice skates—”

“You damned android! Glory to monsterkind!”

2B spun on her heel to face her attacker as the antlered hare she’d dealt with earlier bore down on her, angrily swinging his hatchet. Such a rash action immediately robbed her of her footing; to steady herself and keep herself from knocking 6O over, she reached out and clamped onto the ex-guard’s forearm with an iron grip, immobilizing his weapon.

She squeezed, crushing his bones, and with her free hand curled into a fist she punched the side of his jaw, fracturing and dislocating it.

2B hit the surface of the ice with her now-comatose enemy on top of her. The ice let out a perilous
groan. She let go of the ex-guard and scrambled across the ice, her fingertips scrabbling and scraping the surface, as 6O grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her along.

The ice beneath her shattered, plunging her into the pond’s dark, murky depths, and 6O slipped in along with her.

Androids were not meant to swim; they had no buoyancy to speak of whatsoever, and so 2B and 6O sank like stones. Drowning, thankfully, was of little concern as long as there was some way to get out. Androids only needed air as a medium to expel heat from their components; water, too, could do the same thing. In fact, water conducted heat better than air.

The pond wasn’t deep—just a little more than three meters, perhaps—but no matter the depth, 2B had nowhere to go but down. Visibility was nil; with what little light remained above the water filtered through the ice, 2B couldn’t discern anything but vague, dark shapes. Her coat hung above her, suspended in the water, as she struggled to crawl to the edge of the pond, blindly pawing through the slick silt and muck lining the ground; 2B found herself with about as much traction as she’d had on the ice. At her side, 6O tried just as frantically to pull through to little avail. The water pressure, even at such a shallow depth, was stifling—2B felt as though time had stopped yet again.

All she needed to do was pull herself and 6O to the shallower edge of the pond, punch her way through the ice, and climb ashore. How could that be so difficult?

Resounding crack after crack reverberated through the water as the light at the surface of the pond began to brighten ever so slightly; the sheet of ice blanketing the water was breaking apart. Heartened, and with 6O to help her along, 2B climbed the pond’s shallow slope, inching her way along, the water growing lighter and brighter as the pressure lessened.

A thick, heavy paw wrapped around her wrist, and then another one, and another, hauling her the rest of the way. In seconds, 2B found herself on the shore with 6O at her side, coughing the water out of her lungs and stomach. The cold air hit her wet skin, hair, and clothes with a vengeance, chilling her all the way to her core. It was miserable, but at least she wouldn’t have to worry about overheating.

Toriel pulled off 2B’s sodden coat and shed her own cloak, draping it over her; Dogaressa did the same for 6O before venturing into the pond to retrieve the ex-guard who’d fallen in. “Are you okay?” she asked.

2B held up her hand as she continued to heave and retch. She took several minutes to expel all the water from her body. “I’m good,” she finally croaked when she regained the ability to speak, taking hold of 6O’s wet, icy hand as she coughed out the water filling her own lungs.

“M-Me, too,” 6O chimed in, shivering.

Toriel hugged them both. “Oh, thank goodness. I knew,” she said, a twinkle coming to her eye, “you weren’t going to leave me high and dry. Let’s go home.”

As the three of them took off, 2B wondered…

She was grateful for what Toriel had done for her and 6O. Carrying the two of them with an inexplicable burst of raw, adrenaline-fueled strength, helping Dogaressa pull the two of them out of the icy water…

And yet, she couldn’t help but wonder why, even when her own life had been threatened, Toriel had refused to use her fire magic to defend herself.
Undyne waited to hear Alphys’ voice, her heart catching in her throat and her chest growing tighter with every passing second.

There was something she heard first, though.

The muted, tinny sound of Alphys’ ringtone, some catchy anime theme song, filled the air.

Undyne’s phone slipped from her hand and fell to the ground as she slowly turned in the direction of the music.

“H-Hi, uh, you’ve reached the personal phone of the Royal Scientist, D-Doctor Alphys. I’m n-not available r-right now, so p-please, uh, leave a message. I’m probably b-busy with, um, stuff. Th-Thanks for calling!”

No, Undyne mouthed, her vocal chords paralyzed.

Not too far from one of the laboratory’s doors was the tattered, torn-apart remains of a white lab coat, its collar stained deep burgundy. The ground underneath was smeared with a rough patina of dust; next to the labcoat lay a cell phone, its screen cracked. Beneath the cracks, an incoming call notification with Undyne’s name and face on it filled the screen.

As Undyne approached, she felt something crack beneath her foot, and hurriedly stepping back, she found a twisted pair of glasses mangled nearly beyond recognition, shards of its lenses still clinging to the frames like jagged fangs.

“Alphys… this is a hell of a prank to play,” Undyne squeaked, her breath catching in her throat, her voice warbling as she tried to breathe. “You can come out now…”

“Observation: it is possible,” said Pod 042, “that Doctor Alphys left these items behind while fleeing.”

Undyne shook her head, kneeling down and picking up what had once been Doctor Alphys’ round, horn-rimmed glasses, holding the crushed remnants between her thumb and forefinger. “She wouldn’t get far without these,” she said, her voice coming out as a hoarse croak.

She let the glasses slip from her fingers as she reached out and laid a hand on the ground. The dust clung to her damp palm and fingers, coating her blue scales with white, almost flour-like powder.

It was so cold.

It was so cold, but Alphys had always been so warm, so soft and so squishy, and her tummy had always made such a good pillow at the end of a long day, it was so cold and it wasn’t right, it wasn’t right, it wasn’t right…

This couldn’t be happening.

Undyne gasped and wheezed, choking back sobs as hot tears streamed down her cheeks.

They were supposed to be together. They were always together.

Alphys had been one of Undyne’s first real friends, her first best friend, until her responsibilities as Royal Scientist and hidden guilt and crippling anxiety had driven her into seclusion. Undyne had been so glad when she and Alphys had reconnected, had started hanging out again, had started
dating…

How had Alphys not realized the two of them were girlfriends until last night? For such a smart person, she sure could be unobservant sometimes.

Undyne let out an involuntary moan, her voice cracking and creaking as it slipped out of her throat. She tried to take as deep a breath as she could.

Of course, her training had prepared her to handle the knowledge that someone she’d sworn to protect was dead. Through rigorous exercises and role-play she’d taught herself to never give up, to not let the knowledge of failure overwhelm or paralyze her, to keep on fighting and make the bastards pay, no matter what.

It was easy to learn in theory.

And much, much harder to put into practice.

Because, just like it had been Asgore just a few weeks ago, it was Alphys this time.

Alphys had helped Undyne build some of the puzzles that occasionally stymied visitors to Waterfall. Undyne hated puzzles, hated monsterkind’s weird pathological obsession with putting mind games everywhere for each others’ amusement, but making them with Alphys… was fun. Making sand castles with her later was even more fun.

Alphys had shown Undyne her anime—er, historical records. They were fascinating. Humans had had such a rich and varied culture! She’d known humans were the enemy, but deep down… she thought they were pretty cool, despite their bad blood with monsterkind.

Alphys had always been willing to show Undyne new and interesting things. She’d enriched Undyne’s life so much, shown her things she hadn’t known could possibly exist. She was Undyne’s other half.

And now that other half was gone.

And Undyne wanted it back.

She wanted to hug Alphys again. She wanted Alphys to hug her again. She wanted to feel her scaly little claws around her hand again. She wanted to press Alphys close, feel her lips brush against hers, and she wanted to do so much more, too, she wanted to show Alphys how much she loved her in ways she’d never had an opportunity to show her before. She never would now.

Why did she desire the touch of someone who no longer existed?

Undyne threw her head back and let out an anguished, primal howl, screaming out her anger and sorrow at the rocky ceiling far above. The sound of her agony tore at her throat on its way out, caustic as bile, as her outburst echoed across the far-too-silent air. Arcs of lightning flew unbidden from her body, leaping through the air and leaving scorch marks on the walls. She drove her fist into the ground, shattering the rock below.

Her scream trailed off and petered out into a weak, pitiful wail as the last of the air in her lungs ran out, and as she hung her head, her shoulders began to shake, and she began to weep.

Gone…?

Gone like this…?
Without even a chance to say goodbye?

To say ‘I love you’ one more time?

“Incoming transmission from Unit 9S.”

Undyne ignored Pod 042’s announcement. The words didn’t register to her until 9S’s voice came through from its speakers.

“Undyne… Pod 042 just sent me all the data it’s gathered.” His voice was low, hoarse, and carefully-measured, a restrained tremor barely audible beneath his words. “I’m… I’m so, so sorry.”

Undyne tried to answer, say something pithy and cutting, but she couldn’t force the words out. She couldn’t even think of what to say. Her mind was a blank.

“Undyne?” 9S asked. “Are you all right?”

“…Why?” she asked, not in response to 9S’s inquiry, but in general.

Why had she clung to life when Alphys couldn’t?

Why had Alphys crumbled away here when Undyne had held herself together?

If it couldn’t have been neither of them, why hadn’t it been both?

“Alphys…” she whispered, the name caught between her sobs. For a while, it was the only word she could bring herself to say, as if calling out her name would invoke her presence.

9S sat on the other end of the line, silent; at times Undyne felt she could hear a telltale sniffle from Pod 042’s speakers. He wasn’t who Undyne would have chosen to be there, but all the same, she felt just a little less cold from his presence.

Despite everything, 9S was a good kid… and a good friend.

“Undyne, I…” he began, breaking a long stretch of silence. “I’m glad you’re still alive. Come back to Toriel’s.”

“I’m staying here.”

“Don’t do this to yourself, Undyne. We’re here to support you. Anything you need—”

“Can you bring Alphys back?”

9S went silent again.

“I’m staying here,” Undyne repeated.

9S let out a mournful, exhausted sigh. “Take it from me… staying there won’t make you feel any better.”

“Pod,” Undyne ordered, “cease transmission.”

“Undyne—”

Before 9S’s voice cut out, Undyne thought she heard a child fighting back tears in the background of the call.
An indeterminate amount of time later, the world slipped away from her, shrouding everything in darkness and silence.

Chapter End Notes

Square Enix please make a 6O doll. You can make an A2 doll first, I get it, but please just make a 6O doll at some point in the future.
Chapter Summary

Toriel gives Chara a chance to change their ways.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for 7,000 hits and counting! You're all the best and I love every single one of you!

In other news, I got sick this week and had to take a day off from writing this fic to write a fluffy fic about cuddly android werewolves, which you can read here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“The magnetic field from the EMP blast knocked some of the weaker and more conductive replacement parts in your body out of alignment,” 9S explained to 2B as he fished around in her exposed abdominal cavity. It was slow going with only one hand, although he’d wired a scavenged machine lifeform’s arm into his severed shoulder to give him a little more leverage. It looked strange to see the long, spindly piece of naked machinery protruding out of his body. “That’s why you’ve still been feeling such strong aftereffects. Doesn’t look like anything’s broken, though. I’ll just realign whatever I can, and hopefully, you’ll be feeling right as rain after you’ve spent some time in rest mode.”

“Sorry for the trouble,” 2B murmured, laying back in bed. She wished she could say she’d had enough of lying in bed, but it was very soft and comfy. And her head was still throbbing in a way the gentle caress of her pillow dealt nicely with.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Not compared to that time that valve in your coolant system broke,” said 9S. “Or… when you were, well…”

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” he concluded. He kept working on 2B, his intense concentration and silence broken by the occasional “hmm” and “that’s interesting.” Thankfully, his musings didn’t include, “what’s this thing do?” or “oh, shit,” which would have worried her.

“You’ll have to be more careful,” he told 2B after he’d put her chassis back together and sealed her up. “From now on, it’ll be harder to repair you without—”

He stopped himself.

“Without what?” 2B asked, sitting up. Her head still pounded and her gut still twisted, but she could already feel the last lingering effects of the EMP starting to finally fade away.

“Um…” 9S looked away. His visor obscured his eyes, but 2B could sense worry in his hidden gaze, and it didn’t stay beneath his visor. “I-It’s just gonna be harder, that’s all.”
“Why?”

9S’s lower lip trembled. “It… just is, okay?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong!” he snapped. “It’s just a supply-side issue—”

2B reached out and laid her hand on his cheek. Her thumb brushed against the hard traces of his scars. “Nines.”

9S relented, bowing his head as he took 2B’s hand in his. “It’s… Alphys,” he admitted. His voice cracked as he spoke and he slowed down, parceling out his words as if he couldn’t bear to reach the end of his train of thought. “Pod 042 met up with Undyne and they headed for the lab. When they got there, they found…”

Realizing what 9S was about to say before he could say it, 2B sat up and wrapped her arms around him, reaching up to stroke his hair as he buried his face in her shoulder and wept, sobbing uglily as tears leaked out from under his visor and rolled down his cheeks.

2B shed tears of her own, clutching at her forehead with her right hand—the same hand Alphys had made such extensive repairs to that she had all but built it from scratch; fingers Alphys had so dutifully kept in working order burying themselves in her hair. She’d gained so many fond memories over the months of her time with Alphys, of testing new equipment with her, of sitting through her silly cartoons, of helping her struggle through those bouts of self-loathing 2B had understood all too well… and there would be no more new memories. No more new experiences, unless she…

“We could reset,” 2B reminded 9S, choking the words out. It was the last thing she wanted to do—after nearly eleven months, the thought of erasing all the progress she’d made, all the people who’d grown to know her and 9S down here… as bad as the situation had gotten, 2B couldn’t help but feel that resetting now would be like destroying an entire world.

But she offered that choice to 9S, just as she’d offered it to Undyne when Asgore had been killed. That option deserved to be on the table.

“No.” 9S lifted his head. His voice came out as a hoarse croak. “2B, I… I can’t ask that of you. Not knowing how much it hurts you. After all the times you had to erase me… how could I ask you to erase anyone else?”

He removed his visor, revealing pale blue eyes reddened from tears. “Whatever gave you this power… it’s like it played a sick joke on you. Like it looked into your past, saw how many times you had to start my life over again from scratch, and forced you to do it to the entire world. Don’t ever do it again. Don’t ever let it happen again. No matter how justified you think you are… don’t.”

9S’s argument seemed a sharp turn from how he’d assured 2B before she had reset after the encounter with 6E… but he must have been just as horrified as Undyne had been by the prospect that nine months’ worth of life, nine months of growth, of laughter and smiles and burgeoning friendships and family ties, could be erased at the blink of an eye. And he’d seen the toll erasing not even two weeks had taken on her firsthand.

2B understood. 9S was afraid that resetting now would break her. And he was probably right.

But still… if resetting had been the right thing to do after 6E had killed Toriel, then was it really so wrong to do it now?
“Promise me,” 9S said, resting his hand atop 2B’s and squeezing, anchoring her before she could drift off into her thoughts.

“I promise,” 2B replied. “But… you have to promise me something in return, Nines.”

“Anything,” he said.

“I want you… I mean… None of us can guarantee that we’ll always be at each other’s side,” she told him, struggling to line up her thoughts coherently. “Even if everything works out here, one day, we’ll both have to live our own lives, like brothers and sisters do. And I hope to be a part of your life, in some way, large or small, forever… but if I’m not…”

“2B, what are you saying?”

“Promise me you’ll grow up. Promise me that if I ever can’t be there for you, you’ll take care of yourself, 9S. Don’t…”

Her fingers lightly traced the three parallel scars still running across his face—haunting, ghostly reminders of the depths he’d sunk to in his despair over losing her.

“Don’t do this to yourself. Ever again.”

9S took a while to process her words, shifting with discomfort. 2B almost wondered if he would accept what she’d asked of him. But if it was so important to him that she take care of herself, then 2B would hold him to that same standard.

“I promise, 2B,” 9S said. He detached the ungainly machine arm dangling at his side and laid down next to her, intertwining his fingers with hers, the warmth of his palm resting on top of her hand soothing the dull aches and twinges still running through her chassis.

2B closed her eyes and prepared to fall asleep, wishing as she did so that she and death were not such close acquaintances.

Far away, on the other side of the kingdom, 13B was laughing at Chara.

So, what’s next for the Angel of Mount Ebott? What’s next for the Savior of Monsterkind? You’ve dug such a deep grave for yourself, it’s almost as deep as this mountain! she cackled.

Chara tried not to respond to the voice inside their head. Their fingernails dug into the armrests of their throne as they slouched where their father once had sat.

And what was the point of what you did to Undyne? Was that little charade meant to offend me? Or were you just aching to make someone suffer the way you made my friends suffer?

Chara closed their eye and shook their head, willing 13B to pass them by as they would a minor headache.

What a choice target! Didn’t you need Undyne for your grand plan? And you murdered her… what was that supposed to prove? How was that supposed to benefit you? Or did you just need to blow off some steam? Couldn’t have picked a worse victim! 13B giggled. I’m going to enjoy watching you die, Chara. I’m going to enjoy watching you die so much… Just think about how good it will feel when 2B runs her sword into my chest and kills us both! I can’t wait!
13B was right. Chara had sacrificed a lot today and handicapped themselves, all just to commit to a spur-of-the-moment disguise. All they could hope for was that they could spin this to their advantage.

Their speech, one sure to rile up disaffected monsters into taking matters into their own hands, would hopefully do just that—especially now that Chara could, when the time was right, leak the location of the no-longer-fugitive androids to the many guards and ex-guards who were probably eager to take matters into their own appendages.

Or… perhaps it was time to take matters into their own hands. It all depended on who they could trust to be loyal to them.

One thing bothered Chara more than anything else, though…

Toriel was harboring the androids. Chara’s very own mother. And Asriel was there, too. Once again, Chara’s family stood in their way. No, not just in their way. In the way of the entire kingdom.

Something would have to be done about that.

The doors to the throne room swung open. Chara stiffened and sat up straight. Perhaps one of the regional governors had come all this way to yell at them over their stunning betrayal. Perhaps a contingent of Royal Guards had arrived to overthrow them and set up a military junta more to their liking. Neither would be a pleasant scenario.

Much to Chara’s relief, it was Snaca and Snaca alone who trudged through the doorway. The black armor that now made up the majority of her body was streaked with faint smears of grayish-white dust—signs that Chara’s trusty predator had succeeded in her hunt. Her single remaining original arm, uncovered by her armor, still had a slavering serpentine maw where her hand once had been that dripped steaming venom onto the carpet; the prosthetic arm filling her life-support armor was capped by a simple grasping claw harvested from a machine.

“Your Highness.” She bowed and lowered her sleek, angular head in deference, averting her black eyes. Light glittered and danced on her iridescent blue-green scales.

“Lieutenant Snaca.” Chara stood up. “At ease.”

Snaca rose to her feet, wobbling a bit, her legs unsteady.

“Everything all right?” Chara asked.

“It’s fine,” Snaca insisted. “It’s just hard to get used to not having a tail…”

“We can make modifications to your body as needed,” Chara assured her.

“But I only have a few days left. Doctor Alphys said…”

“Never mind what she said, Lieutenant. I have different plans for you.” Chara leaned closer. “Speaking of Doctor Alphys, though, did you…”

“Yes,” Snaca said. “I killed her. And Gaubrieta, too. No witnesses.”

“Good job. Did you have any trouble?”

“Of course not.” Snaca glanced downward, deflecting Chara’s gaze as if she were ashamed of something as her tongue flicked nervously in and out. “I just…”

“Is something wrong?” Chara asked.
“Why did you order me to do that?” she asked. “After everything Doctor Alphys did for me…”

Chara shook their head sadly. “It’s too bad, I agree. But Alphys was a saboteur. The armor and weapons she’s been developing have been nowhere near up to spec, and what’s more, she’s been in constant communication with our enemies.”

“Why wasn’t the Royal Guard made aware of any evidence you—”

“Are you questioning me, Lieutenant?” Chara asked.

Snaca shot to her knees. “No, Your Highness. Not at all, Your Highness. I trust your judgment to the ends of the Earth, my glorious angel.” She sighed. “But… Captain Undyne will be upset.”

“I don’t think,” Chara said, “she will be.”

Snaca shrugged. “She and Doctor Alphys were… close.”

Chara shook their head. “That’s not what I meant. When I was on my way to make my speech,” they said, their voice dripping with false sympathy, “I’m afraid… she attacked me. I feared for my life and…”

Snaca’s iridescent scales grew dull and ashen. Her jaw dropped, but there was no fearsome look to the glistening fangs in her mouth. “You mean…”

“I suspect she and Alphys had been planning a coup on behalf of the androids for quite some time. I… I had no choice but to kill her.” Chara let out a mournful sigh. “Pity. She was a brave, strong monster. But she made her choice. She chose to defy our people’s destiny.”

“You… You killed…” Snaca began to tremble. “Undyne… my… my…”

Chara crouched before Snaca, running their hand softly down the smooth, cold scales of her forehead. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant.”

“We… We were… I-I…”

Chara recalled the brief moment of camaraderie Snaca and Undyne had shared in the hospital. The two obviously had a history, and it was not an entirely acrimonious one. “I’m sorry. I wish it didn’t have to be that way, but… I don’t think she ever forgave me for what I did to King Asgore. She just couldn’t help herself. It’s too bad.”

“Too bad,” Snaca repeated, dazed. “I told her to believe in you…”

Chara kept their smile to themselves. 13B was wrong. Chara hadn’t needed Undyne for their grand plan, at least not anymore. That was why they’d felt so little remorse when they had decided to snuff out her life. There was another monster in this kingdom who had the raw strength of will and sheer determination to handle absorbing the power of seven black boxes—one who Chara now knew was wholly devoted to them and their cause.

Some ancient humans had once believed that Earth had been a paradise for its first two inhabitants. But paradise had been lost when one of them had been given forbidden fruit by a serpent; displeased, their creator deity had cast both humans out into a world of hardship and pain.

Soon, Chara would turn that old myth on its head. Soon, the forbidden fruit would be given to the serpent, ushering in a new world free of the diseases of the old.
But before the two of them could become as gods, though, there was some unfinished business Chara had to take care of.

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Toriel swaddled 6O in a thick blanket and gave her the cozy armchair next to the hearth, and with a snap of her furry fingers lit a pale violet fire in the fireplace. The poor girl was still cold as ice, even after a hot bath—she simply didn’t have the same tolerance for extreme temperatures that 2B and 9S did, and falling into that pond had done her no favors.

9S had told Toriel there was no immediate danger to 6O—compared to overheating, being under heated was far from a life-threatening concern, as long as her coolant didn’t start to freeze solid and block her circulatory system—but she certainly looked miserable.

“There we go, dear,” Toriel told her. “Do you—”

The fire sputtered and died.

Excuse me.” Toriel knelt before the hearth, stuck her paw in, and waved it over the wood. The fire lit itself anew, casting its dancing lavender glow across the room. She watched it for a few seconds, daring it to defy her.

Toriel’s fire magic was usually nothing but dependable. No matter what time of day it was, no matter how tired she was, she could always get a spark going at the very least. Perhaps she was getting old? No, she didn’t age anymore. Once Asriel had passed away, she and Asgore had both hit a plateau, and even the boy’s miraculous revival hadn’t set that process back in motion.

Come to think of it… when those former Royal Guards had attacked, Toriel hadn’t been able to summon any flames to defend herself and 6O or to assist Dogaressa. Why?

Toriel wondered, had she been too frightened to reveal her identity? Had she worried that if Dogaressa had discovered that the “hermit” she’d helped was really the long-lost queen… she would have responded cruelly? Would she have berated Toriel for turning her back on her people, abandoning her duties as queen, and fleeing like a coward?

What could Toriel have said in response to that?

She knew in her heart it wasn’t true. She had left Asgore on the strength of her convictions. He had been so willing to wage war in his grief, yet too afraid to commit to it; he’d pledged to wait as long as it took for seven humans to fall into the mountain so that seven souls could be harvested—when all he had really needed to do had been to take one soul to pass through the Barrier, collect six more on the surface, and free the kingdom from the outside.

Toriel had known all along that Asgore had been promising a day that would never come. He was the coward—but he had made his cowardice seem like strength; his grieving people had lapped it up. She’d left him so she could protect the innocents who would fall into the mountain, people like Chara who would need nurturing and care, from him and from his kingdom.

It was not cowardice that kept Toriel bound to her exile, but duty. Yet…

Yet it could still feel so, so much like cowardice at the same time—no matter what Toriel told herself.

As she struggled to light the fire, Toriel wondered if she would ever truly be able to protect her children.
At last, the fire stayed lit. “Ah, there we go!” Toriel exclaimed, standing up and briskly rubbing her paws. “Do you feel warmer now?” she asked 6O.

The girl was already fast asleep. Toriel envied how easily those androids could do that. It seemed to be as quick and as simple as flipping a switch. In fact, it probably was. Androids were so fortunate. They would never succumb to insomnia if they didn't want to. They never had to find themselves counting down the seconds as they stretched into hours, waiting for sleep that would never come while keeping their darkest thoughts at bay.

“Penny for your thoughts, mommy dearest?” Flowey asked from his perch on top of the dining room table in dirt-smeared clay pot.

Toriel’s less-than-happy thoughts soured further. To find that vile weed in her home had certainly been a shock. Worse, to hear that creature call himself her son… as if her son had not been right here with her for the better part of a year now!

Toriel leaned against the table, looking Flowey right in the eyes. To say he looked like a very unhealthy flower was an understatement. She’d seen flowers that hadn’t been watered in weeks that looked more lively.

“You,” she said, reflecting on all the times she’d caught him harassing innocents here in the Ruins. “You are playing a cruel prank, and I’ve half a mind to toss you out the door into the cold.”

“Aw, shucks, you really don’t believe me?” Flowey asked.

“No. Because right now,” Toriel said, “Asriel is asleep in his bed.”

“You think he’s asleep right now?” Flowey asked. “Anyway, as I’ve tried to explain to you, you old cow—I mean, Mom—I am Asriel’s missing half. The id to his superego—”

“Do not pretend you know anything about psychology,” said Toriel. “You are embarrassing yourself.”

“Look, I have everything that belongs to Asriel except his soul and his body! And I can prove it, too! Asriel’s favorite book is *The Little Prince*. When he was six you got him a drawing of a sheep as a birthday present because it was the only thing he would ask for. You refused to teach him the names of all eight planets in the solar system because one of them was ’a dirty word.’ Asriel was the one who taught Chara how to knit so they could make a sweater for Dad without you finding out. It took a year. When Chara died—”

“Stop!” Toriel had to restrain herself from pounding on the table. “You may have his memories,” she all but shouted, “but…”

Toriel closed her eyes, sighed, and dropped the volume of her voice to a furious whisper, lest she wake anybody. “But there is more to people than their memories. You have none of my child’s compassion. None of his kindness. You are rude, cruel, vindictive, and obnoxious. You are nothing like him. So pardon me if I doubt your… sincerity.”

“That’s because I don’t have a soul,” said Flowey, a bitter, bleak grin splitting his ruined, half-burned face. “I’m… incomplete.”

“What do you mean?” Toriel asked.

“I remember when I first woke up,” Flowey said. “After… I died. I was alone. I was in this… strange shape. And I was afraid.
“Eventually, I found my way to Dad. I told him who I was and what had happened to me. He believed me, and… he was overjoyed. He was… emotional. But not me,” Flowey said. “For some reason… not me.

“I soon realized I didn’t feel anything about anyone. My compassion had disappeared—and believe me, it’s not like I wasn’t trying to feel. I wasted weeks with that stupid king, vainly hoping I would feel something… but, no. Nothing. Nada.

“I thought you could make me whole again,” said Flowey. “But it was no different. Without so much of a trace of love or compassion in my body… I couldn’t be the child you knew and loved.”

“I do not remember this,” Toriel growled, instantly skeptical of Flowey’s claims.

“Ah, yes, that’s because I grew so despondent, I took my own life. Or, well, tried to.” Flowey sighed. “I found myself with strange powers… that allowed me to turn back time to the moment I’d first woken up whenever I died. Of course, doing so would erase everybody’s memories except for my own.”

“Wow,” said Toriel. “That seems quite convenient for your story. I am sorry, Flowey, but I do not believe your fanciful tale.”

“Ask 2B,” Flowey said. “She can vouch from me. That ability to turn back time… she, er, inherited it from me. Although if I were less charitable, I’d say she stole it. In fact, she’s used it twice already. Anyway, since I can’t turn back time… well, the next time I die, it’ll be the end.”

Toriel crossed her arms. “And good riddance.”

“It’s gonna be soon,” Flowey said.

“I suppose it will be,” said Toriel. Flowey certainly did look days away from death.

A deep bell tolled, its sonorous ringing echoing in the air. Somebody had rung the doorbell at the end of the long tunnel that ran under Toriel’s home to Snowdin. (She’d had it installed a few months ago, since she’d never been able to predict when 2B and 9S would stop by to keep her company.)

Toriel wondered who it could have been. Of all the monsters in the Underground, only four knew that anybody lived here. Five, counting Emil, whom Toriel was not sure counted as a monster. And as she wondered, she worried.

However, she welcomed the distraction from Flowey’s fabrications, and so she trudged into the basement and plodded down the cold stone corridor to the mighty door that separated her from the rest of her kingdom.

Toriel answered the door. “Who is it?” she asked, opening it only a fraction of a centimeter, just barely enough for the howling wind outside to grow audible.

“Mother… it’s me.”

The voice was one she’d recognize anywhere.

*Chara.*

Toriel’s heart skipped a beat. Why, after what they had done, would they come here? How did they know that she lived here? And, most worrisome… how much more did they know? Did they know who else lived here?
She had known right away that Chara’s newest proclamation had not been what it had seemed. Chara was not the type to surrender. She remembered teaching them chess once, a long, long time ago, and when she had gotten them in checkmate, Chara had spent the next half-hour carefully examining the board and testing every move at their disposal to find a way out before storming out in a huff. They wouldn’t play chess with her for months afterward, choosing instead to match wits with Asgore or Asriel or the Royal Guards, people they could easily beat.

Life was not like chess. In real life, a checkmated king was the most dangerous piece on the board.

Toriel half-opened the door, just wide enough for her to squeeze past it, and shut and locked it behind her. The wind ruffling her fur and the snow engulfing her slippers chilled her to the bone. The sky was pitch-black.

Chara took a hurried step back, their eye widening in shock. Their head stuck out of a long, thick cloak that billowed in the wind, making them seem so small. They hadn’t grown an inch since the last time Toriel had seen them—they never had. The only part of Chara that looked any different from the child from the surface Toriel had taken in as her own was the golden flower covering their right eye… and the grim look on their face.

“It’s really you,” Chara whispered, their words almost lost in the wind. Their dark cloak stood out against the snow, but vanished against the sky; their pale face seemed to float in midair.

Toriel nodded. “It—”

Her words caught in her throat.

Chara, her child. As much her child as Asriel was. As loved as Asriel was. The fey child who’d fallen from the surface, withdrawn yet radiating a quiet intensity. Her child… and her ex-husband’s murderer.

“It is,” Toriel finally answered. “What brings you here?”

“I want to see Asriel.”

“No.” The word came automatically from Toriel’s mouth.

Chara reeled back as if struck. “‘No?’” they repeated.

“No,” Toriel repeated more firmly this time, crossing her arms. “How on Earth could you ask that of me? Have you no shame?”

“He’s my brother—”

“I know who you are really here for. 6O. The girl Asgore—your father—gave his life to protect. I can’t fathom why you’ve had your sights on that poor thing—”

“I have to see Asriel.”

“And what makes you think he wants to see you?” Toriel asked, further incensed. “Do you think he doesn’t know what you did? I wanted to hide the truth from him, but I couldn’t. He knows you murdered your father— his father.”

“I didn’t!” Chara shouted out, their carefully-composed facade falling away, clutching their cloak tighter around themselves like a child clinging to a security blanket. “I did not murder him! I tried to spare him! I told him to surrender! He forced me to—”
“Chara—”

“And besides—I swear on my grave, Mother,” Chara said, “I did not strike the killing blow. It was someone else—some thing else—that guided my hand. The original consciousness of this body—”

“Chara.”

Chara fell silent.

“So,” Toriel asked, struggling to keep her voice level as indignant rage built up within her, “did Asgore force you to strike the killing blow? Or did your hand move of its own accord?”

“I—”

Toriel knew the sound of another excuse coming. “Yes, or no, Chara?”

“I… I…” Chara’s eye flitted from side to side.

“Either way,” Toriel concluded, “does it make a difference? Either way, the chain of events that led to his death is your responsibility. And for what? For you to take his throne? So you could stand where he once stood? So you could fan the flames he lit?”

Chara lowered their head, failing to meet Toriel’s gaze. Toriel almost felt a twinge of guilt. She’d never realized how much anger she’d bottled up inside over Asgore’s murder, or how easily it could all come pouring out.

“Killed over a throne. A crown.” Toriel let out a bitter laugh. Chara had claimed Asgore’s throne as his sole living heir and the sole living member of the Dreemurr family…but neither claim was correct. By the laws of succession, both she and Asriel were in line ahead of Chara to take the throne in the event of Asgore’s passing. If she’d wanted to, she could have contested Chara’s claim and ended all this madness long ago…

Would that have been a more noble duty than the one she’d taken upon herself here?

Chara picked up on Toriel’s train of thought. They had always been quite perceptive. “If you want my crown,” they replied testily, “then come and claim it. Or are you too frightened to face the subjects you abandoned for centuries?”

Toriel clutched at her chest. “H-How dare…”

“You ran here when Father needed you the most. When your kingdom needed you the most.”

“Do you know why I came here?” Toriel snarled, struggling to contain her ire. “Every soul Asgore harvested—every heart he tore from living, innocent bodies—they passed through here first! They traced your footsteps, Chara! I had to stay here, to meet them when they came this way, to protect them! From people like your father…and from people like you!”

And I failed every time, Toriel refrained from saying. Six… Six androids—no, six children, because anything that had only lived for two or three years was a child, even if it was born fully grown—frightened and alone, all of them refusing her protection and meeting bloody ends, always leaving her behind, always leaving her bereft and bereaved.

Chara pressed on. “You… Father… you’re both cowards. Nothing you’ve done has been for the glory of monsterkind—merely to soothe your anguished, fragile consciences and indulge in your perverse sentimentality! You’re a disgrace!”
“What is wrong with having a conscience? What is wrong with sentimentalism?” Toriel asked. “What makes it perverse to cherish life?”

“Life?! You talk about cherishing life while this kingdom rots?! Our people,” Chara said, their voice growing low and quiet as they struggled to regain their composure, “are entitled to their freedom. At any cost.”

“And you need one more soul for that, yes, I know. But 2B, 9S, 6O—why is it so necessary that it come from one of them? Only one soul is needed to cross the Barrier, and—”

“Humanity has been extinct for thousands of years. YoRHa has been wiped out. There is not a single living thing on Earth or below it,” Chara explained, “with a soul that resonates in the exact way needed to counteract the Barrier. The only salvation rests in one—just one—of the three androids you’re harboring. And everyone in the kingdom knows it. And so I beseech you… do the right thing. Offer up just one for sacrifice.”

“No,” Toriel said.

“Do they really mean that much to you?” Chara asked.

“They are as much my children as you are, Chara,” Toriel said. “I will defend them to my dying breath.”

“Does the fate of your people really mean so little to you that one life cannot be spared toward it?”

“If you truly cared about saving our kingdom and our people,” Toriel said, “you would know that there is another way. And you would be willing to take that path.”

“What?”

Toriel leveled a finger at Chara’s chest. “You.”

“What?”

“True bravery is being willing to sacrifice yourself for others, not forcing others to sacrifice themselves for you. If you truly wished to gather seven souls and break the Barrier, you would gladly offer up your own. You already have everything you need—why, why, Chara, do you insist on causing so much unnecessary pain to people who have suffered so much already?”

“I can’t sacrifice myself,” Chara insisted. “The new world will need someone to guide it—”

“And it should be you?”

“Yes!” Chara clenched their fists.

“Does your ego know no bounds? Leave us at once!”

“Very well, then.” Chara suppressed a snarl, fished around in their cloak, and threw something gold and glittering onto the snow. “If I were you, Mother, I would take Asriel and run. I don’t want either of us getting hurt.”

“You mean you do not want to kill us the way you killed your father,” Toriel corrected.

Chara brushed off Toriel’s words. “Take care of yourself, Mother. Yourself and Asriel.”

With that barbed comment, Chara turned their back to Toriel and stomped off.
And Toriel felt the pain of another child leaving her, never to return. A pain she had felt so many times over.

Because, despite everything, it was still Chara.

After so many centuries forcing Asgore to wallow in solitude and hating him for his words and deeds, Toriel had forced him to atone for his sins alone, to die alone. Many of her last words to Asgore back then had not been so different from her last words to Chara now.

Asgore, the man who’d betrayed everything his family had stood for, the man who’d turned his back on everyone he loved for empty bravado and promises of revenge, the man who had taken centuries to find his conscience and stand up for what was right… at the cost of his life. A man who’d been braver and more principled than Toriel had given him credit for—although now, she could only give that credit to his dust, wherever it was. Asgore had deserved more than that. He had deserved to hear her say that, instead of hoping she would grant him forgiveness in his sacrifice and martyrdom.

By driving Chara away here, now, was she condemning them, her child, to meet the same lonely fate?

“All you have to do is say that you are sorry!” Toriel called out after them, her voice ringing in the cold air. Chara gave no sign that they had heard her. “All you have to do…”

All they had to do was come back. Set aside their ego, set aside their megalomania, apologize for the wrongs they had done, and come back to their family.

And yes, 2B and 9S, too, were their family now.

If Chara couldn’t do that… then perhaps they were truly lost forever.

Toriel watched Chara walk away until their the amorphous, shifting silhouette of their hooded cloak vanished into the snowy wind.

She knelt down and picked up the object Chara had thrown on the ground, her heart pounding.

It was a gold, heart-shaped locket, and when she thumbed it open, Toriel heard the ringing tones of a music box begin to play. Etched into one side, in Chara’s neat handwriting, were three words:

*Best friends forever.*

Asriel’s locket.

She remembered like it had been yesterday: commissioning the kingdom’s most skilled jeweler to craft this locket and its twin to commemorate the one-year anniversary of Chara’s adoption into the Dreemurr family. She remembered the look on Asriel’s face when he’d opened his up for the first time, the light in his eyes. And Chara, when they had been given theirs—a matching inscription in Asriel’s handwriting on its inside cover—had simply given a wry grin and joked about expecting chocolate. But they had never stopped wearing it—and even now it rested in their grave with the corpse of their original body.

Toriel fell to her knees, the snow dampening the hem of her gown, and clutched the locket to her chest, shedding all the tears she’d held back.

*Chara… my child… where did I go wrong? When did I not do enough for you? Who made you so ruthless, so obsessive, so uncaring… and why couldn’t our best efforts mend your broken soul?*
Toriel composed herself, tucked away the locket, and headed back through the tunnel. When she returned home, she held the locket in front of Flowey.

“If your bizarre story is true and you really are Asriel, tell me, Flowey, what is written inside here?” she asked.

Flowey only needed to examine the locket for a split second. “Best friends forever,” he said. “In Chara’s handwriting.”

Toriel let the locket sit in her paw, its golden contours throwing off the pale violet light from the fire roaring in the hearth.

“Of course,” Flowey added, “I would know my own locket out of a hundred thousand others just like it.”

“’Go and look again at the roses…’” Toriel found herself quoting.

“…You will understand now that yours is unique in all the world,’” Flowey finished.

Toriel squeezed her eyes shut, letting her paw fall to her side and the locket dangle from her fingers. “Well, then, I…”

She couldn’t hold the iron edge in her voice.

Flowey’s story could only be true.

“You know… I’m tired of being this way,” Flowey said. “I’m tired of being this way… Mom. That’s why I’m here.”

Mom. Toriel gently took one of Flowey’s shriveled leaves and ran her thumb across its hard, brittle edge as she held it in her paw. It was an unconscious sympathetic reaction to his words.

She wondered how it felt to Flowey. Did he really feel nothing but a hollow, empty longing for what he knew he should feel? If he couldn’t feel compassion for others, and he couldn’t feel others’ compassion for him, it was no wonder the poor thing had turned out the way he had.

“I’m sorry for the way I’ve behaved. I don’t actually like who I am or who I’ve become. I want to be my old self. I wish I could feel the way I used to feel again. I wish I had…” Flowey trailed off, sighing. “Asriel… I wish I had his soul. My soul, that is. Our soul. But all I have to offer your Asriel in return is my memories, and… not all of them are good. It’s not a fair trade. So… I’m really not sure what to do. I want to be Asriel again, but… I don’t know how to do that.”

Toriel didn’t, either. Perhaps nobody in the world did. But she would do whatever she could to find out.

She patted the soil around Flowey’s stem. “Your soil is too dry,” she said. “And your roots are too close to the surface. I think you would be a little more comfortable if you were planted properly, my child.”

With that, she left to get a trowel and a watering can.

Chara returned to their throne late that night, their heart boiling with a tumultuous melange of sorrow, anger, and frustration. It had been years since they’d been lectured by their mother, but they had
never seen her mete out such a scolding with so much righteous indignation.

Toriel was being so obstinate. Was she intending to get herself killed, like Asgore? Was she really so obsessed with her own sense of righteousness that she would keep Asriel in harm’s way? How could she claim to be anything more than a selfish hypocrite? How could she have rejected Chara so utterly, so vehemently?

Would Chara never feel her arms lovingly wrapped around them again? Would Chara never share hot cocoa with her or stand beside her over a stove or feel her draw their blankets up to their chin at the end of a long day? If Chara continued to pursue the righteous path… would it take from them all that remained of the few people on this wretched planet they had ever loved?

Snaca, Chara’s new right hand, their archangel, awaited them at the side of their throne, standing at attention, ever true in her devotion.

“Your Highness,” she greeted them, bowing. “Did you get what you went out for?”

“No,” they mumbled. “No, I did not, Lieutenant.” They wrapped their cloak tighter around their slender frame. “We might as well not waste any more time. Let’s gather the six souls we’ve already collected and prepare to claim the se—”

“King Chara!”

Before the great double doors to the throne room could swing closed, they burst open again, and eight monsters—four well-dressed in ornate formalwear, four wearing the heavy YoRHa armor that members of the Royal Guard, per Chara’s latest ruling, were no longer permitted to wear. The four regional governors of Snowdin, Waterfall, Hotland, and New Home—and accompanying them, four of what little remained of the Royal Guard’s senior staff.

Chara checked their watch. It was nearly midnight. They faked a yawn. “Well past your bedtimes, I would imagine,” they said to their uninvited guests. “What brings you here?”

The governor of Hotland cleared their throat. “Er, um, we are here to… politely petition you to abdicate your throne and cede all executive, ah, authority to a provisional government.”

“Oh? Interesting.” Chara picked at their nails. “Which provisional government?”

“Ours,” said the governor of Waterfall.

“I see. And if I do not abdicate the throne?”

“Then we are here,” one of the Royal Guards said, “to impolitely ask you to abdicate.”

Chara began to laugh.

Undyne wasn’t sure how she’d managed to fall asleep, but she woke up in Alphys’ lab curled up on the floor, her knees tucked into her chest and her arms wrapped around her shins. Her eyes still burned and her heart still ached, and the ache traveled all the way through her chest and up her throat.

She reached out, fumbling blindly as she cracked open her bleary eyes. “Alphy,” she murmured, “I just had one hell of a nightmare…”
Her fingers caught on the cuff of Alphys’ sleeve and she realized immediately that it was empty.

Just a glance at the ragged, dusty remains of Doctor Alphys was enough to remind Undyne that the horror she had encountered had not been a dream, much as she wished it had been. The lab didn’t look any different. It was just as quiet and empty as it had been before.

Alphys was really gone.

Undyne pulled herself into a sitting position. She clutched at Alphys’ labcoat and held it close like a security blanket. She could smell the dried bloodstains on the torn collar, but beneath that, subtly, almost imperceptibly… it still smelled like her.

Pod 042 floated beside her. “Good morning, Captain Undyne.”

“What’s good about it?” she mumbled, not expecting an answer.

“Captain Undyne has been in rest mode for nine hours, forty-seven minutes, and twelve seconds. Observation: in light of the attempt on Captain Undyne’s life and Doctor Alphys’, it is imperative to find a more secure place to stay. Proposal: Captain Undyne should rendezvous with Units 2B, 6O, and 9S in the Ruins.”

How’s that for grief counseling? Undyne thought bitterly. “What a good friend to have. You pods are something else.”

A cold metal claw rested on Undyne’s shoulder. “Response: this support unit has extremely limited capacity to gauge the psychological and emotional status of non-synthetic lifeforms. Due to standard YoRHa protocol regarding the prohibition of emotions, tactical support units are ill-equipped to offer emotional support as well.” Pod 042 wrung its metal hands almost apologetically. “This support unit would like to offer its apologies… and condolences.”

Undyne wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“This support unit requires data regarding current objectives in order to provide efficient support. Proposal: Captain Undyne should state her intentions.”

Undyne looked down on the ragged coat draped over her hand.

This was all her fault.

She had been the one who’d decided not to go into hiding with Toriel and the androids. She had decided to go back to Chara and remain at her current position to sabotage them. Alphys had followed in her wake with all the loyalty she’d expected… and this was where that path had led.

Alphys was gone because of her.

Everything had gone so, so wrong. What could Undyne possibly do to make things right?

She glanced up at the balcony overhead, her eye catching on the duffel bag leaning against the railing—her overnight bag—and the glimmering white sword propped up at its side.

2B…

“Proposal: Captain Undyne should—”

Undyne stood up, letting the coat fall to the floor. “2B. I’m going to rendezvous with 2B.”
“Affirmative. The position of Unit 2B’s black box signal has been marked. Proposal: Captain Undyne should procure one of Doctor Alphys’ modified visors to facilitate sharing visual data from this support unit. Doing so will dramatically increase Captain Undyne’s combat effectiveness.”

Undyne climbed the stairs up to the mezzanine and took 2B’s white sword, then returned to the lab floor, making her way to the secret hangar Alphys had shown her early yesterday morning. She didn’t know how to unlock and open the sliding door by herself, but the honed, sharpened blade of the Virtuous Contract, sharp enough to slice through a machine lifeform’s chassis with ease, made short work of it.

Behind the door were the two incomplete suits of mobile armor she’d seen yesterday. Two suits of YoRHa heavy armor, one tailored for Undyne, the other made for 2B’s comparatively-petite frame; the former had an outer layer of blue and white armor; the latter had nothing but a pair of short white wings attached to its backpack.

“Analysis: this equipment appears to be a set of heavily-modified—”

“I know, pod.” Undyne noticed the tags on both sets of armor. Name tags. Why hadn’t Alphys shared these with her? Too embarrassed, maybe?

She plucked off the tag on the blue suit and read it.

**MOBILE ARMOR ZGMF-X19A INFINITE JUSTICE**

And as for the winged suit…

**MOBILE ARMOR ZGMF-X02B CELESTIAL BEING**

“Oh my god, Alphys,” Undyne whispered, tears spilling down her cheeks, “you dork…”

Tossing the name tags aside, Undyne laid her hand on the cool, metallic surface of her armor. A spark ran from her skin to the armor, playing across its sleek panel lines as it sank into the metal.

With this… with 2B’s help… she was going to make it all right.

Chapter End Notes

...And now we get the mecha suit I promised you all so many chapters ago.

Here it is, in case you missed it:

Commission for @wmm_ebooks #Undertale #mecha

pic.twitter.com/XwZr2JuDJX

— Marsh (@menacing_marsh) September 28, 2018
[E] The Broken Ouroboros

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, Snaca reflects on her faith in Chara, while 2B makes a leap of faith of her own.

Chapter Notes

So this chapter ended up about a day or two late because Toby Fox basically just fucking dropped Undertale 2 on us out of nowhere, holy shit!

In related news:

these 2B cameos are out of control #DELTARUNE #NieRAutomata pic.twitter.com/LBDOYqLO54

— wellmanicuredma'am (@wmm_ebooks) November 1, 2018

Lieutenant Snaca of the Royal Guard knew that King Chara was testing her faith.

Not just her faith—but the faith of the entire kingdom.

They were the Angel. They were the one of whom the prophecy had spoken, the one who would overturn the Underground and bring their people to the sunlight. They had overturned falsehoods and brought strength to the kingdom. Yet they had also, just today, thrown away so much of what they had worked for. They had surrendered when they had been so close to victory… why?

It was not about weakness. It was not about giving up. It was not about betrayal.

It was about trust.

Chara wanted to know who among their people were truly devout, and who would turn their backs in the face of disillusionment. They had a divine plan, and throwing aside their army and welcoming the enemy into their midst was merely a part of a larger picture of freedom and salvation.

This was the path of gods. And Snaca, knowing that in her heart she had stepped off that path three times too many, strove to remain on it.

Her first misstep, moments before King Asgore’s speech when she had failed to recognize Chara’s radiance and had attacked them out of duty to the old king…

Her second misstep, failing to capture 9S and falling victim to 2B’s sword, letting her lord down when triumph had been easier to grasp than ever before…
Her third misstep, when she had—

Snaca’s sword clashed with the glittering morningstar of one of the other senior
members of the Royal Guard. She recognized him—Commander Alder Quint of
Waterfall, her old master. His beady black eyes glistened from amid a forest of prickling
spines.

If he chose to defy Chara, then Snaca would defy him. Wherever his loyalties lay,
Snaca’s lay with the savior of the kingdom, the angel who had seen the other side of the
mountain and the other side of death, not with mere mortals with delusions of grandeur
who thought they knew better.

Blood spattered the floor, drying and turning into gray-white dust before it could seep
into the elegant violet carpet leading to Chara’s throne.

Lieutenant Commander Pyral of Hotland fell next, and finally Lieutenants Stolas and
Fenric of New Home. The three of them only managed to land one blow on her, cutting
a ragged gash across her snout, before they were dispatched.

The throne room grew deathly quiet as the engineers of the coup, the four regional
governors who were meant to operate under Chara, awkwardly stood before the site of
the carnage.

Chara crossed their arms. “Didn’t think things would go that way,” they asked the
governors, “did you?”

“T-This is insane,” stammered the regional governor of Snowdin, a thin and rather-
sickly monster who, oddly enough, did all his governing over the sparsely-populated
region while basking in the comfortable heat of Hotland. “We—”

Chara held up their hand to silence the monster. “Lieutenant Snaca—or should I say,
Captain Snaca—arrest these conspirators at once.”

*Captain.* That was right. Since the entire senior staff save for Snaca had turned traitor
and had now been dealt with, she remained as the sole highest ranking member of the
Royal Guard, filling its power vacuum.

Snaca dutifully arrested the governors, and she and Chara spent the rest of the night,
well into the early hours in the morning, extracting confessions from the four governors.

How they had decided, upon hearing the casualty reports, to remove Chara from power
in order to prevent further loss of life.

How they had coerced and threatened Chara into passing those three executive orders as
pretext to overthrow them for defying the ‘will of the people.’

As Snaca and Chara had hounded them, piling on the pressure, the governor’s stories of
the harm they had threatened Chara with and the other ways in which they had
blackmailed them into betraying the kingdom had grown more and more elaborate until
their testimony matched Chara’s perfectly.

And of course, mortals lied, but angels did not. So of course, the governors were telling
the truth when Chara said they were.

Snaca felt no pity for them as she took them to the dungeons deep within the bowels of
the castle. Those who defied the will of the divine had made their decision. She had come so close to being one of them… but she had come to the light just in time.

She just felt sorry for Undyne… her friend, her idol, the woman she’d followed since the two of them had been little girls living together in the same orphanage.

Undyne… Undyne, always one step ahead of her, always stronger, always slipping and falling into greater fortune. She had trained under Gerson Boom, the legendary Hammer of Justice himself, while Snaca had settled for Alder Quint. She was taken under Asgore’s wing, while Snaca had settled for chasing the Royal Guard wherever they want. She skyrocketed to Captain, while Snaca stayed perpetually hanging from the rungs beneath her. Two girls born with nothing, but one somehow having the privilege of prodigious luck…

Undyne had always been the strongest, climbed the highest… and because of her lack of faith, she had now fallen the farthest. She had no one to blame for that but herself.

But even so… poor Undyne. Snaca had never wanted their rivalry to end like—

One of the governors—the weak and snivelly one who administered to Snowdin—lashed out as Snaca led him to his cell. A single bolt of magic, formed into a simple arrowhead, drove itself into her chest.

Swatting the arrowhead aside, Snaca wasted not a moment in striking the rebellious monster across the cheek with the back of her hand. The governor was flung across the cell and collided with the wall, slumping onto the floor to reveal a spiderweb of cracks behind him.

An electric ache ran up and down her chest, but Snaca paid it no heed. It would take more than that to kill her.

When she returned to the throne room, Snaca found that Chara had gotten back to work. Snaca knew that Chara would not abandon the future of this kingdom so easily. No matter how many new laws were in the way, the final soul needed to break the Barrier would not be out of reach.

After all, Snaca mused… what were laws to the kingdom’s absolute authority, anyway? Surely Chara, a divine being of prophecy, knew they were above such petty things… as were their servants.

Chara laid their hand on Snaca’s shoulder. Their touch was tender and kind, and in their single scarlet eye Snaca could see the vast love Chara had for their kingdom and the overwhelming determination they had to see it through.

Chara reached out and traced the scar on Snaca’s snout. Their fingertip was soft and warm. “Captain… you’re injured.” Concern filled their voice. Snaca’s heart fluttered.

Another twinge and a hot pain like acid coming up her throat ran through her chest. Snaca winced, thumped on her marred breastplate, and grinned, showing off her fangs with pride as she tapped down her nervousness. “It’s nothing,” she said. “I don’t think anyone could hurt me enough to kill me now. I’m with you to the end, Your Highness.”

Whatever Chara did… Snaca had the honor and the privilege to help them see it through. Faith, as Snaca’s foster mother—that crazy old crone, always babbling about
prophecy and destiny—had always told her, had its rewards.

Yet Snaca felt a pit growing in the stomach she no longer had, because yesterday, she had broken Chara’s trust in her—although they didn’t know it yet.

“Good,” said Chara. “Come… let us collect the six souls.” They stroked their chin, musing silently. “As for the seventh… Captain, I want you to send a message to the every former member of the Royal Guard who has been discharged as a result of last night’s executive orders.”

Snaca nodded, though she wondered what Chara was planning. *Former* guards only? What was the point of that? They wouldn’t respond to orders from her anymore—they were no longer part of the chain of command.

But once she had transcribed Chara’s message, she understood. The Royal Guard followed the law. *Vigilantes*, though…

With that plan set in motion, Snaca followed Chara from the castle through New Home and Hotland to Waterfall, and deep, deep into tunnels so deep and so well-hidden even she had never gone through them, ignoring the pain in her chest.

Usually, when 2B wanted to exercise, she did so out in the snowy fields… just as a precaution, so she could exert herself to her heart’s content without worrying about overheating. However, this morning, she’d brought herself to the garden near the edge of the Ruins, near where she’d planted 14E’s *odachi*, because she needed some privacy. What she was trying to practice was… embarrassing.

She tried to recreate her stance from yesterday. “Stop!” she shouted out, throwing out her arm.

Nothing happened. Time did not stop; it didn’t even slow down. The flowers brushing against her boots continued to sway gently.

She struck another pose. “*Time, stop!*”

Nothing.

She tried another stance. “*Halt the flow of time!*”

Still nothing. What was the secret behind this ability of hers? Maybe she could only use it once per day. Maybe she could only use it when she was desperate… or when someone she cared about was in danger and was too far away to help. Those had been the only other times she’d used that ability, after all.

Willing to try anything at this point, 2B copied a pose from one of Alphys’ cartoons. “*Toki wo tomare!*” she shouted out.

Time continued its onward march. 2B was beginning to feel foolish.

Flowey popped out of the ground in front of her. “Howdy, Toobs! Those are some *weird* exercises you’re doing!”

2B stumbled backward, flustered. How much had Flowey seen? “I… I, er, um…”
“Trying to control your determination, huh?” Flowey scratched at his chin with a withered leaf. “You’re, um… how do I say this… not doing it right. Why don’t I show you how it’s done?”

“I’m not practicing how to reset,” 2B insisted. “I’m… Wait. Why aren’t you in your pot?”

“Why aren’t you in your bed?” Flowey asked, pulling one of his roots out of the dirt and wiggling it. “Because I have to get out of bed to exercise.”

“Well, there ya go.” Flowey smiled. “It’s a lovely pot, but it’s not something I can drag around with me. Anyway… how’s about it? Wanna learn how to put that determination of yours to good use? We did make a deal the other night, after all…”

2B considered Flowey’s offer. She’d promised 9S she wouldn’t intentionally reset to the beginning again… but if she died, she wouldn’t be able to help herself without some greater understanding of what this ‘determination’ of hers could do.

And so she took a seat cross-legged on the ground in front of Flowey. “Okay,” she said. “Teach me.”

“Excellent.” Flowey grinned. “So, just a little background, remind me again, how do you go about the whole ‘resetting’ thing? What’s your personal, uh, method?”

“I die.”

“Ooh, that’s inefficient.” Flowey winced. “And when you die, you go back to…”

“The instant 9S and I first arrived here.”

“That’s…” Flowey scratched at a shriveled petal where his chin would be. “Ten and a half months ago? Eleven? Rough.”

“And how do you do it?” 2B asked, more than just a little incensed at Flowey’s (comparatively-gentle) mockery.

“Do you play video games?”

“What?”

“Viiii—dee—ooooh gaaaaames.” Flowey said, enunciating clearly, spitting out each syllable. “If I’m going to teach you, I expect you to clean out your ears first!”

“No, I heard you clearly. What are video games?”

Flowey squinted at her, mouth agape. “…You’re serious.”

“Why would I be anything else?”

“Didn’t Doctor Alphys teach you what video games were?”

Alphys had tried. Now that she was gone, 2B wished she’d succeeded. That was how it always was. You regretted all the things you’d never done with someone only once they were out of your grasp for good. That poor, lonely nerd had gone off to join all the other 9Ses, leaving her friends and loved ones behind in a netherworld of paths regretfully left untrod-on. She should have been given a chance to show 2B what video games were.
“What’s the matter? You look like someone died.”

“No,” 2B said, masking her emotions. “Alphys never taught me what video games were.”

“Fair enough. Okay. A video game is a game you play on a computer that involves video stuff. Are you with me so far?”

“Yes.”

“Now let’s say you’re playing a little game called, oh, I dunno… ’Super Flowey-o Brothers.’ You start up, hit the title screen, choose your character, and start playing. You’re doing pretty well, then, whoops! You fall into a spiked pit and die.” Flowey winced for dramatic effect. “Now, if this wasn’t a video game, that’d be the end. You’d be gone forever. But because it is, you end up right back at the title screen with another chance to play!”

2B nodded. “That’s what I’ve been doing.”

“But let’s say you spend hours on the game, get all the way to the last level… only to whiff it at the last boss. Oh, no!” Flowey cried out in mock horror. “All those hours, all those fun times, all the fruits of your hard work, lost, like tears in rain! Now you have to start all the way from the title screen!”

“But what if… you took the time to ’save’ your game whenever you worried there was a difficult patch coming up? And then, whenever you needed to, you could… ’load’ that ’save’ point?” Flowey asked.

“I see.” 2B folded her hands in contemplation. “It’s just like backing up your data to the Bunker.”

“Whatever that means, yes, it is.” Flowey grinned. “Finally, you’re getting it! So, it’s simple. Think of it like a checkpoint. All I have to do is teach you how to ’save’ so you don’t end up going back eleven months every time you get in over your head. And how to ’load’ without, um… killing yourself.”

“Simple,” 2B repeated, doubtful. It sounded anything but.

“Yeah! Simple!” Flowey closed his eyes and bobbed his head, still grinning. “Saving and loading doesn’t have to be a life-or-death thing. You could, say, go to Grillby’s, save when you get to the bar, order a drink you’ve never had before… and if it tastes terrible, you can just load from that save point and stick with your regular order!”

To 2B, it sounded almost perverse to use a power that upended the very laws of the cosmos itself for such trivial reasons. “So… how do I… do this… ‘saving’ thing?”

“Oh, it’s quite, quite easy. Simple. Child’s play. As the perpetual child, I can attest to that!” Flowey laughed. “You see, all you have to do is concentrate… take in every inch of your surroundings… the smell of the air, the way it feels on your leaves… or, in this case, your skin… the tiniest sound… you let it all in. You ’fix’ this moment in the universe, this place, this time, burn it into your memory, summon up all your will to keep going, all your determination… and then you can come back whenever you’d like.”

“And then,” Flowey concluded, “when you want to return to it, well, you can just die. But you can skip all of that by just… closing your eyes, concentrating very hard, and summoning up all your determination.”

“Is there… anything else you can do with this power?” 2B asked.
“’Else?’” Flowey asked. He frowned. “Like what?”

“Like stopping time.”

“Hmm…” Flowey scratched at the corner of his mouth. “Interesting. That’s what you were trying to do here, wasn’t it?”

2B shrugged. “I’ve done it before… but I don’t know how.”

“Well, I could never do that. Sorry. Can’t help you with that. But maybe Smiley Trashbag over in Snowdin can help you.”

2B took a deep breath. “Okay. I’ll try saving.”

She tried.

She focused on every detail. Her breath. The humming of her black box, muffled inside her chest, resonating through her chassis and her flesh. The tiny rustling of flowers beside her and groaning of settling stone above. Motes of dust drifting lazily in the air; the old, musty smell permeating the chamber; the taste of the air, stale, dry, a little bitter on her tongue; every single withered and shriveled leaf and petal framing Flowey’s saccharine smile…

Something… seemed to click.

“I’ve got it,” 2B announced.

“Excellent!” Flowey’s teeth sharpened into fangs, a ring of floating pellets of white light forming around 2B. “Now how about we test out your new save point,” he hissed, “and make sure you did it correctly?”

2B shot up to her feet, her pulse pounding, blood singing in her ears, her NFCS immediately drawing a sword to her hand. “What? Wait—"

There was a flash of excruciating pain as every single one of 2B’s systems blanked out, static overwhelming her eyes and ears in the last split second before…

“I’ve got it,” 2B announced.

“Excellent!” Flowey’s teeth sharpened into fangs, a ring of floating pellets of white light forming around 2B. “Now how about we—"

Flowey blinked, shook his head, and the pellets faded away. “Sorry,” he said. “Just a little bit of inertia. Always a little bothersome.”

2B looked around the cavern and realized she was sitting again, not standing, and there was no sword in her hand. A strange, nauseous feeling twisted her insides. “I-Inertia…”

“You did it!” Flowey clapped his leaves together. “Congrats! I knew you had it in you! Boy, it’s a weight off your chest, ain’t it?” he asked. “Now you’re never gonna relive the day you fell into this godforsaken mountain again!”

“You could have killed me!” 2B shouted out, clenching her fists. She had half a mind to tear Flowey to bits right here and now. What would have happened if she’d gone all the way back to the beginning? Firstly, she’d have killed Flowey, but not quickly, and then…

“But I didn’t!” Flowey smiled. “I wouldn’t have attacked you if I hadn’t thought you’d really done it.
Otherwise, I think we both know… my ass would have been grass!”

2B nodded, and once she’d given herself a few seconds to calm down, an eager sense of relief bubbled up inside her. *It was* a weight off her chest. Like a curse had been lifted. The eternal curse that had followed her from the moment she had been assigned to 9S for the first time.

The curse that would lead her to erase the people she loved again and again. A curse she had staunchly avoided for over ten whole months after being its constant victim for over two years… and now it no longer followed her. She was truly free.

“Thank you,” she gasped, amazed when the words fell from her lips that she was saying them to Flowey of all people.

Flowey blushed. “Aw, shucks, Toobie. It’s the least I could do for you. Frankly, it’s been embarrassing watching you waste your determination like that. Now, I believe we had a deal…”

2B stood up. “Yes. Yes we did,” she said, recalling the deal he’d made with her deep in the tunnels of Waterfall. She crossed her arms as she loomed over Flowey. “You would teach me, and I would spare your life. I’ve fulfilled my end of the bargain.”

“Drat,” Flowey grumbled. “For a second I thought I could pull one over on you.” He let out a sigh. “You know… helping people doesn’t make me feel all warm and fuzzy, really. But… for some reason… I think I might be starting to *like* doing it.”

“Hmm.” 2B eyed Flowey with suspicion. “Is it because you’ll be killed if you try to hurt any of us?”

“Well, yeah,” Flowey admitted. “But… kinda… more? I can’t explain it. Anyway, thanks, Toobs. For not killing me when you had the chance. Not for lack of trying, but still…”

Flowey began to wade through the golden flowers and the handful of Lunar Tears nestled in the soil. He reached out and stroked one of the shining petals of the nearest Lunar Tear. “You know… Emil says these things can grant wishes. I wonder, if I wished for a soul of my own…”

He shook his head. “Eh, worth a shot.” And with that, he sank into the soil and left 2B alone.

2B knelt beside the Lunar Tear Flowey had touched, running her finger across its slick, silky petals. She wondered… of the scant few Lunar Tears Toriel, Asriel, and Emil had managed to grow here over the past nine months, had the one 6O had plucked and given to 2B while she’d slept somehow aided in her awakening?

She carefully cut the flower’s stem with her thumbnail and took it with her as she headed back to Toriel’s house.

▫▫▫

To say Asriel was not in the best of moods was an understatement. He picked listlessly at his breakfast, unable to muster any interest in his food. Even though Toriel made the best homestyle potatoes in the kingdom and the fluffiest pancakes, and even though she was so happy to have fresh fruit to serve on top, fruit that was not magical but *grown* and paired so well with fresh whipped cream. The food was supposed to be sweet and rich and heavy, but it tasted like ash in Asriel’s mouth. Insubstantial and bland. He’d rather eat nothing.

Alphys was gone.

And Asriel knew full well that she’d never be able to build newer, more grown-up bodies for him.
now. He’d be stuck like this, in the body of a twelve-year-old—well, a body made to be the body of a twelve-year-old—forever.

He felt ashamed at himself for being sad about that. For being so selfish to think about how it affected him when someone was dead.

More than that, he felt ashamed at himself for never telling Alphys that it was okay. That he didn’t hate or resent her for refusing to let Asgore know about him. He’d wanted to wait until he could tell her properly, face-to-face, because that’s what Mom always said—that if you were truly sincere, you had to do things like apologizing or granting forgiveness properly to really show it.

He was pathetic. Really just awful. Maybe it was because he was a shell, like Flowey had said, because he was missing some part of himself. Because he was just a couple fragments of the original Asriel bouncing around in a metal case. Not a complete person. Just shards of glass. Little bits of glass from a mirror that didn’t reflect all the parts of him that made him a good person.

The faint, sharp sounds of silverware clattering against ceramic plates filled the air. “Are you sure,” Toriel asked 9S as she hesitated to slide a helping of scrambled eggs onto his plate, “2B will not mind us starting without her?”

“She won’t mind at all,” 9S assured her for the umpteenth time. “She would mind if we let all this food get cold while we sat around twiddling our thumbs waiting for her, though.”

“Fair enough,” said Toriel, setting the now-empty skillet streaked with the canary-yellow remains of scrambled eggs aside and taking a seat next to Asriel. “I do hope she returns soon. She was still in her PJs when she went off; I expect she’ll want to change before we all head out for our picnic later today.”

“Asriel?” she asked him, draping a paw over his shoulder. “You’ve hardly touched your food. Is something the matter?”

“I’m not hungry,” he mumbled, pushing his plate aside. “May I be excused, Mom?”

“Yes, yes, certainly, dear.” Toriel stood up and gently guided him out of his chair, laying her paws softly on his shoulders. “Are you all right? If your stomach hurts, I could put on some tea…”

“I just need to lie down,” Asriel said.

Toriel frowned. Asriel couldn’t help but notice the concern in her face. What was worrying her? He’d just said he wasn’t hungry…

Picking up on her concern, 9S stood up. “We could run some diagnostics,” he offered. “You know, make sure everything’s okay.” He tapped on Pod 153’s black hull as it floated over his shoulder.

Toriel glanced across the table at him. “Why, thank you, Nines, dear, that is very—”

The doorbell rang, startling Toriel. Her errant paw brushed against a glass of milk, knocking it over and spilling its contents onto the tablecloth, startling everybody out of their seats. “Oh! Pardon my reach! I’ll—”

“Asriel?” Toriel asked, draping a paw over his shoulder. “Is something the matter?”

Asriel froze. What had just happened? Had time reset?

He glanced around the room, his core warm in his chest, his pulse pounding. The glass of milk was
still upright. 9S and 6O were still picking at their food as if nothing had happened. Had it really only been a few seconds?

Closing his eyes, Asriel sighed in relief. If time had only reset itself by a few seconds, then… maybe 2B had learned to control that power of hers.

“I’m fine,” he told Toriel. “I-I’m just not very hungry, that’s all. May I be excused?”

“Certainly, my child. If you feel sick, lie down and get some rest,” Toriel told him, ruffling his fur and giving him a ginger, gentle squeeze. “I am sure you will feel right as rain in no time.”

9S stood up. “Azzy, if you’re feeling like something’s wrong, Pod and I could run some diagnostics.”

The doorbell rang, startling Toriel yet again. Asriel hadn’t noticed it the first time, but his mother looked shocked and almost frightened, as if she’d just seen a ghost, and not the friendly kind.

And with that, she hurried down into the basement.

“You all right, kiddo?” 9S asked once Toriel had left.

Asriel nodded. “I’m…”

He hung his head.

“I guess I’m… mad. About Alphys. N-Not at Alphys,” he hurriedly added, “but… myself. Because I thought I had to wait to tell her…”

9S stood up, circled the table, and put his arm around Asriel’s shoulder. As fearsome as he looked with all those new scars running across his face, he still had a soft and kind demeanor beneath them, and his smile was as warm as ever. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not!” Asriel felt his eyes begin to water, his voice catching in his throat. “She was probably s-scared when she died, a-and she… she probably died thinking I—I hated her because I never got to s-see Dad because of her, but I…”

9S wrapped his arm around him, resting his cheek against Asriel’s head and running his fingers through the fur covering his long ears. His touch was light, soft, and soothing… and just a little ticklish. “Shh. There, there, Azzy.”

“I’m useless,” he murmured, burying his snout in 9S’s shirt. “I-I try to be good and behave myself a-and do things right b-but it doesn’t make anyone any better off…”

“That’s not true,” 9S reassured him. “Everyone you know likes you. And you’re a pretty great little brother.”

“Big brother,” Asriel corrected.

“Hmm?”

“You’re three years old. I’m twelve,” Asriel said, sniffling.

9S sighed with exasperation. Asriel could practically hear him rolling his eyes.

Toriel returned from the basement. “Hello, children,” she said, breathless. “I believe right now might be the perfect time for our picnic!” She smiled nervously. “There is some lovely architecture out
there I think you would all find quite, um, fun… damental to your appreciation of…”

A ramshackle cart with a round stone head perched on it blundered its way up the stairs after her.

“Hey, guys!” Emil shouted out from atop his perch. “I got here as fast as I can! There’s a bunch of guys with swords on their way here, and, uh, sorry, but I think they’re gonna have an easier time finding this place now that they can follow my tire tracks!”

9S pulled away from Asriel. “Guys with swords?” he asked, the expression on his face growing dark and grim.

“And torches and stuff, too,” Emil added. “I think they wanna hurt you guys!”

Toriel nodded, nervously kneading her paws. “We may wish to, um, not be here when they arrive.”

“Never fear!” a high-pitched, nasally voice boomed, echoing through the tunnel behind Emil. “The great Papyrus, most concerned citizen in the kingdom, is here!”

9S hurried to the guest bedroom, returning moments later with the machine arm Flowey had given him hooked up to his shoulder and 2B’s switchblade sword tucked under his arm. His frock coat, its front unbuttoned, was draped over his pajamas. “All right,” he said. “Azzy, get your stuff.”

“Got it,” Asriel heard a voice say from behind him. Shocked, he whirled around and came face-to-face with Sans, who was currently holding a random assortment of items from his bedroom. Ashamed and a little insulted that Sans had rifled through his clothes, toys, and books, Asriel grabbed everything he was holding and held it all to his chest.

2B barged into the room, back from whatever she’d been doing (she had said earlier that morning, according to 9S and 6O, that she’d needed to ‘practice something embarrassing’). Her pastel-green, bunny-print pajamas cut a strange contrast to the coppery-bronze katana at her hip and the golden sword hanging from her back. “Hi. Sorry I’m late for breakfast. I—”

9S tossed her the switchblade sword. She caught it and immediately affixed it to her forearm so readily and so smoothly it had to have been her soldier’s instincts kicking in.

“Breakfast is canceled,” 9S told her. “Looks like there’s a little army coming our way.”

6O groggily threw on a coat over her nightgown. “Army?” she asked. “They can’t do that… that’s illegal!”

2B kept her composure, even though the air was saturated with tension. “I won’t have time to change, will I?” she asked, looking down at herself with disdain.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, 2B,” Papyrus insisted as he dashed in and out of the guest bedroom, creating a growing pile of cardboard boxes on Emil’s cart as he vacated 2B’s and 9S’s belongings. “We had the Royal Guard come along to protect the door; that’ll buy you guys at least a few minutes!”

He tossed a pair of black knee-high boots at her; 2B snatched them out of the air. Next came a long-sleeved wrap and a few garments Asriel couldn’t identify, along with a few garments he knew he shouldn’t be able to identify. “Will that do?” Papyrus asked.

“Good enough,” 2B said flatly, pushing her way into the bedroom and slamming the door shut behind her. She returned from the bedroom soon enough fully-clothed (the bright color of her nightshirt still peeking out from under a black crepe wrap jacket) and fully-armed. “Let’s head out.”
Toriel nodded and took Asriel by the paw with a firm grip. There was a hard, stern light in her eyes Asriel hadn’t remembered seeing in a long, long time, her mouth stretched in a grim, taut line.

Soon, the little house in the Ruins Toriel had made her home for the past few centuries was empty save for Papyrus and Sans, who stayed back to act as a “rear guard” in case the Royal Guards stationed at the door in Snowdin couldn’t keep everyone out. Everybody had had scant few moments to collect any precious belongings just in case something happened to the house. Toriel held a few books under her arms; Pod 153 carried a few more for her. Asriel had his locket hanging from his neck—he wanted to ask Toriel where she’d found it, but she seemed preoccupied. Emil’s cart held whatever couldn’t be carried.

Asriel tried humming along with Emil to keep his spirits up as they holed up in one of the hundreds of abandoned buildings littering the old city. The Ruins had once been Home, the first city King Asgore had founded after the end of the war, but now it was merely sprawling spiderwebs of cobblestone roads and ancient ruins. There was no shortage of places to hide. But Asriel couldn’t help but feel exposed and vulnerable.

Evidently, he wasn’t the only one. “It’s possible,” 9S spoke up, “that if they know we’re here, they must have found some way to pick up our black box signals. It might be for the best if 6O, 2B, and I head out on our own.”

2B nodded in agreement. “The three of us will be safer together than the rest of you will be with us,” she said.

Asriel felt his stomach churn. Chara… Was all this… all this chaos and fear… was it their doing?

Something must have been horribly wrong with them. Maybe their android body was malfunctioning. This… This wasn’t the Chara he knew!

There had to be something he could do… Anything he could do to fix them. To make them stop hurting people.

To fix them…

“Wait,” he said, before the androids could venture out of the dusty old house. “I, um… c-can Mrs. 153 stay with us?”

2B and 9S shared a glance, pondering his request, but the pod spoke up of its own accord. “Statement: this tactical support unit is already registered to prioritize commands from Queen Toriel and Prince Asriel. However, without a direct countermanding order, this unit must assist and ensure the well-being of Unit 9S as its top priority.”

Asriel would need Pod 153’s help if he wanted to help Chara. So he took a deep breath, and…

“Pod 153,” he said, trying to sound as princely as possible, “I need your help. So I order you to follow my commands and protect the three of us—” He gestured to Emil, Toriel, and himself—“Until further notice.”

9S was taken aback. “Wh-What? Hey! You can’t do that!” he sputtered as Pod 153 floated to Asriel’s side.

“Asriel,” Toriel sternly said, “return the pod to 9S.”

“No, it’s fine,” 2B interjected. “The three of you need whatever protection you could get.”
“I assure you, 2B,” said Toriel, “I can—”

2B reached up and laid a hand on Toriel’s shoulder, silencing her, and gave her a brief, light hug.

“We can take care of ourselves just fine,” 2B told her. “Do this for us.”

“Are you sure, 2B?” 9S asked, still eyeing Pod 153.

2B crouched down in front of Asriel, patted him on the snout, and told him to look after his mother, weaving a shimmering Lunar Tear into his fur just above his ear. 9S gave him as tight of a one-armed hug as he could. 6O kissed him on the cheek.

He couldn’t help but feel a crushing sense of foreboding when the androids parted ways. It all felt like the three of them were saying goodbye. Asriel wondered, were a dozen or two monsters really such a threat?

Or did they, like Asriel, have the sinking feeling in their guts that whatever was coming, Chara would not be far behind?

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The wind was bitter cold as Dogamy and Dogaressa stood at their posts in front of the great stone door. Torchlights shone through the gaps in the trees as a vigilante army of monsters and machines gathered from all over the kingdom, many dressed in the high-tech armor Royal Guards were now forbidden from wearing, closed in on the Ruins.

The Dogi brandished their twin axes in a show of strength against the mob.

“All of you! Return to your homes at once,” Dogamy called out, “or you will all be under arrest!”

They didn’t listen.

---

The caverns grew dark, darker, yet darker. The darkness kept growing, the shadows cutting deeper.

It still hurt in Snaca’s chest. Was it guilt? Guilt over having secretly failed Chara—guilt over betraying them? It hurt more than guilt, though. And her fang-tipped fingertips felt numb.

She shrugged it off.

Static flickered at the corners of her vision. She ignored it. She was half-machine now. It was probably just feedback. She would have to get used to it.

But the pain didn’t go away.

And it started to spread.

And she started to feel cold.

So cold.

What hurt? What hurt? Cold cold cold. Chara…

Why did she feel so numb, so cold?
Chara clutched at their head, wincing as if in pain. Were they hurting? Snaca raised her hand and held it toward them, laying it on their shoulder. Dead pixels fluttered on her scales like buzzing flies. Her blood, her circuitry, it all felt as sluggish running through her body as mud.

*Come join the fun.*

*Come join the fun.*

*Lorem ipsum...*

*Lorem...*

Chara cried out and recoiled, stumbling back, an anguished snarl smeared across their face as they batted Snaca’s hand away.

Snaca clutched at her hand as it throbbed. “M-My king,” she moaned, her voice sounding alien to her ears. As if many of her were all tripping over themselves trying to speak first. Static washed over her, her eyes, her ears, her brain.

*Stay here with me.*

She grabbed them again. “*Help me, help me, help m-me, stay here w-with me, come join the f-f-f-fun, c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c—*”

Chara let out an agonized howl and tore themselves free of her iron grip, clutching at their head as they screamed in pain. Her fingers dropped, spilling static onto the floor.

“What’s wrong with me?” she cried out. “*Chara, a-a-a-angel, help! Help me!*”

She grabbed them with both... hands?

Were they even hands?

She couldn’t describe how they looked. How she looked. Wisps of smoke. Flowing water. Dead pixels. Either, neither, none. Did she look like anything? What was she?

*It hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt it hurt 1t hur7 it hurt 1t 4ur7 1t 4ur7777777777777*

“What! ME!” she howled, and Chara let out a strangled shout of their own, half terrified scream, half manic laughter, as tears rolled down their cheeks. The tears from the eye covered by their flower were as scarlet as their eye—in the darkness, the blood was black as tar.

Chara writhed in Snaca’s grip and tore themselves free, and with a wide and wild eye showing a primal and implacable fear, they drew their golden sword, and with one strike—

*Chara. My angel.*

*I spent my life scoffing at your legend. But when I saw you, I wanted only to serve you.*

*You were my path to meaning. Méñ__ng. P^2__rp\_\_\_0\_\_\_s\_\_ s\_\_.*

*My ambition... had... a p__urpose. A p\_\_\_urpo e\_\_\_.*

*I had a p\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.*

*It was more than being the best. More than being the st...*
The last thing Doctor Alphys had expected to do was wake up.

The first thing she became aware of was a throbbing pressure in her skull, as if there was a vise squeezing her brain. It hurt more than anything.

And then she realized that the rest of her body hurt just as bad, from the tip of her snout to the tip of her tail.

Her head pounded again, and she revised her assessment. Her head hurt more.

There was a white blur hanging in the darkness in front of her. And two smaller white blurs beneath it that seemed to be fluttering like little birds.

Alphys squinted to get a better look. Where were her glasses? She tried to lift her head, but was rewarded only by a shooting, electric pain that ran up the left side of her neck.

Bony hands took her by the shoulders and gently held her down.

Bony…

Bones? Papyrus? Sans?

No. Someone else. Someone with long, spindly fingers.

“Gau… bri… e…” she croaked, her voice coming out as a hoarse whisper.

Alphys squinted again, Gaubrieta’s form coalescing before her. The movements of her hands was clearer, clear enough that Alphys could just barely discern the positions of her fingers. Was she speaking in some kind of code?

Sign language. Alphys knew sign language. So why did the symbols Gaubrieta’s bony fingers contorted themselves into not make any sense to her? Was she signing in a different dialect?

“Can’t… understand…”

Gaubrieta grabbed a pen and paper, wrote a few words in large, uncharacteristically sloppy and bold handwriting, and held it in front of Alphys’ nose.

Alphys leaned in closer, squinted, and shook her head. “Can’t… read… that…” she rasped. What
was wrong with Gaubrieta? Why wasn’t she writing in a language she could understand?

Gaubrieta withdrew the pad of paper, frustrated, and thought for a few moments, then scribbled something else on it before showing it to Alphys again. It was a series of crude pictograms. There was a little hunched-over lizard—that was her, Alphys figured—a snake with big fangs, a skull and crossbones, and a drawing of a brain with a speech balloon trailing from it. The balloon was crossed out, and underneath the brain was a little flame.

As much as it felt like Alphys’ brain was about to explode, she connected the images in her head. Her… snakebite… poison—no, venom… brain… fire… no speech.

She’d been bitten by a venomous snake and couldn’t talk anymore?

No, she could talk.

She’d been bitten by a venomous snake and her brain was… on fire?

No, no, but she was close.

Bitten… venom… inflamed…

Alphys muddled through her aching mind and put it all together. That was it. Cerebral inflammation—swelling—must have caused some damage to the language centers of her brain. That was why she couldn’t comprehend Gaubrieta’s sign language anymore, or read her handwriting. Spoken language, though, she still seemed capable of understanding—although that did her little good when the one thing Gaubrieta couldn’t do was speak.

Alphys nodded. “I get it,” she whispered, and satisfied, Gaubrieta set aside the paper.

Questions ran through her battered and bruised mind, although in her condition, she was in no shape to ask them, nor was Gaubrieta in any shape to answer them.

She couldn’t read anymore?

She couldn’t read?

How was she going to watch anime now? Was she really going to have to resign herself to watching dubs? Perish the thought! What was the point of living if she had to subject herself to such torment?

Scratch that. How was she going to do her job if she’d forgotten how to read?

Alphys’ head hurt. This was literally one of her worst nightmares. What else had she forgotten? What if she didn’t know how to use computers anymore, either? Or how to build machinery? What if she’d forgotten how to eat?

No. Had to focus on the more important questions. Where was she? Why was she here? How… why…

Venom.

Snake.

Snaca? Lieutenant Snaca? Her patient?

She bit me, Alphys remembered. It was just about the only thing she remembered. Had she been unconscious the whole time since then? How long had ‘the whole time’ been? Where was Undyne?
Was she okay? Was she safe? What had Gaubrieta said to her before Snaca had attacked her? Something about… execution?

Undyne was in big trouble. Alphys couldn’t remember how or why, but she was in big trouble.

Alphys tried to sit up, but achieved nothing more than calling forth a fresh wave of agony to sweep through her body. It felt as though the flesh was being torn from her bones, like her blood had been replaced with battery acid. Something hot and wet trickled down the side of her neck, stinging. She’d never felt worse in her life. Physically, at least. It hurt enough to bring her to tears.

Gaubrieta reached over and draped a rough, scratchy blanket on top of her, then laid a hand on her neck where it hurt the most. In a matter of seconds the pain had subsided, and its ripples and echoes across Alphys’ body were dampened as well; when Gaubrieta pulled her hand away, ghostly threads of light that glowed a soft yellow-green hung from her fingertips. With a flick of her wrist, the threads faded away.

As Alphys caught her breath, she raised her hand to the side of her neck, bracing herself for another wave of anguish; instead, her fingertips slid over bumpy suture marks. Gaubrieta must have sewn her up with her healing magic earlier, only for Alphys’ exertion to reopen her wounds. At least the good doctor was as deft and skilled with a needle and thread as her reputation as chief surgeon claimed.

“What… do we do?” Alphys asked.

Gaubrieta held a bony finger to the tip of her long, fleshless snout. Her gesture said something sign language couldn’t.

The government wanted the two of them dead. Until further notice, for their own safety, Alphys and Gaubrieta could do nothing, say nothing, and go nowhere.

For all intents and purposes, Alphys was truly dead.

Chara hung their head as they knelt before the vault containing the six black boxes, running their fingers along the black blade of the Mourning Star.

I knew it would come to this, 13B gloated. You’ve got no option left.

I’ve read the legend from your head. That thing…

It’s going to kill us the moment you pick it up.

And you know it. You know it!

13B laughed again. You and all your precious monsters are going to die in this mountain! You’ll never set them free… you’ll never help them escape… and you’re never going to harm another android ever again!

Chara tried their best to push 13B out of their mind and glanced over to the piano. The entire mechanism had been smashed to bits, the wood splintered, bits of the hammers and strings poking out from the mangled form. It looked like a pincushion with all the needles pulled out, its frame blackened and scorched.

Chara couldn’t help but laugh along with 13B. Undyne… was all that damage her doing? Had Chara failed to kill her? Had she somehow clung to life just to spite them?
What if she’d taken the souls?

Seized with panic, they drew Caladbolg, swung it, and tore through the thick rock wall that hid their vault, slicing the Gordian knot with the power of the most legendary of swords. Debris showered them, and there, in the vault…

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six glittering black boxes.

Chara grinned.

Undyne hadn’t been able to play the song and open the door… so she’d settled for destroying the key.

But Chara was better at picking locks than Undyne had anticipated.

Setting aside the massive gold greatsword, Chara brandished the Mourning Star. Somehow… somehow they’d known all along… that it would come to this, their last resort. That this would be the instrument of their will.

This cursed blade, this blade forged by their adoptive ancestors, this blade that would, if the legends were true, just as soon kill them as it would serve them.

The black boxes lifted off the ground, their stasis pods falling away to leave them open to the air. They drifted toward the Mourning Star’s gleaming opal jewel and orbited them like horses on a carousel, the lights within them glowing stronger and stronger. The six clustered around the hilt of the blade as the radii of their orbits grew tighter, and, one by one, they sank into the gem, making its fiery glow stronger and stronger.

As the hilt grew hot, Chara dropped the sword, letting it clatter to the ground as the last of the black boxes merged with it. The sword began to vibrate, shaking as if caught in an earthquake for interminable minutes that stretched on for what seemed like hours, until, at last, it fell silent.

An eerie pressure descended on the chamber. And Chara was, they were ashamed to admit, afraid to reach out and grab the Mourning Star, lest they meet the same fate as the man who had commissioned its forging over ten thousand years ago. 13B, of course, kept taunting them from inside their head.

After what felt like an eternity, Chara reached out with a trembling hand…

Fighting against a horde of monster and machines, fending off weapons and dodging bullet patterns, trying to restrain the mob with as little loss of limb and life as they could… it began to take its toll on Dogamy and Dogaressa.

Dogamy panted with exertion, his battleaxe heavy in his palms, exhaustion piling upon him;
Dogaressa, always the stronger and fiercer of the couple, was faring better, but not by much. This lawless vigilante army… it was too much for even the town’s oldest and most experienced guardsmen.

Dogaressa knew who dwelt beyond the door now. She’d had her suspicions after last night about that hermit woman. Part of her resented the hermit, knowing that Toriel Dreemurr had so callously abandoned her subjects. But the Queen-in-exile was still Queen, and laws were laws, and Dogaressa took pride in the discipline it took to enforce law and order instead of acting on whatever her whims were.

So she would protect Toriel and her android friends to her last gasp of breath.

Dogaressa took a knee, sinking into the snow, as the fighting became too much for her. The mob would surge past her and her husband like a wave, crashing into the great stone door and invading the ruins of Home…

Dogamy sniffed the air.

An electric tingle filled the frigid atmosphere; Dogaressa could feel her fur standing on end. Something was coming.

The pressure… the determination… it felt *stifling*.

A roughly-V-shaped scar of aquamarine light against the grayish clouds filling the sky, small enough to have been a bird at a great distance, grew larger, drew nearer.

And with it, bolts of lightning rained down like sleet, cutting through the ranks of the ad-hoc militia, forcing them to retreat with haste—what few of them were not skewered through their arms and legs and rendered immobile.

Spears of aquamarine…

The V-shaped scar in the sky touched down in front of the Dogi like an angel descending from the heavens. Undyne hovered before them, her long scarlet ponytail whipping around in the wind behind her as the jagged, crackling rays of energy extending from the short, stubby mechanical wings mounted on the back of her armor dwindled into nothing. A black blindfold covered both her eyes, and a boxy black machine hovered beside her.

“Captain…” Dogaressa breathed, astonished.

Undyne’s voice was uncharacteristically flat, nearly robotic. “Is 2B in there?”

Dogamy nodded.

“Is she safe?”

Dogaressa nodded.

“Good work, you two.” Undyne glanced at the rabble she’d disbanded. “Arrest these ruffians. I’ll take care of things here.”

Dogamy and Dogaressa both snapped to attention and saluted. “Yes, Captain!”

As the two of them began arresting the injured would-be militia members, Undyne pulled open the stone door with a single hand and vanished into the tunnel leading to the Ruins.
Chapter End Notes

Just to make it clear for the rest of this fic from here on out:

2B is, at this point, wearing her pajamas.

She won't have an opportunity to change her clothes until after the final battle (assuming she survives :p).

That means she is going to do all her fighting from here on out while wearing a fleece nightshirt with bunnies on it.

Please keep that mental image in mind for all future chapters of this fic.
Chapter Summary

By the time Undyne reaches 2B, she finds her already fighting a battle of her own.

Chapter Notes

(musical accompaniment)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Ruins, formerly the city of Home, were sprawling and meandering; it had been built with no plan in mind soon after the end of the Human-Monster War, when the monsters had barely begun to explore their subterranean prison. The streets wound around each other in twisting, labyrinthine paths; the crumbling buildings were haphazardly and randomly clustered between them. Only a handful of monsters still lived here—all hermits living simple lives of solitude, detached from the affairs of the rest of the kingdom.

It reminded 2B of the surface. The crumbling remains of ancient cities inhabited only by transient Resistance camps and disinterested hordes of machines and slowly being reclaimed by vegetation. After living so long in the populated areas of the kingdom, the parts that were still growing and living, she had a new appreciation for those ruins. She knew now what they might have looked like in the past, how it might have felt to live there… and now she understood more fully the melancholy that permeated those graveyards of civilization.

2B wondered as she wandered with 9S and 6O at her side if the three of them could hide here forever… if they would have to hide here forever as pariahs, forever hated and hunted by the people of the kingdom. Would this ghost of a city serve as a permanent home for them, the way it had for Toriel since her self-imposed exile?

Solitude wasn’t something that would bother 2B. She didn’t mind the quiet. In fact, she rather liked it. But 9S… he wouldn’t be happy in such a small, cramped, empty world. For nine months he’d lived in heaven—a world that was vibrant and lively, a world brimming with more culture than he could ever have had the freedom or opportunity to explore on the surface, a world with thousands of years of recorded history for him to pore over. It was the world 9S had always deserved to live in. To bring him back here, to this fossil of a city, to consign him to live here, perhaps forever, felt like a crime.

And 6O…

2B sighed.

“You okay, 2B?” 9S asked, laying his hand on her shoulder.

“I can’t complain,” she said.
“Can we?” he asked, a wry, sardonic grin spreading across his face.

“Knock yourself out.” 2B kicked open the latched wrought-iron gate that blocked the way to a cul-de-sac bored into the walls of the vast cavern. The buildings all jutted out from sheer rock walls: the street could act as a good bottleneck if multiple enemies tried to converge on the three of them here. The rusty gate swung open, a reverberating clang echoing through the still air. “Come on. This position looks defensible.”

She ushered 9S and 6O through first, glancing over her shoulder for any signs of the mob that was allegedly on its way. It stood to reason that an angry mob would make plenty of noise as it approached, but one could never be too careful.

Once she’d slipped behind the gate, 2B swung it closed behind her, then tore one of its loose bars out and threaded it horizontally through the gate’s bars to keep it shut. The iron bar protested and squealed in her hands as she bent it in a loose knot; despite her prodigious strength, it left the synthetic muscles in her arms sore. Not too sore to fight, but sore enough to be uncomfortable.

The three of them took shelter in one of the abandoned homes lining the cul-de-sac; 6O kept watch at the front window, peeping through the blinds for any sign of approaching enemies while 9S rifled through the cabinets for any useful items. 2B could already hear him muttering with disappointment, because it stood to reason that this house had probably been abandoned for centuries (or, judging by how thick the dust coating everything was, millennia) and had probably been empty for just as long.

“We don’t know,” 6O said, “if they can actually trace our black box signals, do we?”

2B brushed off a thick patina of dust from the windowsill, turning her fingertips grayish-white. “If they know we’re here, it’s likely.”

“Still… they could search for hours and not find us.” 6O sighed. “We should keep watch in shifts. Or,” she added, glancing at 2B, “we could… do groups of two and rotate positions every hour or so? So none of us get lonely?”

“Good idea.”

2B kept vigil along with 6O. Operators were good at observing; their jobs mostly consisted of sitting and watching, after all. 2B, though, started feeling antsy almost immediately.

Sensing her discomfort, 6O laid her hand on 2B’s arm. Where her fingers curled around her bicep, 2B felt the soreness in her muscles grow fainter. 6O started to rest her head on 2B’s shoulder soon enough.

No wonder 6O wanted to keep watch in groups of two.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” 2B murmured, her fingers finding comfortable purchase in 6O’s braided hair.

“Sorry?” 6O repeated, a flash of concern flitting across her face. “For what? You’re doing great!”

“I missed you,” 2B said. “If there was anybody from the surface I wouldn’t have minded seeing again, it was you. I was so happy to find you again. I was hoping…” She bowed her head. “…you’d like it here.”

“Well…” 6O shrugged. “I do. Kinda. It’s got its ups and downs. All this peril is rough, but… it’s been nice getting to know all your new friends!”

“I mean… there was so much Nines and I could show you. The things we had fun doing…” 2B
sighed. “Scenery, museums… restaurants… pizza…”

“Oh!” 6O’s eyes lit up. “Back when you were asleep, when 9S went on one of his, uh, excursions… he came back with a big box of that stuff!”

“What, pizza?”

6O nodded.

On further reflection, that sounded to 2B like an extremely “9S” thing to do. “I’m not surprised,” she said.

“He passed out almost as soon as he got back,” 6O said. “By the time he woke up, Asriel and I had, um… kinda… eaten it. All of it.” She giggled sheepishly. “I felt bad we didn’t save him any of it, but I’d never had anything like it. I just couldn’t help myself.”

2B tried to muster up a laugh, but couldn’t quite manage it. “That’s… nice. I’m glad you had fun. But I’m just… sorry. After the trouble we ran into yesterday, and now this… it doesn’t matter what the law says or who’s in charge anymore. We’ll always be hated and feared. Not by everyone—but by enough people. This kingdom isn’t a safe place for you. Or any of us. Not anymore. Maybe… maybe not ever.”

2B bowed her head and closed her eyes. “Nines and I had a nice little cabin next to the river in Snowdin. Now I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to take you there. I wish I could show you the life we made for ourselves, but…”

I had the life… We had the kind of life I’d long since stopped dreaming we could have. A life with no orders, no killing, no danger… but now…

She could feel her hands shaking, her fingers clinging tightly to the windowsill to steady her hands. “That life… It’s already been taken from us.”

And we’ll never get it back.

Deep down, 2B wondered if she’d ever deserved to have it in the first place. A part of her had spent all her days down here waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the universe to realize the error of its ways and take from 2B all the nice things and happy moments down here it had unjustly granted her, to snatch from her fingers the family she’d been only allowed to have through a cosmic clerical oversight.

To think that she’d actually been naive enough to believe that she and Nines and 6O could have a happy life down here…

6O wrapped her arms around 2B and nuzzled her cheek, her voice dropping to a soft, low murmur as her hands slipped under 2B’s jacket and nightshirt to rest against her bare skin. “We’ll get it back,” she whispered to her, the softness and warmth of her hands as reassuring as her voice. “Things are going to get better.”

2B buried herself in 6O’s embrace, clinging to her so tightly that 6O was taken aback by the strength of her grip. For so long, she’d depended on 9S and 6O without giving them anything in return, holding them both at arms’ length no matter how much they reached out to her, all so she could spare herself the pain of losing them. Her old circumstances… that old life… that old her… was threatening to return.

“It’s okay,” 6O assured her. “As long as the three of us stick together, I know things will get better!”
“Hey!” 9S called out as he hurried down the staircase, the wooden steps creaking and groaning under his heavy footfalls. “We’ve got company, lovebirds!”

2B’s eyes shot open as 9S caught up with her and 6O. Embarrassed, 6O pulled away from her, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

“2B?” 9S asked, laying a gentle hand on her back. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. She stood tall, trying to clear her head and banish her incessant pessimism. “I just needed some time to collect myself. Find anything useful?”

9S held out a glass jar filled with a thick, viscous amber liquid. “Whoever lived here left this perfectly good jar of honey behind.” He studied it carefully. “Not much good to us, is it?”

“Unless we run into a bear,” 6O offered.

“What kind of ’company’ are we looking at, Nines?” 2B asked.

9S gestured to the window. “Well, I see you two have been shirking your duties,” he said.

2B slipped her fingers between the blinds and opened them a crack, prepared to leap into action.

Standing in the middle of the street was a heavily-armored piscine monster with brilliant blue scales and long, auburn hair trailing behind her. 2B couldn’t place the design of her armor—she could see elements of YoRHa heavy armor, but it was partially covered up by a sleek, angular outer layer of armor in blue and white. The design was almost alien, yet vaguely recognizable… it looked almost like something from one of Alphys’ cartoons. Floating beside her was a familiar tactical support pod with a silver hull.

“Undyne!” 2B exclaimed. “042!”

2B hurried out the door, meeting Undyne in the street; 9S and 6O trailed behind her. There was something odd about the way Undyne carried herself, she noticed—the captain seemed oddly subdued. A visor covered both her eyes, not just the one she hid with her eyepatch; while 2B was used to everybody around her wearing those things back in YoRHa and was practiced in discerning people’s feelings even with their visors on, something about the one Undyne wore made her expression inscrutable.

2B brushed aside her pang of unease as Pod 042 returned to her side. “It’s a good thing you’re here,” she told Undyne. “There’s an army on their way—”

“Yeah,” Undyne said, her voice hoarse. “I know. I took care of ’em already.”

“All of them?” 9S asked, incredulous.

“It wasn’t hard.”

2B still felt a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach. Something was off about Undyne. Very off. But she dismissed it—with Alphys gone, after all, Undyne was bound to be struggling with her emotions.

“Undyne…” 2B reached out and laid a hand on her flared shoulder armor. “I’m sorry about Alphys.”

I’ve said those words so much recently, 2B mused. ‘I’m sorry.’ But, then again, I have a lot to be sorry for.
Seemingly ignoring 2B’s overture and brushing her hand aside, Undyne reached over, removed a short white cylinder from a hidden holster on her armored hip, and held it out toward 2B, as if offering it to her.

Overcome with a sudden sense of dread, 2B stepped backward to narrowly avoid a blazing blade of energy extending from the cylinder. The aquamarine blade roiled, crackled, and hummed as if it were barely holding back an incredible rage; its jagged tip hung in the air just a centimeter away from 2B’s throat, a pulsing electric aura radiating from it.

“Undyne!” 9S shouted out, grabbing 2B protectively by the shoulder. “What the hell are you—”

Undyne said nothing, but merely flicked her other wrist; an aquamarine spear tore itself free of the ground and hit 9S in the chest, tossing him across the road. He hit the ground in a crumpled heap.

“Nines!” 2B cried out, shocked at Undyne’s behavior. Before she could rush over to him, a fence of spears burst out of the ground, penning her in.

“He’ll be fine. 2B, look at me,” Undyne said, brandishing her blade again. It grazed 2B’s cheek just lightly enough to leave a numb, tingling feeling on her skin, and with a gentle nudge, Undyne used it to guide 2B to turn and face her.

“…What are you doing?” 2B asked. Had Undyne gone mad? Or was she on Chara’s side now? Was there any difference between those two options?

“You’re going to go back to the past,” Undyne said, her tone unusually measured, her mouth drawn in a tight, thin-lipped scowl, “and put everything back to normal.”

“What?” 2B took a step back. “No. No, I can’t—”

“I didn’t ask,” Undyne snarled, cutting her off as she took a combat stance. “You’re fixing everything that’s gone wrong, whether you want to or not!” Her energy blade sputtered and died as the cylinder in her hand telescoped into a two-meter staff with angular forked prongs on the end; a sharp aquamarine spearhead blazed to life around the prongs.

2B took a defensive stance, shielding herself behind the buckler mounted to her forearm and keeping its switchblade tucked away. Undyne was the last person she wanted to fight right now… so she wouldn’t.

The spearhead bashed into the shield with a shower of sparks, sending a throbbing pulse of electricity—alternating ripples of searing heat and numbness—up 2B’s arm. She leaped back to avoid another sweeping strike, the spearhead smearing into a long, wicked scythe-like shape as it cut through the air, then dodged another thrust—the spearhead plunged into the ground, tearing through the stony road and kicking a shower of debris into the air.

2B parried a swing of Undyne’s spear with the Joyeuse; the shaft retracted, snagging on the blade of her sword as its two prongs flared out, splitting the spearhead itself into a three-pronged partisan. It dragged the sword from her hand, flinging it across the road. The wicked snarl, feral and fearsome, on Undyne’s face was an expression 2B had never again wanted to be on the receiving end of.

2B circled around Undyne as Pod 042 laid down a salvo of suppressing fire. “Keep it non-lethal,” she cautioned the pod. If she could keep her distance from Undyne, she might be able to talk her down from her frenzied state.

Pod 042 didn’t have to try hard to fulfill 2B’s request: its bullets splashed harmlessly off Undyne’s armor. The pod’s laser had barely any more of an effect. “Analysis: Captain Undyne’s mobile armor
utilizes nanolaminate coating. This substance deflects and disperses projected-energy weapons. The effectiveness of long-range weaponry is significantly reduced.”

“That’s okay. We just have to stay back and try to calm her down.” 2B backed away and felt the cold iron of the gate she’d closed press against her back. The knotted bar she’d tied through the iron bars was still there—how had Undyne gotten past it? Had she jumped clear over it? The gate was nearly three meters tall…

“Undyne!” 2B called out. “Calm down. We can talk this over!”

“What’s there to talk about?” Undyne’s now-shortened partisan folded itself back into a single blade. “There’s only one way to set everything right!”

The skeletal bat-wing armature sprouting from Undyne’s back flared out; with a crackling roar drowning out her ragged battle cry, gouts of brilliant cyan energy burst forth from them, forming ragged, sparking wings of lightning and light and shooting her forward like a bullet.

Her strike was so forceful that it threw 2B through the wrought-iron gate, tearing it apart; fragments of its ornate iron construction sailed through the air as both Undyne and 2B barreled down the street, 2B’s boots skidding against the road as she struggled to find purchase.

2B slipped to the ground and landed flat on her back as Undyne sailed past her, the cacophony of heat, sound, and electrical aura from her wings almost unbearably overwhelming. She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth to ward off the painful pressure. With all this electrical energy pouring out of Undyne—was the armor supplying the energy, or had Undyne always been able to generate this much lightning?—she was almost like a walking EMP.

Undyne pulled up steeply, avoiding careening into a crumbling mansion and flying high into the air; her wings, ragged and trailing sparks that rained down like sleet, brushing the ceiling of the cavern.

Hardly able to comprehend what she was seeing, 2B pulled herself to her feet. “S-She can… she can fly?”

“Affirmative,” Pod 042 replied. “The mobile armor currently utilized by Captain Undyne is flight-capable. The mobile armor is constructed with what Doctor Alphys called a ’magitek circulation system.’ The MCS draws magical energy from the armor’s wearer and distributes it throughout the suit, particularly into weapons and propulsion systems.”

2B pondered this new information. Undyne seemed to be, if anything, overflowing with magic. It was almost as if her body was producing more energy than it knew what to do with. Some of it was leaking out… but 2B wondered if perhaps the vast majority of Undyne’s reserves of magic were building up within her like toxins without a release. Was that driving her erratic behavior?

2B sighed. “Well… she’s not much of a ranged fighter, so I’ll wait for her to get close for another attack and see if I can get through to her.” She gingerly patted her right arm. It already felt a little fuzzy.

“2B!” 9S called out, stumbling across the ruined road toward her. 6O wasn’t far behind him.

“What’s going on?”

2B glanced over her shoulder at the two of them, but as she did so, something tingled in the back of her mind—

Dozens of bolts of lightning spiraled through the air, heading for 2B.
2B threw out her hand. “Wait!” she shouted at 9S and 6O, fearing they might get caught in the crossfire.

The lightning lances froze in midair. 2B was taken aback. Maybe this ability she had to stop time only manifested on accident, or when she least expected to be able to do it. What a pain—an ability she couldn’t consistently rely on was worse than useless.

Nevertheless, knowing she’d only bought herself a few seconds, 2B quickly assessed the situation. Undyne’s projectiles were spread out, targeting both her and the area around her; unfortunately, this meant that 9S and 6O were just as in danger as she was.

2B couldn’t bring herself to believe Undyne was trying to harm either of them on purpose—if that were the case, she really would be too far gone to see reason. Undyne must have meant to target a wide area to prevent 2B from running away.

Time was running out. 2B dashed over to 9S and 6O, placed her hands on their chests, and gave them each a shove, and as their frozen bodies fell backward, 2B whirled around and raised her shield.

Several spears slammed into the shield as time resumed; 2B grunted as the force of the impacts sent tremors up her arm and through her body. One spear slipped past her, slicing open her left ear and carrying with it the scent of scorched synthetic flesh and hair; another buried itself in the ground just barely touching her foot, scraping and singeing the leather of her boot.

As the last spear fell and faded away, 2B spared the slightest of glances over her shoulder at 9S and 6O. Much to her relief, they were both all right—a little shaken from their sudden movements if the looks of shock on their faces was anything to go by, but just out of range of Undyne’s attack. Grim as the situation was, 2B couldn’t help but smile.

Undyne wasted no time in swooping down for her next attack. 2B felt her foot hit her in the back, followed by four sharp, stabbing pains between her shoulderblades; to her surprise, when Undyne took to the air again, she came up along with her. There must have been pitons on Undyne’s boots meant to improve traction; instead, Undyne was using them to snatch 2B up like a sea hawk hunting for fish.

The ground fell away as 2B was carried high into the air. She reached out, grabbing Undyne’s other leg, her fingers scrabbling and scraping against the smooth metal armor. Whatever this nanolaminate coating was, it wasn’t just impervious to beam weaponry, it was slippery as an eel.

“Undyne!” 2B shouted out, the howling wind tearing the words from her mouth as she spoke them. “Put me down! You don’t want to do this!”

To 2B’s surprise, Undyne did as she was told; the pitons retracted, pulling themselves free of 2B’s flesh, and 2B fell like a stone onto the shingled roof of an ancient villa. Hitting the roof knocked the wind out of her, but 2B recovered quickly and pulled herself onto her feet. Blood, hot, wet, and sticky, poured down her back.

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Undyne touched down on the other end of the roof. “Don’t tell me,” she growled, “what I don’t wanna do. You’d do the same thing if Nines died, wouldn’t you?”

“I—”

Undyne lunged forward, and 2B barely managed to conjure the Joyeuse in time to parry her strike. Her blade clashed with 2B’s; 2B struggled to stand her ground as the bursts of energy emitting from
Undyne’s mechanical wings propelled her forward.

“This world… this broken, cruel world… it’ll all go away…” Undyne strained until she tore the blade from 2B’s hands and threw her clear across the roof. “It’ll all be fixed—if I can just kill you!”

2B hit the edge of the roof with enough force to dislodge dozens of already-precarious shingles and kick them into the air; lingering static fuzzed the corner of her vision as she rolled off the edge. She threw out her hand, fingers digging into the rim of the dry gutter lining the roof just in time to keep her from falling all the way to the alley below, and swung back onto the roof. In midair, she lashed out with her leg and caught Undyne on the collar, knocking her backward.

2B returned to her defensive stance. “I can’t go back as far as you want me to go,” she said. “I set a ‘checkpoint’ for earlier this morning. If I die, I’ll just return to that point. And that won’t help anyone.” She decided not to mention that she could go back to the beginning if she chose to—after all, she’d never willingly choose that option again anyway.

Undyne grinned wickedly. “Sounds like something someone who doesn’t want me to kill her would say.”

2B honestly couldn’t argue with that.

Undyne charged forward again, her sword once again shifting to its spear form and splitting its spearhead into a crackling cyan partisan, its crossguard catching 2B’s sword again.

“Besides,” 2B added, “you wouldn’t remember if time reset… but I would. And so would Chara! Everything they’ve done here…” She struggled to parry Undyne’s next strike. “They’d be able to do it all over again!”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take—if I can get Alphys and Asgore back!” Undyne struck again, and for the first time, 2B noticed that she was heavily favoring her left hand—and two of her fingers were bandaged. She must have injured them at some point.

Thinking fast, 2B drew dangerously close to Undyne, grabbed her left hand, and squeezed with all her might.

It was a dirty trick, but Type-E’s were nothing if not connoisseurs of dirty tricks. And judging from Undyne’s pained howl, it was an effective trick as well. Undyne ripped her hand free of 2B’s grip and cradled it in her other hand, her spear falling from her grasp and compressing itself back into a plain little cylinder as it clattered onto the loose shingles at her feet.

2B couldn’t see Undyne’s eyes through her visor, but she felt she was being glared at. “I know… I’ll never see them again. Never…” Undyne’s voice wavered as she cradled her hand. “And what next? Who’s next? Everyone I try to hold onto… everything… the harder I grasp at them, the easier they all slip through my fingers…”

“Undyne, I’m sorry.” 2B held out her hand. “Calm down and let’s talk about this.”

Undyne formed a spear in her right hand. “But I don’t care… I’d erase the whole world right here… myself included… just so another Undyne could see them again—”

Spear met sword again, sparks flying through the air. A salvo of spears flared into existence in midair, moving independently as if they all had wills of their own; as Undyne stood back and commanded her faithful legions, 2B struggled to defend herself.

“Undyne!” 2B shouted out. “I know what it feels like to have people I love taken from me! I know
how desperate you are! I know how much you’re hurting right now—how much of a struggle it is to
go on living! Please listen to me!”

If Undyne had heard her, she made no sign of it; her spears continued their assault. One came too
close for comfort, shattering against the shield affixed to 2B’s forearm; another cut a smoldering slit
through the side of one of her boots as it embedded itself in the roof.

“But this isn’t the answer! You can’t imagine how much it hurts to wipe away an entire world just to
erase a few mistakes!”

“I don’t need to!” Undyne retorted. “It’s not like I’ll remember any of this!”

“Then what’s the point?” 2B asked.

There was a roar of gunfire, and as harmlessly as it pinged off of Undyne’s breastplate, it still
distracted her enough for 2B to launch a counterattack, planting her boot on Undyne’s chest and
shoving her clear across the roof. Pod 042 floated over to 2B’s side.

“First Asgore dies… then the Royal Guard turns into a bunch of jackboots… now… now Alphys…”
Undyne rose to her feet, reeling as if dazed, lightning still lancing and arcing off her body. “My
king… my career… my girlfriend… and you have the power to bring it all back. Make it all go away
like a bad dream…”

“Undyne,” 2B said, her voice shaky. “I—I can’t…” It wasn’t just that she’d promised 9S. 2B
couldn’t fathom erasing the past year for any reason, no matter how noble or selfless. She couldn’t
do that to Nines, she couldn’t just erase that happiness. But she didn’t have time to get a word in
edgewise and explain—

“Of course.” Undyne wiped a tear from her cheek, her quavering voice and hapless snifflers
morphing into a mad cackle. “Of course! Of course, of course, of course, of course, of course!” She
threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, your life is so precious, 2B, so valuable… You know what
would be more valuable to everyone?”

She charged at 2B.

“If you were dead!”

2B braced herself, but Undyne’s words cut through her defenses more effectively than any attack
could.

I’m more useful to the world dead.

Of course she was.

2B always had been. Her existence was one that caused misery upon misery. Her station was to
cause the deaths of good, kind people. It was what she’d been built for. It was what she’d been born
for.

Maybe it would really be for the best if…

Pod 042 summoned a shield around itself and 2B; Undyne’s attacks bounced harmlessly off the
rippling, translucent bubble that enclosed them. 2B should have been thankful for the pod’s quick
thinking, but she wasn’t. The only thought running through her head was that she wasn’t really
interested in dodging or defending against anything anymore.
She’d already ruined 9S’s and 6O’s chances at happiness. Starting over from scratch would give her the opportunity to try again. And Toriel, so wracked with grief over the murder of her ex-husband, knowing that one of her children had grown to be a malicious sociopath and the other a ruthless murderer and tyrant… And now Alphys…

How selfish was 2B being by clinging to this world to spare herself the heartache of erasing the memories of her loved ones again? Only she would bear the burden of that pain, after all. It was a sacrifice she should have been more than willing to bear.

So why fight it?

The shield faded before Pod 042 could summon another one, but 2B hardly noticed.

She should let herself d—

Undyne punched 2B in the face with so much force that her entire upper body went numb for a split second, static filling her eyes and ears as the captain’s electrical aura coursed through her. The momentum from the captain’s attack flung both android and monster off the edge of the roof. The world spun around 2B—what little of it she could discern through a haze of static and blotches of corrupted pixels before she hit the ground.

Pod 042 pulled 2B to her feet. “Observation: Captain Undyne does not appear to be responding to reason,” the pod pointed out. “Proposal: Unit 2B should work to disarm and subdue Captain Undyne before her psychological condition further deteriorates.”

“Pod,” 2B muttered, her voice weak, “go back to 9S and 6O. Look after them.” It didn’t make a difference. But she didn’t want her pod to waste its energy keeping her alive.

“Statement: Unit 2B is—”

“That’s an order, pod.”

Pod 042 hung in the air in an almost forlorn way, but dutifully did as it was told and floated out of the alley, and left alone, 2B and Undyne stared each other down.

The distortion plaguing her sensors cleared away just in time for 2B to feel a familiar pressure on her legs as a green aura enveloped her, pinning her where she stood. It was just a formality at this point—she wouldn’t bother running away even if she could.

Not satisfied with merely pinning her to the ground, Undyne grabbed 2B by the throat. The throbbing waves of lightning coursing through Undyne’s body and into 2B’s made 2B feel dizzy and lightheaded; she couldn’t feel anything from the neck down. Her breath froze in her lungs; black spots ate away at her sight as color began to drain from the world.

2B was fortunate not to feel Undyne drive her fist into her stomach; but a second later when Undyne released her, the pain came flooding back. She doubled over, clutching at her stomach as a searing pain ran through her chassis.

Undyne wasn’t taking her advantage to kill 2B on the spot, though she easily could have. Yet 2B didn’t get the feeling that Undyne was toying with her, either. It was more like Undyne was trying to goad 2B into fighting back… like she wanted a challenge.

Of course she did.

The tip of a familiar sword nicked 2B’s throat. The long, slender white blade of 2B’s own sword,
one of her most constant companions through her life. That sword had been with her almost as long as Pod 042 had and longer than 9S had.

And in Undyne’s hand, it was finally turned against her.

Undyne growled, baring her yellowed fangs, as she held out the Virtuous Contract. A frayed, lank lock of her disheveled scarlet hair, streaked with white, fell over her visor.

A dreadful silence filled the alley.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” Undyne spat. “You think going soft on me is gonna make me feel sorry for you? You think I’m gonna give up and let this hellish timeline get worse!? Put up a goddamn fight, 2B! You’re embarrassing yourself!”

“If you’re going to kill me,” 2B muttered, glancing up at her, “then do it.”

Undyne was taken aback. 2B collapsed to the ground as Undyne released her from her paralyzing aura, clutching at her stomach and curling up as if making herself smaller would make the pain go away. Undyne raised the Virtuous Contract in the air, switching it to an icepick grip, and stabbed downward. 2B braced herself for the end.

The blade slid into the ground barely a hair’s breadth from 2B’s nose. Her breath caught in her throat, her black box burning in her chest.

“Dammit, 2B!” Undyne cried out. “There’s something welling up inside me… like a million little, tiny fires… that won’t let me die. But it’s burning me out… I feel… hollow inside. I don’t know how much time I have left.” Tears began to roll from under her visor down her scaly cheeks. “One last fight, 2B. All out. No holds barred. Please, as my friend… just give me that. Make me earn this!”

“2B!”

9S’s voice cut through the air… and through the fog filling 2B’s mind.

Nines.

She’d promised him.

Undyne cried out and clutched at her forehead, reeling backward. Blood welled up where her sharp fingernails scraped against her scales, and with great effort, she tore the visor from her eyes and threw it aside.

Both her eyes were wide, wild, and jet-black save for the slitted white pinpricks of her pupils; her left eye intermittently spat out aquamarine sparks and arcs of electricity.

New determination welling up within her, 2B pulled herself up to her knees, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ruined street, her fingers curling around the hilt of her the Virtuous Contract. She forced herself to her feet once again, pulling her sword from the ground, as 9S hurried toward her.

9S pulled her out of the alley and ducked into a half-collapsed building, dragging 2B into the shadows. Pod 042 immediately took hold of 2B and propped her up. “What can I do to help?” he whispered urgently, struggling to unsheathe the Cruel Oath at her hip. The machine arm he’d grafted to his right shoulder was long, spindly, and ungainly, its hand little more than a two-pronged claw and a thumb.

“Go away,” 2B replied, grimacing as her perforated back pressed against the wall. She didn’t want
him involved in this fight. Not when Undyne was like *this*. She’d become the Undyne 2B had first met, the howling demon of rage, and 2B knew what to expect from her if 9S tried to step forward and intervene. With Undyne in the state she was in right now, a spear through the eye just might have been the least of 9S’s worries.

“She’s my friend, too! If she’s gone berserk, we’re gonna bring her down *together,*” he insisted.

Pod 042 spoke up. “The mobile armor’s MCS uses an algorithm to manage the flow of magical energy from the wearer to the suit. Proposal: by hacking into the suit’s computer systems, this algorithm could be adjusted to draw several orders of magnitude more magic from Captain Undyne’s body.”

“I can do that,” said 9S.

“It is likely that doing so will overload and burn out the mobile armor’s systems,” said Pod 042. “Drawing excess magic will also severely weaken and pacify Captain Undyne.” It wrung its claws.

“…And?” 9S asked, sensing from Pod 042’s body language that it was leaving something unsaid.

“Hypothesis: Captain Undyne is emitting the same form of DT radiation Doctor Alphys studied in her experiments with the amalgamates,” said Pod 042. “It is possible that the excess magic produced by Captain Undyne and regulated through the MCS may be counteracting the negative effects of constant DT radiation exposure.”

“So if I hack the suit…” 9S started.

“It’ll kill her,” 2B concluded. That was what Undyne meant when she’d said she was burning herself out. Eventually, she wouldn’t have enough magic to balance out her out-of-control determination, and her body would begin to break down…

9S hung his head. He looked as though he were about to say something, but when he opened his mouth, no sound came out.

“I have an idea,” he finally said. “But… 2B, you’ll need to keep Undyne occupied long enough for me to reprogram the MCS.”

2B nodded. If she did her best to pin Undyne down and give 9S the time he needed, she was positive he could find a way to remove Undyne’s combat capabilities without bleeding her dry. If anybody could… *he* could.

“You gonna be okay?” 9S asked.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him, aware that she didn’t *look* fine in the slightest. Judging by the look 9S gave her, *he* was aware, too. “I just didn’t have my, um, head in the game.”

“Oooookay.” 9S sighed. He wiped a little bit of dirt and grime from 2B’s cheek, then gave her a light, soft kiss, his hand gently squeezing her shoulder. “I’ll try to work as quickly as I can.”

2B brandished her buckler and let the long switchblade swing around from its hiding place beneath the shield. “Good luck, Nines.”

Once 2B had stepped into the street, it didn’t take long for Undyne to find her. With a melancholy smirk on her face, the bereaved captain reached for a hidden holster on her hip, withdrew another white cylinder, and ignited it, letting a long and furious blade of crackling energy blaze forth.

“Finally,” she said.
2B readied her blades as the wingspan of Undyne’s mechanized armor lengthened, shedding sparks in twisting patterns through the air.

Chapter End Notes

Remember not too long ago when I ended Chapter 53 with the line, "With 2B’s help… she was going to make it all right"?

Hopefully, some of you saw this coming from that choicely-worded sentence.

And of course, nobody has any idea that Alphys is still alive... because I love me some dramatic irony...
Chapter Summary

Undyne's crusade comes to an explosive conclusion.

Chapter Notes

(musical accompaniment)

You don't wanna know how much Gundam I had to watch to get references for this fight scene. That's why this chapter took so long to write...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alphys sat up, her brain still throbbing inside her skull. Gaubrieta sat at her side and monitored her condition as best she could, her long, angular skull-like face emerging from the dim shadows, a pale green glow wreathing her bony hands.

Wondering where she was but unable to communicate clearly with Gaubrieta, Alphys examined her surroundings. She could barely see a thing without her glasses unless she squinted—then she could see a little bit. One thing she could see at least a little clearly, though, was the picture frame on the bedside table.

A tall monster woman with a sharp, angular obsidian face standing behind two children. One, a scaly blue girl with fiery hair, a square white bandage over her left eye and a toothy grin on her face, and the other, a shorter snake girl with iridescent blue-green scales who seemed a little irritated at having the obsidian woman’s stony hand on her shoulder. Alphys knew one of the girls in the photograph at first glance. It was Undyne.

And the second girl...

This was Lieutenant Snaca’s house. Her bed. So Snaca hadn’t just failed to kill her, Alphys realized—she had decided to spare her. That couldn’t have gone over well with Chara.

Alphys clutched at her aching forehead. “U... Un... dyne...” she gasped. It was still hard to get words out. She could think them easily enough, that wasn’t hard, but just as she couldn’t read them or write them anymore, even speaking them had become a challenge. The words didn’t want to come out in the right order, or sometimes even at all.

Gaubrieta’s foggy emerald eyes were dispassionate as she continued to examine Alphys, prodding gently at the wound marring her neck.

“Un... dyne... h-have to... ph... phone. Phone.” Alphys raised her hand and tapped on the side of her head with her claw. “Okay. Gotta... know. If sh-she’s...”

Gaubrieta shook her head.
No, that wasn’t good enough. She had to make sure Undyne was okay. If Chara had tried to eliminate her, they’d surely have tried to take Undyne out as well. “Please. Let me… call.”

Gaubrieta pulled out a notepad, scribbled a drawing on it, and held it in front of Alphys’ snout. It was a crudely-drawn cell phone with an X through it.

“We… don’t have… phone?”

Gaubrieta shook her head.

“She doesn’t… have one?”

Gaubrieta nodded.

“Help. Help her.” Alphys tried to pull herself out of bed, throwing off the rough sheets. Damn, Snaca lived like this? She was practically a monk if her home was any indication!

Gaubrieta held her down, shaking her head.

“D-Dammit! Let go!” Alphys struggled with her and broke free, pulling herself over to what looked like a desk and what looked like a personal computer on top of the desk.

The RE:Visor system. A centralized server linking the visors she’d reverse-engineered from 2B’s and 9S’s equipment. If Undyne was connected, Alphys could hack in through the backdoor she’d created and send her a message! Or she could connect to her private server and send a message to Pod 042 and 153 and ask them for help!

Alphys reached the computer in spite of Gaubrieta’s silent protests, powered it on, and pulled up a terminal, her fingers hovering over the keyboard, ready to work her wizardry.

And then she realized.

The characters on the keyboard all looked like alien squiggles to her now—numbers, letters, punctuation, all meaningless nonsense.

She backed away from the computer, hands falling limply to her sides, bowing her head and chewing on her lip as hot tears began to well up and roll down her cheeks. There was nothing she could do. Absolutely nothing. Undyne meant the world to her and she could have been hurt or even dead and there was nothing Alphys could do.

She fell to her knees and wailed as Gaubrieta caught up to her, hot tears burning her eyes like acid as they rolled down her snout and dripped onto the floor. The surgeon knelt beside her, still managing to tower over her, and laid her hands on Alphys’ shoulders, running her cold fingertips softly and tenderly across her scales. For a skeletal monster, Gaubrieta’s embrace was just as inviting as Undyne’s had always been… though Undyne had always been much more enthusiastic and had a much stronger grip.

Gaubrieta doodled something on the notepad and held it out for Alphys. It was a crude drawing of herself, a crude drawing of Alphys, and a little pentagon-shaped thing that Alphys supposed was a shield.

Alphys squeezed her eyes shut, choking down sobs as they threatened to tear themselves from her throat. “I—I don’t—I don’t know—Undyne—m-my girlfriend, I-I don’t k-know what… happened to her, i-if she’s… if she’s d-dead or…” Every word fought against her as she tried to force it out, each one struggling to tear itself from her memory before she could use it. “I need… help. Help her. I…"
need to… help… her. A-And… I… I need help…”

Gaubrieta tapped her on the shoulder, catching Alphys’ attention, and pointed to the computer. “C-Can’t… u-use it,” Alphys insisted.

Gaubrieta glanced at the computer, then pointed at herself. Alphys shook her head, growing even more frustrated. She felt like a prisoner in her own head. “N-No. I… c-can’t. Can’t use it,” she repeated. “No… reading. No wr-writing. N-No… no t-typing.”

Gaubrieta wiggled her fingers, then pointed at herself again. “N-No, no… I…” And then it struck her. Of course. Even if a painter lost their arms, they still knew how to paint!

Alphys gathered her thoughts. “R-Run c-command prompt,” she told the doctor. “N-Next…”

Little by little, she began to feed Gaubrieta instructions, and little by little, they began to make progress.

Stark and shifting lights and shadows bathed the streets as 2B and Undyne crossed blades. With every parry, every riposte, sparks flew through the air in whorls and eddies, borne by the wild currents of air flowing around the two fighters as they danced their deadly ballet.

Undyne fought like a demon, wild and enraged. Every swing of her blade, every thrust of her spear was meant to be a finishing move, and every one of them brought with it a whirlwind of lightning carried through the scorched air. 2B, by contrast, moved with quiet, measured, purposeful grace, swift both to attack and to retreat.

However, even with her more conservative fighting style, and even with three swords—the Virtuous Contract in her right hand, the Joyeuse in her left, and Alphys’ switchblade mounted on her right forearm—2B found it difficult to both fend off Undyne’s attacks and penetrate her offensive shield. Undyne, after all, had nigh-infinite weapons at her disposal. And despite her intent to stand and fight, 2B quickly found herself on the back foot.

2B staggered under the force of Undyne’s next attack, reeling as the electrical discharge from her blazing energy blade wrought havoc on her systems, gritting her teeth as electrical energy coursed through her chassis. The world spun around her, waves of dizziness and nausea passing through her.

She’d lost count of how many times she’d fought Undyne. Between battles to the death, sparring sessions, competitions (although, technically, everything Undyne did, she turned into a competition), it had to have been two dozen times or more. She’d thought she’d learned all of Undyne’s moves. But with this new armor and new armaments, the captain was full of surprises. 2B struggled to parry every strike as Undyne’s weapon shifted from a sword to a spear to a partisan and back, struggling to
find an opening to land a hit of her own.

While Undyne had so many new tricks up her sleeve, the tools and techniques at 2B’s disposal weren’t so fresh. That put 2B at a severe disadvantage. She just hoped she could hold out long enough for 9S to come through for her.

Racking her brain for a plan, she used the force of Undyne’s attacks to drive herself backward and hasten her escape, trying to distract Undyne with a burst of gunfire from her pod, but Undyne had no intent on letting her run away.

2B glanced to her left and right, and at last she realized that she did have an advantage over Undyne.

In all of their sparring matches, she and Undyne had only ever fought in wide-open, neutral locations, and in every situation more serious than that, they’d only ever fought on Undyne’s turf. But this was an abandoned city just like the ones littering the surface of the planet—the same cities that inevitably became battlegrounds in the wars against the machines.

This ancient, crumbling city—its walls and rooftops, its languishing remnants of civilization—was a familiar kind of battlefield. It suited 2B perfectly. Every single part of the environment was something she could use.

“What’s the matter?” Undyne taunted, her toes skimming the ground as she glided around 2B to block off her escape. As 2B did an about-face to keep her in her sights, a forest of spears burst from the ground behind her, penning her in. “Running away? I thought you were taking the fight to me!”

Hissing through gritted teeth, 2B pulled to the left and leaped at the wall. Her muscles coiling like springs, she ricocheted off, launching herself in the air and sailing over Undyne’s head, landing behind the captain and stabbing at her back.

It should have been easy for 2B to treat Undyne like just any other enemy. In the old days, she’d snuffed out the lives of machines, deserters from YoRHa, and 9S with equally-dispassionate lack of prejudice. It was as simple as finding a weak point and exploiting it. And as she fended off Undyne’s blows, she noticed plenty of weak points. The heavy nanolaminate armor that so easily shrugged off the long-range ordinance from her pod was incomplete and left Undyne’s upper arms and legs, abdomen, and head far more vulnerable. Beneath that was YoRHa armor, which was durable, but far less so. It would be easy to end this fight with a single fatal strike to any of those areas… or, preferably, a less-than-fatal strike.

The sound of Undyne’s energy sword roaring in her ear as the furious blade swung past her, 2B cut through Undyne’s side, tearing a bloody gash in the black underlayer of her armor.

At last, Undyne retreated, clutching her side as blood seeped through her fingers. Sputtering lances of lightning split off from her wings, coalescing and congealing into wicked spears and arrowheads that homed in on their target like a furious swarm of hornets. 2B dodged and weaved through them, buying herself a little more time as she put more distance between herself and her enemy. A few came close enough to numb her limbs, forcing her to stumble.

Another burst of gunfire from her pod rid 2B of the last remaining stragglers flying after her. Undyne’s new ranged attacks made her a more dangerous foe than ever before. What could 2B do to gain an advantage here?

As Undyne charged at her, the ragged bursts of energy from her wing armatures raging like wildfire, 2B tossed the Virtuous Contract and Joyeuse aside, freeing up her hands, and took hold of the shaft of Undyne’s spear, ripping it out of her grip. The crackling energy blade sputtered and died as
Undyne’s hand left the spear’s shaft—it had been cut off from the bottomless well of magical energy circulating through her armor. She threw it aside, summoned the Virtuous Contract back to her hand, and with a single swing of the white blade, sliced it in two.

2B’s next swing of the blade struck Undyne, leaving only superficial scrapes and scratches on her armor—yet her attacks still knocked the captain backward. This armor was strong, it was resilient, but it was not physics-proof.

2B dove to the ground and slid beneath the sputtering wings flaring out from Undyne’s back, her skull painfully throbbing from the wings’ pulsing electrical aura as she rolled back onto her feet and attacked Undyne from behind.

It took another strike to knock Undyne off her feet, another to throw her into the air, and a third—2B leaped onto Pod 042 and launched herself off its hull to position herself above Undyne—to slam her back down to the ground, the curtains of aquamarine light and lightning streaming from her wings shattering on impact with the worn stones lining the street.

2B brought her sword down for a fourth strike, the wind rushing through her ears and drowning out the lingering static plaguing her audio sensors.

Undyne threw up her arms in an X-shape over her chest, and the shining white blade clanged against her forearm guards. Blood sprayed from her mouth as her sharp fangs dug into her tongue; her arms trembled as she struggled against the force of 2B’s attack. With a ragged, hoarse battlecry, she flung out her arms, knocking 2B backward and tearing the sword from her hands.

Thanks to her NFCS, disarming 2B for any significant length of time was a fool’s errand—but Undyne only needed a second to leap to her feet and grapple with her, twisting her arm and throwing her onto the ground.

2B recovered just as quickly as Undyne had, barely managing to block a salvo of energy spears with her shield as Undyne’s wings flared back to life and the captain rose into the air once more.

*Dammit, not again,* 2B thought. Undyne’s flight capabilities were one advantage the captain had that she couldn’t hope to surmount. “Pod, engage missiles,” she ordered Pod 042, “and target Undyne’s backpack!”

Pod 042’s hull split open on command and let loose three missiles. Smoky gray trails of exhaust hung in the air as the missiles homed in on their target; Undyne climbed higher into the air, struggling to shake them off. She cut one in half with her energy sword, letting it explode harmlessly in the air and dodged and weaved out of the way of the other two, but was unable to shake them.

2B felt her spirits lift as she watched the other missiles draw closer and closer until—

Undyne threw up her arm and a ragged sheet of turquoise energy formed over it in a rough diamond shape. The missiles impacted against the shield and detonated, wreathing Undyne in a cloud of smoke; when the smoke cleared, the captain was completely untouched.

2B’s face fell. “What?”

“Analysis: the mobile armor ZGMF-X19A Infinite Justice’s weapon and equipment loadout is as follows: Beam partisan, four. Flight unit, two. Beam shield, one. Beam cannon—"

“Beam cannon?” 2B asked, a chill running up her spine. She steeled herself as she looked up at Undyne.
A beam of light tore itself loose from Undyne’s forearm where the energy shield had been generated, searing the air around it and filling 2B’s nostrils with the overwhelming odor of burnt ozone; 2B only just barely managed to avoid being struck by the beam, but found herself pelted by the debris from the crater it left in the street.

Undyne kept firing, turning the street into a shooting gallery as 2B scrambled for shelter.

“According to Doctor Alphys’ design documents,” said Pod 042, “the Infinite Justice’s beam shield absorbs the kinetic energy of incoming projectiles and uses it to charge the beam cannon.”

“You have access to Alphys’ design documents?” 2B asked, incredulous. Before she could leap through the window of a dilapidated shop for cover, another bolt from the heavens tore through it, reducing it to a blackened, smoking heap of rubble.

“Affirmative.”

“Then tell me its weak points!”

The air fell silent; the roar of the energy blasts faded away. For once, all 2B could hear was her own heavy breathing over the pitched whirring of her black box.

“The Infinite Justice’s beam cannon is part of a closed energy system, connected to the MCS solely via the beam shield,” Pod 042 explained. “This is to prevent it from draining the energy of the mobile armor’s occupant. Hypothesis: Captain Undyne’s beam cannon has just run out of energy.”

But Undyne wasn’t down for the count just yet. A crackling spear buried itself in the ground at 2B’s feet, and another, and another, and 2B was once again forced to dodge another salvo of electrical blasts.

Undyne swooped down, buzzing the rooftops as she strafed 2B. She still had plenty of means to attack from her vantage point in the air and plenty of open space to maneuver, and 2B was even further limited now that she knew that Undyne could simply soak up any of her pod’s ranged attacks. The battle had shifted even further in Undyne’s favor.

As she braved the hail of lightning, 2B could feel her limbs growing heavier, her muscles growing stiffer. The longer she continued to fend off Undyne’s attacks, the weaker she felt. To make matters worse, even narrowly avoiding or blocking the attacks wasn’t enough to stop the electrical discharge from affecting her systems. She couldn’t keep this up forever. *Come on, Nines,* she pleaded, all but praying for him to intervene. *How long is it taking for you to hack into her armor?*

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Hacking into Undyne’s armor was, in fact, taking much longer than 9S had expected. He was almost insulted by how tough the security systems in place around the armor’s MCS regulation programs were. Why would Alphys put these sorts of defense mechanisms in place? It wasn’t like anyone but him had any hacking abilities down here.

9S discarded that line of thought. If there were anti-hacking measures in place around the MCS, it was probably just because it was a very delicate system, not because Alphys had intended to make this mobile armor into some kind of weapon perfectly tailored for kicking android ass. And if she had put these bothersome firewalls in place intentionally, then she’d probably been forced to do so by Chara.

He lost his concentration as a digital defense turret targeted and fired on his avatar, knocking him out of Undyne’s systems. His head throbbed and ached as a wave of static cascaded past his eyes and
ears, deafening and blinding him for a few seconds as he staggered and stumbled backward. When his vision returned, he saw to his dismay that Undyne had taken to the air once again.

9S punched the ground. Dammit! It was hard enough to get a bead on Undyne when she wasn’t flitting around like a wasp on amphetamines. He had to hack her to disable her wings, but he had to disable her wings to hack her...

As he pulled himself to his feet, 9S heard Pod 042’s voice echo in his head.

Pod 042 to Unit 9S. This support unit proposes disabling the beam shield functionality of Captain Undyne’s mobile armor.

“Yeah, yeah. Help me lock onto her first,” 9S muttered, climbing onto a nearby rooftop and trying to focus on Undyne as she zipped through the air, “and I’ll do whatever you want.”

Nearby, a rickety tower loomed over the abandoned city, its apex nearly brushing against the roof of the vast cavern; spying a tactical advantage, 9S hurried toward it.

Once more, Undyne divebombed 2B, swooping low to the ground, carrying an acrid, bitter-tasting gust of wind in her wake. 2B raised her blades just in time to parry a strike from Undyne’s blazing sword; however, the force of the blow, augmented by Undyne’s free-fall acceleration and the thrust from her wings, was more than enough to knock 2B off her feet.

The world spun incoherently around her, air and ground trading places with increasing rapidity before 2B felt herself collide with a stone wall, then another wall, then another, until she landed on the smooth, worn stone surface of a nearly-dry canal. Only the barest trickle of cool water ran down this long-forgotten structure, mingling with the blood dripping from 2B’s forehead as she lay in a crumpled heap in the middle of the smooth, curved trench.

2B heard 9S call out her name as she struggled to her feet. Her side ached; when she’d hit the ground, the edge of the buckler on her right forearm had dug into it painfully, and 2B could feel blood from the wound adhering the wound to her shirt.

This was bad. She wasn’t wearing Undyne down—if anything, Undyne seemed to be growing stronger with every passing moment, whereas 2B was growing weaker. What would she have to do to stop this senseless violence? She couldn’t so much as tire Undyne out, never mind talking her out of her bloodthirsty berserker rage.

The words of an old mentor who had left her long ago rang in 2B’s ears.

*Remember: pride, affection, happiness, sadness, love, hate—all androids must deny themselves these pleasures. But for a Type-E especially, putting aside one’s emotions is even more vital.*

2B’s inner voice, her conscience, had stopped referring to herself as ’2E’ very soon after her first kill. She’d never wished to be a cold-blooded assassin, and her cover had given her an identity she could embrace in its stead. An ideal self… a version of herself she wouldn’t have to carry such loathing for. That was who she had tried to be from the moment she had discovered that she and 9S had no way out of the Underground.

She didn’t want to go back.

But…
If Undyne was so desperate to return to the past, then 2B would show her what the past was really like.

Her past.

Pod 042 rejoined her just as Undyne charged full steam ahead, tearing through the hole 2B had made with reckless abandon.

2B grabbed hold of Pod 042’s arm. “Pod! Wire! Now!” she shouted, throwing herself underneath Undyne. The pod shot out a yellow-white bolt of lightening of its own, latching onto Undyne’s foot as the captain pulled back up and ascended once more. 2B clung to her pod with a white-knuckle grip, the wind rushing in her ears as Undyne carried her along as an unwelcome passenger.

Undyne came to a stop, but carried by momentum, 2B kept sailing upward. Merely a split second after the wire connecting the two fighters disengaged, 2B reached her apex and began to fall. Clutching the pod to her chest, she fired on Undyne at point-blank range. The barely-discriminate spray of bullets bounced harmlessly off of Undyne’s thick outer layers of armor, but chewed through the thinner and less durable inner layer.

As 2B fell, Undyne kicked the pod out of her hands, then launched a salvo of lightning-fast kicks into 2B’s midsection.

2B hit the ground, sprawled out across the cracked and shattered stone road as a haze of pain engulfed her mind. If the sticky warmth spreading across her stomach was any indication, her pajamas were ruined… stupid thing to care about, now of all times...

Above her, Undyne circled through the air in a ragged figure-eight pattern, as if keeping her distance. 2B’s attack must have had an impact… but she knew full well that Undyne wouldn’t back off or retreat. No matter how pointless it was—2B would never reset, never, not after she’d promised 9S—Undyne would keep fighting until one of them was dead… or both of them were.

But… maybe Undyne was right. Maybe so many mistakes had been made in this timeline that there was nothing left to do but reset and try again.

Reset and try again. Try again. Try again. Try again. Try again. Always trying again, erasing everything, good and bad alike, wiping the slate clean. In the back of her mind, forty-six ghosts screamed at her not to give up—not to fill the afterlife with billions of ghosts from a timeline that had been unmade.

2B stood up, her shoulders sagging under the weight of her pain and exhaustion, but clenched her fists and gritted her teeth.

I won’t.

Pod 042 returned to her side, looking only a little worse for the wear. It always surprised 2B just how much punishment tactical support pods could take… in certain circumstances. “This support unit has a suggestion to improve Unit 2B’s combat efficiency. Unit 2B’s heat saber requires an external power source to perform at full capacity,” it noted. “Proposal: connect this support unit to the device.”

It was then that 2B recalled what Pod 042 had said about the switchblade affixed to her forearm when she’d received it. It had been designed based on the weaponry from the flight units she and 9S had arrived here in…

2B nodded. “All right. Do it.”
Opening its clamshell hull, Pod 042 fished the tied-off bundle of cables out from under the buckler and ran it into its chassis.

“This won’t… cause any problems, will it?” 2B asked, concerned. Pod 042 was as much her friend as anybody else down here, and her mind raced with all of the ways using it as a battery could go wrong. Its circuits could be fried, it could be shut down, it could wipe its internal memory and personality data…

“This support unit’s long-range armaments may become unusable for an extended period of time,” Pod 042 answered. “However, permanent damage is unlikely.”

Her worries assuaged, 2B allowed Pod 042 to connect itself to the sword. When that was done, the blade began to hum and glow with a shimmering reddish-orange aura.

Pod 042 hooked its arms around 2B’s waist, letting her wear it like a backpack as it channeled the power from its propulsion system into the blade. “Connection complete.”

2B gave the heat saber an experimental swing, the blade leaving a ghostly orange afterimage smeared across the air.

She raised her head. “Don’t you understand, Undyne?” she cried out. “It’s pointless! You’ll never be able to erase the past!”

She’d hoped to goad Undyne into fighting her down here, where her heat saber could (hopefully) do some real damage to that suit of mobile armor. But instead, Undyne did something else.

▫▫▫

Even from his new vantage point atop the tallest structure he could find—a rickety, creaking tower made from stone and half-rotten wood—9S struggled to lock onto Undyne. She was just too fast, too maneuverable. In terms of agility and speed, she put YoRHa’s best flight units to shame.

9S held out his hand, trying to follow Undyne’s movements. He could feel his mind being pulled closer and closer to the computer systems of the captain’s mobile armor. Almost there… almost there…

Undyne spun on a dime and began firing spearheads at 9S’s tower, grazing its decaying structure as she closed in on him. With every strike, the tower began to crumble.

Damn! 9S packed up and hurried down the staircase, each step groaning in protest as the 0walls around him shook. How’d she figure out what I was doing?

The tower trembled violently, its throes nearly tossing 9S off the winding staircase. Given a little more punishment, this thing would collapse right on top of him!

Or does she know, 9S wondered, that if she kills me, 2B won’t have any choice but to reset?

Scanning his environment for a faster way out, 9S spied a narrow window, like the slits in castle walls used by archers in the distant past. It’d be a tight fit, but luckily for him, this whole tower was being held together by spit and prayers, and there weren’t very many people here to do any praying.

He threw himself out the window, his shoulders catching on the sides and tearing through the fragile stone as he leaped into open air. Fortunately enough, a two-story villa with a mostly-intact roof lay beneath him to break his fall; tucking in his legs, he hit the roof rolling as the upper levels of the tower he’d been sniping from sloughed off its rotting scaffolding and collapsed in on itself.
Undyne took notice of him, readying a volley of spears—

And froze in midair, surrounded by a ghostly blue aura.

2B despaired when she noticed where Undyne was headed—who she was headed toward. She couldn’t bear to lose 9S. Not after all this. Not after he’d created so many fragile memories.

At first, when Undyne stopped moving, 2B thought she’d somehow stopped time.

But the flickering wisps of lightning streaming from Undyne’s mechanical wings weren’t frozen—they still lashed out, crackling and spitting with savage fury.

Something else… somehow… had stopped Undyne in her tracks. 2B could see her straining and writhing against her frozen armor, struggling to move her limbs.

*Nines… did you do it?* 2B wondered.

Captain Undyne has been subdued, Pod 042 told 9S. *Query: is this sufficient for Unit 9S to lock onto and hack the mobile armor?*

“H-How?” 9S asked. But before he could answer, the roof gave out beneath him. “Shit!” he cried out, fumbling for purchase.

And then he stopped. He felt his insides twist around inside him as gravity ceased to apply to him. The same aura that had surrounded Undyne now wreathed his limbs.

Standing on the intact edge of the roof were two skeletal monsters, one lanky, one short and stout.

“Heya, kiddo,” said Sans. “Looks like you aren’t having a very good *trip* this fall.”

“What’s going on?” 9S asked as he found himself telekinetically lifted out of the hole and gently deposited onto a more stable section of the roof. “A-And how long have you two been able to do *this*?”

“Since forever,” said Sans.

“You never told me you could do that!” 9S shouted.

Sans shrugged. “You never asked.”

“One of your little robots called me!” Papyrus exclaimed, brandishing his cell phone, “and told me you needed help!” He glanced at Undyne’s frozen form, hanging in the sky. “So, uh… did Undyne’s and 2B’s sparring match get out of control again?”

“Yeah,” 9S lied. “Looks like the bionic armor Undyne’s been testing has a will of its own; it’s going crazy up there.” There was no need for Papyrus to know what had *really* happened to his mentor.

“And with her inside it? Yikes!”

“Yikes’ is right.” 9S lifted his arm and got a bead on Undyne. He wasn’t sure how Sans and Papyrus had managed to stop her in her tracks like that, but he welcomed their assistance. “Now just hold her steady while I hack into her armor.”
Papyrus cupped his hands around his mouth. “You can do it, Undyne!” he shouted out at her as she struggled against the aura holding her in place. “You’re stronger than that machine! I believe in you!”

9S felt his mind sink into the computer systems of Undyne’s armor, and he went to work, tearing through the virtual microcosm of the mobile armor as swiftly and deftly as he could.

Whatever was holding Undyne in place gave way, dropping the captain to the ground; as soon as her feet touched the rough and battered cobblestone road, she charged at 2B, crossing blades. Orange sparks flew in showers from the energized heat saber as it ground against Undyne’s crackling beam sword.

“You need to stop this. You don’t realize what you’re asking me to do!”

“The right thing!?” Undyne answered. “For once in your life, 2B!”

2B nearly pulled the sword from Undyne’s hands with her next strike, then took advantage of her opening to cut a smoking, blackened gash through her chestplate with the heat saber. A shower of teal sparks gushed from the wound in the thick armor plating.

“This world isn’t a plaything you can just erase when it doesn’t turn out your way!” 2B retorted. “I understand the pain you feel, and I know the past hurts, but you have to learn to live with it!”

“Shut up!” Undyne shouted.

2B gritted her teeth as she fended off another enraged blow from Undyne. “What you’re doing isn’t noble or righteous!” she told Undyne, digging in her heels. “You’re being a coward!”

She struck Undyne again, but this time, the captain raised her forearm and conjured her beam shield again; the glowing blade of 2B’s heat saber ground against it, and the translucent shield flickered as it gorged itself on the blade’s energy.

Undyne grinned. “I don’t care if I’m a coward,” she said. “After all… in a few seconds, I won’t exist! None of this will exist! Everything’s going to go back to the way it used to be… No more Chara… and no more…”

Undyne’s blackened eyes widened, her harsh snarl softening. “A-Are you still gonna be friends with the next Undyne?”

2B was caught off guard by Undyne’s question, but at that same instant, the beam shield draining the energy from her saber vanished in a flurry of sparks and her blade, no longer deterred, cut another diagonal line through Undyne’s chestplate, forming a smoking, charred X through the armor.

Undyne staggered back, the electrical aura flowing from her wings flickering and firing from the skeletal wing scaffolding’s emitters in ragged spurts. She clutched at her head, screaming, as electricity purged itself from her body and coursed through the mobile armor before exiting through the wings, the sheer magnitude of energy released blackening and charring the blue and white paint. At last, after an explosive burst of aquamarine electric discharge, the inoperative wing scaffolding protruding from her armor hung from her back like dead weight. 2B gritted her teeth and braced herself as the shockwave engulfed her, sending static and visual and audio artifacts rolling through her senses.
The orange glow surrounding her heat saber dissipated, rendering the blade once more simply inert metal, and Pod 042 removed itself from 2B’s back.

“The heat saber is no longer operable at max output,” Pod 042 announced.

“That’s okay,” 2B said, sighing. “I-I think it’s…”

Even without her wings to aid her, Undyne still charged at 2B with just as much ferocity as before.

Static fuzz ran across 2B’s eyes as another spear crashed into her shield, sending tremors up her arm. The jagged spearhead lost its shape against the shield, deforming and splashing against the metal; sparks kicked up from the impact swirled through the air. Those that drifted onto 2B’s bare skin burned like acid.

2B’s hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of Undyne’s hair, feeling it tear from her scalp; the now-dormant heat saber mounted on her forearm sliced through both Undyne’s left eye and her left earfin, leaving the fin’s thin membrane torn, ragged, and bleeding. Undeterred, Undyne drove her kneecap—the armor sharp and wickedly-scalloped—into 2B’s stomach, puncturing her skin and scraping her armored chassis. Gasping and wheezing, 2B let go and stumbled back, quickly summoning her two swords back to her hands as Undyne assaulted her with another barrage of electric spearheads.

Undyne’s ruined left eye gushed blood—it streamed down her cheek, dripping off her chin and running down her neck, like a crimson waterfall—but a light still sparked from within its black depths, gouts of electric energy pouring out and drifting through the air around her.

The two grappled, their hands clasping at each other’s wrists and scrabbling for purchase. 2B shifted tactics, locking elbows with Undyne to free her hands; Undyne’s sharp armor dug into her skin hard enough to cut through it, drenching her sleeves in blood. 2B conjured the Joyeuse to her hand in a reverse grip and, slowly but surely, began to twist the blade, inching it closer and closer to Undyne’s neck…

Something hot pressed against her right bicep; 2B glanced at it and found a battered white cylinder in Undyne’s left hand, her fist clenched around it in a death-grip even as her two broken fingers stuck out at odd angles.

Realizing what Undyne was about to do, 2B tried to pull away—but her hands were tied. Undyne had her pinned down.

Undyne grinned viciously and ignited the blade for only a split second—but that split second alone was enough for the blade to bore a hole all the way through 2B’s arm.

2B let out an earsplitting, ragged scream and collapsed as Undyne tossed her aside. With so much pain coursing through her nervous system and howling through her brain, she barely felt herself hit the ground.

Still, she pulled herself to her feet, clutching her arm as it dangled at her side.

2B and Undyne stood facing each other, both panting for breath, both struggling to stay standing. Undyne’s eyes, jet-black, were half-closed; sweat made her ashen scales glisten. Her earfins drooped and her scarlet hair was mussed and singed—her exhaustion was more than apparent in every inch of her body.

But sparks still flew from Undyne’s body, and she still managed to put one leg in front of another as she came closer and closer to 2B.
“I’m… the hero…” she rasped as she stumbled toward 2B. “I’m the one… who’s gonna… fix the world…”

“Alert: FFCS and NFCS inoperable,” Pod 042 warned 2B. Sure enough, she couldn’t summon any sword to her hand; her right arm hung limply at her side, the inoperative buckler and heat saber hanging from it like a lead weight. “Long- and short-range attacks are no longer possible. Proposal: retreat immediately and perform temporary repairs before reengaging in combat.”

Undyne continued to inch closer. “Right all the wrongs… make everything… back… like it should be…”

“Undyne…” 2B squeezed her arm where it hurt the most, as if doing so could squeeze the pain from her flesh. If only she’d woken up sooner… if only she’d managed to be there for her friends when they’d needed her the most… if only… if only…

“I can’t erase this world,” 2B said. “All of the lives of everybody down here… and on the surface… unmade in an instant…” She fell to her knees as Undyne trudged closer. “I can’t… I can’t let you do that. All my life, the only thing I’ve been good at has been killing…” Tears began to leak from her eyes. “I can’t go back to that. I can’t do it. I can’t kill the world. I promised. I promised.”

Undyne loomed over her. The closer she came to 2B, the more unwell she looked. The dark rings under her eyes, the grayish pallor of her normally-brilliant-blue scales, the gauntness of her face…

These last few weeks must have been hell on her. And for it to all come to a head like this… 2B wasn’t sure she could fully understand the full extent of the turmoil of Undyne’s mind, but what she could understand filled her heart with pity.

“And you… you can’t do it either,” 2B told her. “I know… Undyne… you’ve always been better than me. I’m just a murderer. You’re a hero. No matter how many of our fights I won… I could never…”

*I could never live up to you, Undyne.*

*You were always so brave, so bold. You lived by your principles. All I ever knew how to do was follow orders, no matter how much they hurt. The more I got to know you, the more I looked up to you… as the person I could have been… as the person I should have been.*

*I’ve never been a good friend, have I?*

2B let out a weak, bitter laugh.

*I can’t help but feel… that you’ve learned from me as much as I’ve learned from you.*

She thought back to 14E, 6E, Commander White—the women who’d taught her, who’d shaped her. They’d all been lousy teachers… and so, it seemed, was she.

As she stood before 2B, words from a dream ran through Undyne’s head. Words from a nightmare that had hooked its talons into the real world.

“We have a shared duty, Undyne. Adopted children of royalty, bound not by blood, but united with a common purpose!” Chara had said, pulling the flower from their eye, blood running from its burned socket like tears down their pale cheek. “*In your heart, you know I’m right. Stay with your friends and abandon everything you claim to stand for… just as Father did… or stand with me… and save*
Her friends… or the world?

Kill 2B… fix the timeline… or…

She reached out with a trembling hand. Laid it on 2B’s shoulder. 2B knelt, immobilized and exhausted, as Undyne’s gauntleted hand slid up her neck and her fingers curled around her throat.

And she began to squeeze.

Undyne stood in the snow, shivering as the cold air chilled the sweat coating her scales. She was utterly exhausted, and so was 2B. They were all out of weapons… all out of magic… and neither had the energy to even throw a punch anymore, let alone a spear.

“You fall first,” said Undyne, pointing at 2B as she swayed on unsteady legs.

“No,” 2B retorted, smiling faintly. “You fall first.”

“No, you,” said Undyne. This was her and 2B’s thirteenth sparring match. 2B had won six. Undyne had won six. The tiebreaker match was not going to go to 2B. Undyne would make sure of it.

2B took a step forward and nearly fell over. “It’s over.”

“Yeah…” Undyne tried to step forward, but felt the world spin around her. “For you.”

She grabbed 2B by the wrist and the two of them fell into the snow at the exact same time. Undyne hated the cold more than anything, but she was too tired to get up.

“It’s a tie,” said 2B, sighing. Snowflakes settled on her black jacket, dotting it like the tiny diamonds dotting the ceilings of the tunnels deep in Waterfall, like the stars in the sky Undyne had always heard so much about.

“Yeah,” said Undyne, sighing more heavily as the falling snow tickled her fins, her breath forming clouds in the frigid air. ‘Hey. If I pass out first, you gotta drag me to Papyrus’ house. Or Grillby’s. Whatever’s closer. I’ll freeze to death out here.”

“What if I pass out first?”

Undyne laughed. “Then we die.”

“Then perish.”

“No… no, no!” Undyne tugged on 2B’s sleeve. “We gotta have a re-rematch tomorrow!”

“Oh… all right.” 2B began to pull herself up, but wavered, so Undyne took hold of her and propped her up.

The two of them rose on unsteady feet, their arms slung over each others’ shoulders, and began to trudge through the snow like a lumbering, ungainly four-legged creature.

“Any broken parts or anything?” Undyne asked 2B, eyeing a long, purplish-black bruise on the side of her right hand. That was the same hand Alphys kept having to repair.
“Just a little worn out.” 2B smiled, her cheeks flushed from exertion and the cold. “How about you?”

It was hard for Undyne to believe that just a few months ago, 2B had been a quiet, emotionally-repressed, stoic weirdo. Now she was just a quiet, stoic weirdo. A cute, quiet, stoic weirdo. Not as cute as Alphys, though. Well, cuter in a different way, but not as cute in other ways. Important ways. One thing 2B did have over Alphys, though, was that out of every living thing on the planet she probably had the most perfectly-shaped a—

“How about you?” 2B asked.

“How?” Undyne hadn’t been listening.

“Nothing broken?”

Undyne couldn’t help but laugh. “You aren’t that good,” she told her.

“We’ll see,” 2B said.

“Excuse me?”

“We’re having a rematch tomorrow, aren’t we? We’ll see.”

“I can let go of you and just leave you here in the snow,” Undyne warned her as the facade of Grillby’s pub drew closer. “C’mon. Let’s get something to eat!”

Grillby’s was warm and inviting as always—it was hard not being warm when the bartender was a fire elemental—and, of course, Undyne was very well-known in there. Most of its regular patrons were her subordinates. One big, hot, thick, greasy, dripping burger later, Undyne was feeling like her old self again.

At her side, 2B carefully cut her burger into manageable pieces with a fork and knife, a napkin spread out over her lap.

“That’s not how you—”

“Table manners are important.” 2B insisted as she daintily ate every bite-size piece one by one.

Undyne shook her head and sighed. She was one hundred percent certain that 2B only did that to annoy her.

The night wore on. Undyne kept drinking. So did 2B, although after the fifteenth pitcher of beer between the two of them, Undyne was starting to believe 2B when she said that alcohol didn’t do anything to YoRHa models.

“Are you okay?” 2B asked as Undyne almost stabbed her own hand with her fork. She’d been trying to mock 2B’s ironclad adherence to fancy dining decorum by chopping up her fifth burger of the night, but she was rapidly losing her ability to aim her utensils.

“Kay? Yeah, m’okay,” Undyne said. Her words sounded slurred even to her own earfins, a sure sign that she was probably too drunk now to keep drinking. “M’the queen of okay. I’m Missus Okay.” She hiccuped. “Miss Okay,” she corrected, leaning against
2B’s shoulder as she twirled her fork, dropped her fork, picked up her knife, twirled her
knife, and then dropped it on the floor as well. “But we could be Missus Okays.” She
rested her hand on 2B’s collar, tracing the edges of her collarbone in what she hoped
was a very suggestive way.

“I’m not interested,” 2B said coolly, delicately removing Undyne’s hand from her
shoulder, “in coming between you and Alphys. Sorry.”

“Oh, th’only ‘comin’ between’ you’ll be doing is… is…” Double entendres? Forget
those. Undyne’s brain only had enough power in it for single entendres now. She tried
to swagger without getting up off her stool and nearly fell off, only for 2B to catch her.

“Maybe you’ve had enough to drink,” 2B told her.

“C’mon! Haven’t y’heard-a ’polyarmory?”

2B raised her eyebrows quizzically. “No…”

“It’s when…” Undyne hiccups and felt something trying to crawl up her throat. She
swallowed it back down. Was Grillby standing too close to her? She felt hot. Really hot.
Hot like ‘just walked through Hotland to see Alphys’ hot.

She bent over to pick up her fork and knife again. Or, well, tried to. Eventually, 2B just
gave her hers.

“Yeah! Okay, so…” Undyne held up the fork in one hand and knife in the other. “We
got two hands, right? For two swords. Two spears. Two whatever you want.” She raised
the fork, then the knife. “You. Alphy.”

She shoved the utensils back into 2B’s hands, then grabbed her by the wrists and raised
each hand in turn as 2B sat there, a bemused look on her face. “Me. Alphy.” Then
Undyne pried the fork and knife out of 2B’s hands, held them out, and dropped them
onto the floor.

“Okay, uh… that’s where Alphy’s s’posed to pick ’em up.” Undyne gestured to the
fork. “Me.” She gestured to the knife. “You.” With her explanation finished, she
grinned a toothy grin. “Polyarmory!”

2B looked at her, still utterly bemused, her mouth slightly agape. “So… dual-wielding.”

Undyne nodded so vigorously that she got motion sickness. “Yeah! But for girlfriends!
The three of us,” she said, “could all be each other’s girlfriends! Whaddaya think?”

“I-I, uh, think you should ask Alphys—” 2B stammered, her face reddening.

“Y’know she’d be down f’r it? So, how ’bout it? Huh?” Undyne leaned in closer to 2B.
“Huh?” She leaned in even closer to 2B. “Huh?” She leaned in even closer to 2B and
toppled over.

2B caught her as she fell and all but dragged her out of Grillby’s. “Come on, Undyne.
I’ll get you a room at the inn.”

Undyne wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. “Make sure to ’accident’ly’ rent a room
with only one bed,” she said. Then she burped, puked, and passed out.
Undyne shuddered under 2B’s gaze. 2B looked into her eyes expectantly, as if trying to divine her thoughts through them. Her gaze from behind disheveled, matted, and bloodstained snow-white bangs was piercing—and, somehow, accusing.

It was the same as last time. Undyne had 2B at her mercy…

But she couldn’t do it.

Even after all this, even at the end of all things, even after the heartbreak and pain, even after watching the decay of the world she’d been so proud of, even after seeing her resolve crumble before her eyes, Undyne couldn’t do this.

2B was, and always would be, her friend.

She hated herself for being unable to go through with her plan, but she hated herself just as much for wanting to do it in the first place. What had happened to her? What had happened to the Spear of Justice? How could she have allowed herself to be reduced to… this?

Undyne hadn’t fully realized the extent to which Chara had seeded her mind. She’d tried so hard to block them out… but all this time, they’d been planting their own twisted ideas into her mind, watering them, nurturing them like the flowers in Asgore’s beloved garden…

But Chara had failed. They couldn’t turn Undyne into them, no matter how hard they’d tried to poison her. You don’t sacrifice friends for the greater good. You don’t cut down the people you love for standing in your way. That wasn’t what a hero of justice did. That wasn’t what a hero of anything did.

That wasn’t what Undyne did.

Since she’d stumbled upon Alphys’ remains, Undyne had felt like all her thoughts were trudging through a field of mud—sluggish, slow, muddled, and murky. But now, at last, her mind felt clear.

She laid her hands—both of them—on 2B’s shoulders, the two broken fingers on her left hand smarting, and pulled 2B into a hug, burying her face in her chest as she let loose hours’ worth of repressed sobs. 2B’s shirt was so soft, so…

It was her pajamas.

All along, she’d been trying to kill a girl in her pajamas.

The two of them knelt there on the ground, silent save for Undyne’s quiet, muffled tears.

In the end, she couldn’t do it. In the end, she knew that she couldn’t have ever done it in the first place.

“I’m sorry,” Undyne sobbed. “I’m so sorry, 2B… please…”

2B slowly, gingerly wrapped her arm around Undyne’s waist and hugged her.

9S leaped into view, baring his sword. “Undyne!” he shouted out. “Don’t you dare… hurt… uh… 2B?”

The world began to fade to black around Undyne as she murmured her desperate apologies to 2B, and as the darkness closed in, she wondered if this was the end.

It was okay if it was. Maybe then, she’d see Asgore and Alphys again…
Pod 042’s monotone voice echoed in the void.

“*Incoming transmission. Source unknown…*”

The next thing Undyne heard before everything went black was a familiar voice.

“*U-Un… d-d-dyne… a-are… you… th-there…?*”

Chapter End Notes

I hope this chapter was as emotionally draining to read as it was to write.

Need a pick-me-up? The first of my short "side stories" fleshing out the timeskip in between routes D and E has just been published and you can read it here:

[Ghost in the Machine: Long Story Short](#)
"Despite everything, it's still you." Anguished by her battle with Undyne, 2B wonders if her life underground has been worth it. As Chara draws nearer, Asriel makes a bold decision.

The first thing Undyne felt was a soft pressure on her hand. She wasn’t sure if she was alive or dead. Everything was black as pitch, black as the deepest depths of the mountain, and quiet as the grave.

Was this her grave?

Alphys...

Her timid, nasally voice still rang in Undyne’s earfins. There was nothing for it to compete with. How wonderful that she had been able to hear it one last time… although she had to laugh at the absurdity of it all. The bridges Undyne had burned had been leading the way back to her all along…

“D-D-Dynes? P-Please… be o-okay… Und-dyne…”

Real sound rang like a bell in the void. Her voice, strained and pained as if she had to fight to force each word from her mouth, but so much like music to Undyne’s ears.

Or, well, ear. She could only hear out of one of them. Everything on her left side sounded muffled.

A blurry crack formed in the darkness, ushering in blinding light as it widened, and slowly, inching forward bit by bit, the world around Undyne sharpened into focus.

“See?! I told you she’d pull through!” Papyrus exclaimed, a twinkle in his eye sockets as he nudged Alphys with a bony elbow. His brother stood at his side as he knelt at the ground, and across from him, on Undyne’s other side, was a looming skeletal monster with a long, bestial skull.

Papyrus? Sans? Gaubrieta? What were they doing here? How had they gotten here?

Alphys all but lunged at Undyne, burying her snout in the crook of her neck. “Y-You’re… alive… r-really… a-alive… U-Undie…”

“I told you,” Undyne croaked as she lifted her leaden arm—slightly-luminous yellow-green threads spooled from the seams of her black armor—and laid her hand on Alphys’ back, her throat as dry and rough as sandpaper, “not to use… that nickname…”

She glanced at her side and saw, off in the distance, a shod-off pile of blue and white armor. Her armor—the outer layer, at least. It was scarred, blackened, and seemed to have been separated from the inner layer in a hurry.

“…sure are lucky 9S shut down your armor!” Papyrus was babbling in her ear. “I can’t imagine how
scary it must have been to have that thing controlling…”

Undyne tuned him out. All she cared about was the soft pressure of Alphys’ body resting atop hers. All her anguish, all her pain, all her heartbeat, and in the end… it had all been okay all along. Alphys was here.

How had she gotten here? A question for another day. She was here and that was what mattered. She hadn’t been torn away from Undyne like Asgore had.

“In case you were wondering how these two got here so quickly,” said Sans, as if he could read her mind, “let’s just say I know a few, uh… shortcuts.”

Barely paying attention to him, Undyne dragged her fingers along Alphys’ spine. “Alphy… I’m so happy to see you again. I thought I never would…”

“I-I… s-so… w-was worried so m-much…”

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Undyne asked Alphys as she whimpered into her shoulder. “How did you survive? I saw your coat, and your glasses, a-and your—your dust…” The words caught in her throat, and her next words came out mingled with a sob. “I’d have done anything to s-see you again, Alphy… I-I thought I could, b-but, but I…”

Alphys’ little claws dug into Undyne’s sides. “I… we… Gau… b-b… G-G-Gabby and…”

Gaubrieta patted her on the head, then turned to face Undyne. [She’s suffered damage to the language center of her brain,] she signed. Undyne, her mind still hazy, struggled to follow along with the doctor’s frantic gestures. [It’s hard for her to talk. You shouldn’t push her.]

Undyne nodded, giving Alphys a firm, yet gentle squeeze. Alphys could be a real chatterbox when she was waist-deep in one of her special interests. Hopefully, she’d get better soon—having all that bottled up in her head, having so much to say and so many questions to answer but not being able to do so, seemed to Undyne like the smart person’s equivalent of a broken leg.

“Well, uh, maybe she could write it down?” Undyne asked Gaubrieta, forcing a smile.

Gaubrieta looked away. [Like I said,] she signed, [damage to the language center of her brain.]

Undyne’s face fell and she glanced again at Alphys, who still had her face buried in her shoulder. “Don’t cry,” she consoled her, struggling to sit up—everything hurt, everything ached, her fingers and her ribs were howling and burning white-hot in protest—and trying her best to hold Alphys in her lap. “It’s okay… your brain’s gonna heal up sooner or later.”

Alphys choked back a sob and nuzzled the side of Undyne’s neck harder, her snout brushing against her sensitive gills. Undyne’s breath grew short. “However long it takes…” she continued, “I’m gonna be there for you until you’re all better… And then I’ll be there for you after that… You know why?”

Alphys merely clung to Undyne more tightly, stifling a forlorn moan. Gaubrieta tapped her on the shoulder. [Undyne,] she signed once she’d gotten Undyne’s attention, [I need to explain something to you. Your body has been producing lethal amounts of DT energy…]

Undyne sat and stared, dumbfounded, as Gaubrieta explained what had happened to her. Her body was, in a sense, so abundant with life that it was barely holding itself together; her armor’s circulatory system, which siphoned and redistributed the magic in her body, was the only thing keeping her from literally falling apart at the seams. But Undyne’s stores of magic were all but depleted; now, the only
magic flowing through the inner layer of her mobile armor was Gaubrieta’s own healing magic. Maybe it would keep her together for a few days. A week, if she was expecting a miracle. A few hours in a worst-case scenario.

The news settled in Undyne’s gut like a basketball made of lead. She’d known ever since she’d awoken this morning that she was burning herself up to nothing, that her time in this world was short, but to hear a real medical expert confirm that feeling made it all the more real… and all the more horrifying.

She was going to die.

She was really, **really** going to die. Every single cell in her body, every scale, every fang, every strand of hair felt like a time bomb waiting to go off. And she didn’t want it anymore. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with the people who mattered to her—the people she still **had**, people like Alphys, and Papyrus, and Gerson—and she wanted it to be a **long** life, a **good** life. She wanted to **live**.

She curled up around Alphys, squeezing her eye shut to try and stop her own tears from flowing.

“Don’t worry,” Papyrus assured her with his usual bright, overly-loud, chirpy voice. “I’m positive you two’ll both be right as rain in no time at all!”

“He can’t read sign language,” Sans whispered in Undyne’s ear.

“Sure I can!” Papyrus retorted. “And I **still** think you’re gonna be fine!” he said, clapping Undyne on the shoulder. “That’s how much I believe in you!”

With an aching hand, Undyne wiped away her tears and cracked a bittersweet smile. “Th-Thanks, Papyrus. I knew I could count on you… for a vote of confidence. I won’t let you down.” But she hoped he’d forgive her if she did.

Of course he would. He was **Papyrus**. But still…

She set Alphys aside and stood up, her knees creaking and protesting. Strands and loops of Gaubrieta’s magical medical threads dangled from every seam and joint in her armor, all faintly shimmering. With whatever limited time she still had left in this world, there was someone else she had to make amends to.

On the other side of the crumbling cobblestone street was another group attending another injured person—2B lay on the ground, attended by the other two androids and Toriel. As Undyne stumbled closer (waving off Papyrus’ assistance so she could have at least some semblance of privacy), she soon noticed that triage here did not seem to be going so smoothly as it had under Gaubrieta’s supervision.

Undyne’s heart sank. She couldn’t have hurt 2B **that** badly in the fight, could she have?

2B was curled up on the ground, her knees tucked up to her chest, clutching at the thin black jacket wrapped around her fleece nightshirt, trembling like a leaf. Toriel was tugging at her jacket to no avail.

“2B, please, my child. Let us see where you are hurt,” she said. “Just let me—” She tugged harder at 2B’s shoulder, trying to get a better look at whatever damage she had incurred as the android struggled against her.

Her tone became terse. Evidently, she had been struggling with 2B for quite some time already. “2B.
You are behaving childishly. I can help you. Doctor Alphys is here as well, and the best surgeon in
the kingdom, but we cannot do anything for you if you do not cooperate with me. Please. Just tell
me where it hurts.”

2B simply curled up tighter, mumbling something incoherent. As Undyne drew closer, she could see
streaks of tears glittering on her cheeks. Was she even awake, or just thrashing around in the throes
of a daytime nightmare?

Toriel shook her head and sighed, exasperated. “Use your words, dear.”

9S, the first to notice Undyne, pulled himself to his feet, scowling at her as he stomped toward her.
His clenched fist shook. “What,” he snarled, giving her a withering glare, “did you do to her?”

2B did what she did best and closed herself off. Her mind was as hazy as it was tumultuous—
whatever thoughts she tried to dwell on slipped out of her grasp, as if she were trying to hold onto a
cloud. She couldn’t focus. She couldn’t help but tune out the words of the people surrounding her,
the hands grasping at her—they all slid off her sensors like water off of Teflon.

All she could do was cling to herself, pulling herself as far away from the world as possible, fighting
back tears and losing. It felt like she had been that way forever. She wasn’t even aware of her
surroundings anymore—it had all faded into a blank haze.

It was all her fault. She couldn’t escape who she was, after all. A dear friend was at death’s door and
she was to blame. In the end, 2B couldn’t help but kill the ones she loved.

She’d tried to be her old self. That had been the worst of it. She’d tried to channel her past, that
callousness she could turn off and on like a switch, and it just hadn’t come. She should have felt
grateful to have lost that hated part of herself, but… maybe that had been the part of herself that had
made her strong. Maybe she was useless without it.

“Well, well, well,” a familiar voice whispered softly in her ear. A familiar face swam in front of her
eyes, blurred by her tears. A face framed by curled, whitish-violet hair, its roundness and softness
belying the cruelty of the woman who bore it, the body behind it shrouded in mist. “What do we
have here?”

2B blinked. She had to be dreaming, although she couldn’t remember ever having fallen asleep.
You’re dead, she wanted to say, but the words wouldn’t come out. I killed you. You murdered Mom
and I—

“You don’t look so good, Tooie. Do you feel good?” 6E asked, her voice honeyed as always. She
crouched down in front of 2B, curled her fingers beneath her chin, and lifted her head so the two of
them were staring eye-to-eye.

2B turned her head and glanced away. The world around her was foggy and indistinct. “I—”

“You’ve really made a mess of things here, haven’t you?”

“I-Let go of me,” 2B stammered, feeling icy tendrils worm their way up her spine.

6E did exactly the opposite, and her hands slid back up to the sides of 2B’s neck, her fingertips
running in little circles along the back of her neck.
2B squeezed her eyes shut. “You’re dead. I killed you. Go away.”

“Come back with me.”

2B’s eyelids fluttered open in shock at the request as she struggled to process its absurdity, 6E’s face sharpening into focus before her. “B-But the Bunker…”

6E giggled. “All you have to do is reset, you silly girl.” She tousled 2B’s hair, her fingertips roughly brushing across her scalp. “You know what to do to come back. So just do it. Come back here. You’ll be happier.”

“I’m happy here,” 2B insisted.

“You were,” 6E corrected. “But now?” She cocked her head like a confused dog. “It all really fell apart, didn’t it? Are you happy down here now?”

2B dodged the question. “I can’t go back. Like I told you last time, I can’t go back.”

6E stood up, putting her hands on her hips. “Why? Because you’ve changed?”

A pause hung in the air, and as she struggled to find an answer, 2B wrapped her arms around herself. “Oh, you’ve changed, all right,” 6E continued. “You’ve learned to smile, to laugh, to whittle away your days with idle amusements and diversions… but have you changed for the better?”

2B curled up tighter, burying her face against her knees, afraid of the answer to that question. She hadn’t changed. Beyond the superficial differences between herself and 2E, she was just as rotten on the inside.

“Civilian life doesn’t suit you, Tooie,” 6E said. “All it’s done is corrupt you. It’s made you soft and weak. We androids weren’t built for it; it’s no surprise what it’s done to you. You used to be the ultimate ascetic, never refusing to put comfort ahead of duty! Now, here you are…”

“Shut up…”

“Look at yourself. Look deep inside… at how selfishly you cling to your little friends and your little family and your little life, even if it means choosing ruin over greatness.” 6E crouched down to bring herself eye-level with 2B again and reached out to her. Her left eye turned bright scarlet; a golden flower appeared over her right eye, translucent and flickering like an unstable hologram; a circlet of thorny vines snaked through her curled locks. “Look at how weak it’s made you.”

2B swatted her hands away. “Shut up!”

“Little 2E, little frightened girl, hiding from the greater duties the world has placed on you,” she continued, adding a singsongy lilt to her voice. “Hiding away in your little hole, clutching your little treasures to yourself, begging your mommy to indulge you and treat you like the child you’ve always so desperately wanted to be…” 6E laid her hands on 2B’s shoulders, gripping them tightly. “2E, listen to me. We want to…”

2B snapped awake, the mist vanishing around her. In an instant, 6E’s face became 6O’s, framed by pleated blonde tresses. There was no trace of malice in that face. Her eyes were wide with concern. “…help you. We just want to help you, 2B. A-Are you…”

Without hesitation, ignoring the pain wracking her body, 2B flung her arms around 6O, taking
shuddering breaths to calm her nerves and force down the lump in her throat. She could taste salt on her own lips, but she wasn’t crying, at least not anymore. Instead, she just felt empty, exhausted—and not just physically, but emotionally as well. It was as though her insides had been scooped out.

6O snaked her fingers through her hair, gently brushing her fingertips across her scalp. "We were getting so worried," she told her. "You weren’t responding to anything we said or did…"

"I was, uh, dreaming," 2B mumbled, still a little dazed and reeling. She shook off how real that vision of 6E had felt—more like a psychotic episode than a nightmare—and resolved to perform a thorough diagnostic as soon as she could just to make sure nothing was permanently damaged. Androids weren’t meant to see, hear, or feel things that weren’t there while they were awake, and certainly not all three. "…I think."

Toriel’s paws landed gently on her shoulders. "My dear, I am so, so sorry. We did not know whether you were asleep or awake… I—I was growing a little frustrated…"

"Now, can you tell us where it hurts?"

"Everywhere," 2B said. "How’s Undyne?"

A loud, resounding crack echoed through the air, turning every head in the area.

"Well enough for 9S to slap her across the face…" 6O responded, cringing.

"2B doesn’t wear her heart on her sleeve like you, Undyne!" 9S all but screamed at Undyne as he stood in front of her. Within seconds, Toriel had already rushed over to him and restrained him, hoping to pull him away from Undyne before he could get any more violent; the black-cloaked surgeon with the long, skeletal face and Papyrus did the same for Undyne. "Do you know why? Do you have any idea why?"

"9S, please!" Toriel scolded him. Despite her efforts, he wouldn’t budge, as if his feet were rooted to the ground. "Do not assault her. She is dying."

"You think just because she’s stoic means you can say whatever hurtful things you want to her? She doesn’t wear her heart on her sleeve because it’s fragile!" 9S shouted out, still pouring his ire on Undyne as she stood there like a statue, a fresh bruise welling up on her cheek. "So whatever sick lies you told her to make her like this, you’d better take them all back, or I swear I’ll—"

Despite 6O’s protestations, 2B forced herself to her feet. "Nines…” she weakly called out. He didn’t hear her. Stumbling on unsteady legs like a newborn fawn, she staggered toward him, calling out his name again, until she was close enough to grab his hand. "Nines."

9S lost his train of thought, the rage evaporating from his face as he turned to look at 2B. "O-Oh," he mumbled sheepishly. "T-Two… 2B… you’re okay?

"I just had a little mental breakdown," 2B said. "I’m fine now. Undyne, what about you?"

Undyne stood before her. Faintly-glowing threads of healing magic hung off of every joint and seam of the scuffed and tattered black YoRHa body armor she still wore, and the furthest thing she looked from was healthy. Her face was haggard and gaunt; ragged strips of a scarf as red as her hair (Papyrus’ scarf, which he’d eagerly converted to bandages for her) circled her head to cover her mutilated eye and ear. Her one good eye was still jet-black, a single white pinprick blazing amid the ebony sclera; a faint sheen of sweat coating her scales made her look almost as though she were melting. At her midriff, where 2B had torn through her armor and perforated her torso with machine
gun fire, every inch of bare skin and more was wrapped in a thick layer of bloody gauze laced with glowing threads. She looked like a raggedy, threadbare, patchwork doll.

“Never better,” she croaked, giving a pained thumbs-up. 2B couldn’t read the hand signs of the surgeon standing at her side and propping her up, but whatever she was trying to say, it was probably contradictory to Undyne’s sentiments.

All the same, 2B reached out and hugged her, or, more accurately, tripped over herself and fell into her, resting her cheek against her breastplate as she hung her left arm over the captain’s shoulder for support.

The black-cloaked surgeon, evidently irate over the way her patient was being manhandled, tried to drag Undyne away, but Undyne brushed her aside.

“2B,” she said, lowering her voice, “I’ve got… some stuff I need to say to you.” She took a seat on the ground, pulling 2B down with her. 2B didn’t protest. She already dreaded whatever Undyne was about to say.

Undyne sighed, raising her head to stare up at the ceiling. “You know… people who have all the power to change things for the better, but won’t get off their asses and do it… they piss me off.”

2B should have known better than to expect sympathy. She bowed her head in shame. “Undyne, I’m… I’m sorry. I understand why you think resetting would be in everyone’s best interest. I know it’s selfish and childish of me to cling to this world when we’ve lost so much, but…”

2B thought about 9S, the number of times he’d only lasted a few days before she’d had to kill him, how hard it always had been to see such a simple smile on his face when he met her for the first time… for the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, umpteenth time; the pain in her chest, the hollowness, how it grew worse and worse every time. To suffer through that again with Undyne, Alphys, Toriel… those friendships, those family ties would exist only in her head. In the new world, the one created by turning back time, those memories would be as unreal as delusions.

She had always been drawn to self-sacrifice like a moth to flame. It was a symptom of having to deny everything that was precious to her over and over again for so long. Perhaps now she was overcompensating, forcing herself to put her wants ahead of everything else just to keep herself from ending it all. Organizing her thoughts like that, it just sounded petulant of her.

“But I can’t describe,” 2B said, “how much it hurts.”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about you.” Undyne said. “That fucking Sans can go wherever he wants in the kingdom in the blink of an eye and never thought to help us out until now? Fuck that guy.”

2B laughed in spite of herself, a sharp ache running through her stomach. She clutched at her side, the damp bloodstain marring her shirt still warm against her palm.

Undyne laid a hand on 2B’s knee. “You know, Asgore… he was the nicest, kindest, sweetest guy. And it’s been hard for me to accept that he could’ve gone and freed us whenever he wanted. I just can’t imagine what he must have been thinking that kept him from doing that.” Her voice broke. “I can’t understand him, and it hurts to know he failed us like that, but… I’ll still always love him, and I’ll still always miss him.

“Lately… I’ve been seeing a lot of people I care about end up like that,” she said. “And I’ve seen what it looks like when you’re willing to do whatever it takes to reach your goals, no matter who gets caught in the crossfire… I’m the one who should be beating myself up over this. I threw out
every single one of my values. I never imagined I could sink so low."

“You still tower over me,” 2B muttered. “I’m… I’ve become too selfish. In the old days, I never allowed myself anything. I never allowed myself to grow close to anybody because I knew I’d have to toss them aside eventually. Then I came here, and suddenly I had friends, family, a—a mother… and for them, I told myself I’d fight it. I’d fight all my instincts that told me to throw away my own happiness for the greater good. Because my happiness was their happiness. And theirs was mine.

“But…” 2B raised her bloodstained hand in front of her and let it fall limply to her side. “Look what it’s done to us.”

“Gotta have balance, I guess,” Undyne mumbled. “Sorry. For beating the hell out of you. And,” she said a little louder, paying a glance at 9S as he fumed at her, “for all the shit I said to you.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

“I didn’t mean it,” Undyne said.

“Neither did I,” said 2B, although she was sure neither of them fully believed the other.

“Just trying to push your buttons. You know. Looks like I pushed them too well, huh?”

2B sighed. “I just wish I’d been there for you.”

“It’s okay,” Undyne said. “I almost thought everyone had let me down, Asgore, Gerson, you… but it was me all along who’d been failing me.”

Undyne leaned onto 2B’s shoulder. 2B couldn’t believe she was being so kind to her. Did she really deserve this?

“I wasn’t lying,” 2B said, “when I told you I’d set a checkpoint this morning.”

“You just figured out how to do that?” Undyne asked, her shoulders shaking as she suppressed a bitter laugh. “Boy, would that have come in handy about two months ago.”

“I know.” 2B nodded. “I could go back there. We’d only lose a few hours,” she rationalized, “and… I can live with that, if it means you…”

Undyne was silent for a few moments, staring down at her wounded body with a heavy, half-lidded eye. “I dunno. I’d just fight you all over again, I think.”

“I’d do better next time.”

“Pfft. Fuck you, no, you won’t!” Undyne snorted, that familiar competitive gleam in her eye. “Don’t worry about me, 2B. I’ll be fine!”

2B tried a different approach. “I could heal you if I gave you my—”

“Nope. End of story. I’m gonna be fine. Besides, if you sacrifice a single thing for me, I’m pretty sure 9S is gonna kill me.”

It went without saying that 2B didn’t believe her, but the question was settled. Before she knew it, Undyne had her in a headlock and was vigorously rubbing her knuckles against 2B’s scalp, ruffling her hair into an unkempt mop. “I love and support you, dammit, so don’t you dare threaten to give up your life or whatever shit for my sake!”
It was the warmest, fondest, gentlest noogie 2B had ever received. 2B couldn’t believe Undyne still thought of her as a friend after all this.

Undyne let go of 2B and stood up, looming above her. Even weak and weary as she was, she still looked like a colossus. Reaching out, she took 2B’s wrist. “C’mon. Let Gaubrieta take a look at you. Between her and 9S, I’m sure we can get you feeling a little better.”

The anxious hollow in her stomach vanishing, 2B obliged to let the black-cloaked skeleton work on her while Undyne hung back with Alphys. Doctor Gaubrieta did her work in silence with Pod 042 keeping watch over 2B and advising her and Papyrus translating her occasional flurries of hand gestures into speech. 9S joined in, addressing the damage to 2B’s chassis while Gaubrieta and the faintly-glowing magical thread she spun from her bony fingers mended the damage to her skin and muscles.

There wasn’t much that could be done for the charred coin-sized hole tunneling through 2B’s arm that left everything below her shoulder more or less dead, but between the doctor’s healing thread, liberal applications of staunching gel, some sealant applied to her chassis, and a few vaguely-fruit-flavored juice boxes that had been procured from Emil’s cart, 2B felt shockingly close to healthy… or, at the very least, far away from dead.

9S took her right arm, lifted it, and let it fall limply to her side. “What is it,” he asked, glancing at the unwieldy machine arm grafted to his right shoulder, “with us and mangling our arms?”

“I’d rather lose an arm than a leg,” said 2B, sitting up and fumbling with the buttons of her liberally-bloodstained nightshirt. A few of the cartoon bunnies printed on the fleece fabric still poked their heads out from under the drying burgundy stains.

“I am not sure,” Toriel muttered as she handed 2B another juice box. “A broken leg would certainly keep you two out of trouble.”

“I’m pretty sure if you ever lost a leg,” 9S said, “you’d just do a handstand and start walking on your hands.” He reached over and tried to help 2B with the buttons, but with one hand, he was about as useless as 2B, and his mechanical claw was not a nimble replacement for his other hand.

“I’ve got this for you,” 6O announced, leaning in and buttoning up 2B’s shirt, the giddy grin on her face making it plain that she was reveling in being the only one of the three with two functioning hands. Her fingers slipped as though they were coated with oil when she set to work, though, most likely because she was clearly getting flustered every time they brushed against 2B’s bare skin.

After a few mumbled apologies, 6O finished. “All done!” she chirped, leaning back to admire her handiwork. Her smile immediately shrunk when she noticed that the buttons were misaligned. “Wait! U-Um, let me try again…”

“It’s fine,” 2B insisted. “You can retry as many times as you want once things settle down.” 6O smirked at this remark, her smile dripping with innuendo; Toriel shrank away, a faint reddish tinge beneath the fur on her cheeks; 9S buried his face in his hand and shook his head.

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Once things settle down. 2B wondered why she’d said that. Things had settled down now, hadn’t they? Or was something deep inside her warning her that some new danger was emerging over the horizon?

Toriel pursed her lips, casting a worried glance around the quiet street. “Where,” she asked, her voice trembling with panic, “have Asriel and Emil gone?”
Sure enough, Emil’s cart was nowhere to be found… and neither was Asriel.

Asriel sat in the back of Emil’s cart as it careened down the empty roads, Pod 153 hovering at his side. He was so consumed by worry that he couldn’t even hum along to the ditty Emil always hummed to pass the time.

Was he doing the right thing, running off like this on his own? Mom wouldn’t be happy… in fact, she’d probably be furious. But it would all be worth it if he could fix whatever was wrong with Chara. Then, everything would be all right. If Chara could just go back to the way they were, the way they’d been in Asriel’s memories… they’d get along great with 2B and 9S, and Asriel was certain they could all be one big, happy family.

2B and 9S were soldiers, and Chara—for all it seemed—was a murderer. A murderer! They would put Chara down like a rabid beast without waiting to see if there was anything wrong with them… and if there was even a tiny glimmer of goodness left in Chara’s heart, then Asriel couldn’t let that happen.

So he had to get to Chara first.

“A-Are we getting close?” he asked Pod 153.

“Affirmative,” the pod answered. “The black box signal given off by Unit 13B is approaching home.”

“They’re not ‘Unit 13B,’” said Asriel. He knew that Chara and 13B were sharing a body and that 13B could sometimes take control, but they were still Chara to him. “Can you call them ‘Chara?’”

“Affirmative. Chara is approaching home. Proposal: given Chara’s history of extreme violence, Prince Asriel should request additional support.”

“It’ll be okay,” Asriel insisted, trying to smother the nervous quiver in his voice as he tucked his knees against his chest. “I-I’m their brother. They have to listen to me.”

Pod 153 fell silent.

Asriel took a deep breath. “H-Hey, Emil?” he called out over his shoulder.

“What’s up?” Emil called back, still driving along the bumpy cobblestone road winding through the Ruins.

“Th-This isn’t a, uh, bad idea, is it?” Asriel asked.

“Don’t worry,” Emil answered. “I’m sure it’ll all work out! And you’ve got that pod with you, and if that’s not enough, I’ve got your back!”

“You’re just a head.”

“And a truck!”

Asriel laughed in spite of himself. “You can’t run over my sibling!”

“I will if they try to hurt you!” said Emil.

Asriel felt a little flattered, but Emil’s response didn’t help him stop worrying. Chara had killed their
dad, after all. They were dangerous. What if they didn’t have a soul anymore, like Flowey, or they’d lost part of their memories and it had changed them into a different person? And then there was whatever was going on with 13B. Was she still in control? Was she doing all the horrible things Chara had been doing? But she’d seemed so nice…

Or what if there wasn’t something wrong with Chara? What if they were just a horrible person all along, and Asriel just hadn’t noticed or didn’t remember? What if they’d kill him just as easily as they’d killed Dad?

Asriel leaned over the side of the cart, staring down at the cobblestones as they passed by, trying to toss all those thoughts from his head. He was too far gone now. He was going to confront Chara, and that was that. Because if he left it to the others, there might not be a chance to save them—if there was one.

“Hey, Emil,” he asked, trying to change the subject. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, buddy! What’s up?”

“If… If you could have all your memories back, would you do it?” Asriel asked.

He recalled how he’d felt about getting his body back—how guilty he’d felt that he’d have that chance while Emil would just be stuck the way he was forever. And now Flowey was offering him the rest of his memories, when Emil would spend the rest of his life never knowing the names of the old friends he sometimes tried—and failed—to recall. He wanted Emil to reassure him that he wasn’t taking a chance that Emil coveted but would never get to have.

Emil stayed silent for a long time. “Hmm. That’s a tough one. Would you?”

“I-I, uh… um…” Asriel stammered, fidgeting nervously with his ear. He hadn’t expected Emil to turn the question back on him!

“I-dunno, that’s, uh, why I’m asking you!”

“Well… if I had all my memories, I’d probably be a different person than I am now. And that sounds kind of scary. But people become different people all the time, just by doing things normally, so, uh… it’s probably not that big a deal! So yeah, I guess I’d take my memories back if I could.”

Asriel hadn’t thought about that. If Flowey gave him his memories, what was to stop him from giving Asriel memories of his time as a flower—which, from what he’d heard, had involved a lot of nastiness and behaving like a jerk—and would that turn Asriel himself into a nasty jerk? Would he be erased and replaced with a worse person? Would Emil and 2B and 9S like him less? Would his mom love him less?

“What if…” Asriel puzzled out, “some of your memories… were about you doing, um… bad things? L-Like, um, lying, cheating, stealing… m-maybe even…” His voice faltered. He didn’t want to say killing, but Flowey was definitely dangerous enough—or at least 9S had thought so, and Asriel had never seen 9S so afraid of someone—to have done something like that.

“Well, you remember some of the bad stuff you’ve done right now, don’t you?”

Asriel nodded. “Yeah…”

“And you’re still a good guy. So what’s the problem?”

Asriel hung his head. “I, um… I-I don’t really know, I guess.”

Pod 153 laid a claw on his shoulder. “Proposal: Prince Asriel should discuss this topic with Unit 9S.”
“Yeah.” Asriel patted the pod’s claw. “When this is all over.”

Eventually, the cart pulled in front of home, in front of the naked tree in the courtyard. Asriel hopped out, the butterflies in his stomach fluttering like never before.

“Chara’s black box signal is within ten meters,” Pod 153 announced. “Analysis: at current velocity, Chara will arrive at this location in just under two minutes.”

Asriel took a deep breath. It was do or die.

Well, maybe not do or die. Maybe just do.

Or maybe just die.

“E-Emil?” he called out. “Y-You can stay out here.” This was something, Asriel knew, he had to handle between himself and his sibling. “If I’m in trouble, I’ll come running out!”

“Yeah!” Emil swiveled his head to show Asriel his permanent stony grin. “I’ll be your getaway vehicle!”

“This support unit will contact its counterpart with a distress signal at the first sign of danger,” Pod 153 said.

That made Asriel feel a little better. He took another deep breath and laid his paw on the doorknob, swinging the door open, and as the dark interior of the house beckoned, he glanced over his shoulder. “Uh… Emil?”

“Yeah?”

Asriel’s mouth went dry. “Th-Thanks, buddy.”

“Good luck!” he called out as Asriel took a heavy step over the threshold into his home. The front door swung shut behind him.

Asriel stood there and waited at the foot of the stairs leading into the basement, Pod 153 hovering at his side, until he saw his sibling’s pale face emerge like a phantom from the darkness.

Chara froze halfway up the stairs, their single visible eye wide, their mouth agape in shock. Asriel stumbled over his tongue for what felt like an eternity before finally blurting out a nervous “H-Howdy, Chara. It’s me, Asriel.”

Chara said nothing.

“Y-You’re Chara, right?” Asriel twiddled his thumbs anxiously. “I-If you’re 13B, that’s okay, but I kinda wanted to talk to Chara.”

Chara took their next steps slowly. Their hands—one of which was wrapped in a mitten of white bandages—were shaking. As they came into the light, Asriel noticed how grimy and disheveled their violet and white robes were, how mussed and unkempt their hair was. And the golden flower covering one of their eyes was the oddest fashion choice Asriel had ever seen (and considering he’d seen some of Alphys’ cartoons, that was quite an accomplishment). There was a black sword at their hip, its hilt wrapped in what looked like bloody gauze, and one of their treasured swords—their biggest one, the one whose name Asriel couldn’t quite remember—floated at their back.

Chara ascended until they were standing at eye level with Asriel. Asriel felt their shuddering,
unsteady breath on his snout. “Asriel,” they whispered, their voice quivering as they lightly laid their hands on his shoulders. “I’ve wanted to see you for so long…”

Their unbandaged left hand slid up Asriel’s neck and past the collar of his shirt, resting on the side of his neck, their thumb curling and gently tracing a small circle in the hollow of his throat.

“It’s me,” they said, a twinkle in their scarlet eye. “Chara.”

Chapter End Notes

Things are about to get serious. Here, have some cute fanfics to prepare yourself for the end:

Beauties and the Beast

mechanical [B]allad

Also, I crunched the numbers, and roughly 1% of all the words in this fic are "..." so far. Do I use "..." too often? Let me know!
Asriel confronts Chara.

Chapter Notes

(musical accompaniment)

Asriel had been with Chara all the way to the end.

He sat cross-legged at the foot of their bed, Chara’s tall, thin body stretched out before him and covered up to their neck with a soft, thick blanket. Chara’s red eyes were glazed over and unfocused, but although they looked barely alert, they raised their head weakly to gaze upon their dearest brother.

Chara raised a hand, holding it over their chest, and to Asriel’s amazement, their soul manifested in their hand.

It was not what Asriel expected at all. It was a black box, a perfect cube, laced with glowing lines running across its sides and sparkling. It was like nothing he had ever seen before in his life.

Chara handed it to Asriel, and with shaking hands, Asriel took it, cradling it in his palms. It was heavy, warm, and vibrated faintly.

“This… Th-This is your soul, Chara?” he asked. It was beautiful… it reminded Asriel of the diamond-studded caves he and Chara had played in, where Chara had sat him down and told him about the moon and helped him make his own constellations on the ceiling. It was like a piece of starlight carved out of the night sky.

This was wrong.

Asriel handed the black box back to Chara. “I—If I give it back, w-will you get better?” he asked. “Please?”

Chara raised a pale, weak hand and pushed the black box closer to Asriel’s chest. “You cannot go back now,” they croaked. “Take it. We will be strong together.”

Asriel looked down at the box in his paws.

“The sunset, Asriel. You’ll see it tonight. And the moon.”

Asriel felt hot, fresh tears build up, blurring his vision. “But Chara…” he sniffled, tugging at his floppy ear and using it to wipe at his eyes, the black box still cradled in his other hand.
“I’ll be with you,” Chara reminded him. “Every step of the way.”

Asriel nodded. That was right. Chara wasn’t dying. Their body was, but not their soul, and they would live on once Asriel had made the pact. “A—And once we’re past the Barrier, we—We just need six more of these, right?”

Chara nodded, a grin playing across their sweat-soaked face, a little hint of a rosy blush returning to their wan, waxy complexion.

“A—And we’ll only take them from bad people?”

“Only the wicked,” Chara assured him. “Listen to me, Asriel. The surface is a dangerous place. When I came down here I brought my swords with me. Carnwennan and Caladbolg. You’ll need them. I left them right where you found me…”

They closed their eyes, their head lolling back on the pillow, and something about them seemed to change, subtle, yet impossible not to notice, something that made them look almost like a statue instead of merely sleeping, frozen and… and…

Lifeless.

Letting the black box fall from his paws and tumble onto the blanket, Asriel crawled up Chara’s body and grabbed them by the shoulders. “Chara…? Chara!”

His voice caught in his throat. Chara’s neck flopped like a doll’s, and their skin was now ice cold. Their arms, their legs, everything was limp. They were like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Before Asriel’s eyes, Chara’s pink lips turned bluish-gray; with trembling fingers Asriel reached for their eye and out of morbid curiosity lifted their eyelid, recoiling in horror with a ragged cry when he saw that Chara’s brilliant scarlet eye had turned a cold, pale gray.

Chara was dead and it was his fault. Asriel squeezed his eyes shut and sobbed, curling his knees up into his chest and wrapping his arms around his legs, rocking back and forth on the bed. He’d done this. He’d killed Chara. His best friend in the world, his truest companion, gone, all gone, gone, gone, gone, gone. This was a stupid plan, a stupid, awful, horrible plan, and Asriel hated himself for letting Chara talk him into it. He cried, his keening wails echoing through the castle and falling on nobody’s ears but his own. Mom and Dad were gone, taken away cruelly from Chara’s bedside for an urgent meeting with other grown-ups. Stupid adults.

Asriel reached for the black box and held it close to his chest. It still hummed as if it were alive, even though Chara’s body was dead.

Asriel felt something warm inside him, spreading out from deep inside his chest through his whole body, and soon it was burning, burning, white-hot and searing, and a voice in the back of his head began to whisper.

Chara hugged Asriel, their arm wrapped around his back in a light, yet warm embrace; Asriel felt them shiver as he embraced them in return, his paws slipping ticklishly on their silken tunic. “Azzy,” they whispered, resting their cheek against Asriel’s ear. “Oh, Azzy, it’s you, it’s really you… How’d you do it? Last time I checked, you were… a flower.”

“Uh…”

“And not at all like your old self,” Chara added. They ran their hand up and down the back of
Asriel’s head, mussing up their fur. “But now you’re… you. How?”

“I’m… not Flowey. I-I never was. It’s complicated, but…” Asriel sighed, wondering how he could explain what he was to Chara. “A-A couple of my memories kinda, um, bonded to a machine core? A-And Mrs. Alphys put together this body for me…”

“A… A couple of your memories?”

“Yeah, I… I have a few blank spots,” Asriel admitted. It was harder to say than he’d thought. The words didn’t want to come out. He felt like he was admitting he was a fraud. “Wh-When I woke up, I-I was like a f-five-year-old or s-something, a-and, and even now, I-I’m not complete, I…”

Asriel took a deep breath.

“I’m not the real Asriel,” he said. “I-I’m just a t-tiny part of him…”

They pulled away, their eye misting over as they smiled simply and happily. “You’re real to me,” they said.

Asriel smiled. It meant so much to hear those words from Chara. He’d heard them from his mom, he’d heard them from Emil, he’d heard them from everyone he’d ever expressed his doubts to—but he’d had to hear it from Chara.

Chara laid their hand on Asriel’s cheek, their fingers worming their way into his fur and vigorously scratching under his ear. Asriel stifled a fit of laughter as he tried to pull Chara’s hand away. “Ch-Chara, s-s-stop, you know I-I’m ticklish!” he choked out, falling to the floor. Chara pounced on them like a vicious predator, targeting Asriel’s sensitive tummy next; so wracked with laughter he couldn’t breathe, Asriel began to gasp and wheeze, his lungs burning and tears streaming from his eyes as he wriggled and writhed on the floor. “Ch-Chara, s-s-s-seriously, I c-can’t, I-I can’t b-breathe—”

A burst of gunfire lit up the dark and silent house, the light blinding and the sound deafening. Chara backed away, tense as a tightly-wound spring, and drew their gilded greatsword, brandishing it at Pod 153 as its machine gun turrets cooled; they instantly lost their footing and tumbled to the bottom of the staircase, letting out an ear-piercing “Fuck!” when they hit the cold basement floor in a crumpled heap.

Asriel sat up, catching his breath. “Why’d you do that, Mrs. Pod?” he gasped, his horrified gaze torn between the crumpled body of his sibling and the smoking bullet holes in the wall.

“Statement: Prince Asriel appeared to be in danger. In an effort to respect Prince Asriel’s wishes, this support unit fired a warning shot at Chara.”

“They were just tickling me! You didn’t send a distress signal, did you?” Asriel asked, panicking. He didn’t want anyone to barge in here with the wrong idea and start trying to harm Chara.

“Negative. However, at the next sign of danger, this support unit will immediately notify Pod 042. It is highly likely, however, that Pod 042 has already been used to triangulate this support unit’s location and that the others are on their way. Proposal: Prince Asriel should ask Chara to state their intentions.”

Asriel sighed. He’d have to make this quick. “Chara?” he called out, staring down the gloomy staircase. “A-Are you all right? Sorry about that!”

Chara picked themselves up and trudged up the stairs. “Why is that… thing with you?”
“Mrs. Pod’s here to, uh…” Asriel said. Chara already looked emotionally wounded by whatever Asriel’s response would be, and he hadn’t even answered the question yet.

Pod 153 answered for him. “Statement: this support unit has been assigned to assist Prince Asriel and protect this unit from harm.”

“Protect this unit from harm? By whom?” Chara asked as they reached the top of the stairs.

“Observation: based on Chara’s behavior, it is likely to suspect that any unit in close proximity to them is at severe risk of physical harm,” Pod 153 answered.

Chara’s lip curled in a disgusted sneer. “So that’s how it is…”

Asriel felt a chill run up his spine. “Chara,” he hastily stammered, “i-it’s not what you think—"

“No,” Asriel lied. “And besides, Mrs. Pod is, um, h-here to help me with other things—"

Before he knew it, Chara was looming over him. Chara could be very scary when they wanted to be… but usually, they only pretended to be scary as a joke. Here, though, the baleful glare of their scarlet eye was as genuine as genuine could be. Asriel felt his words leave him.

Chara laid a hand on Asriel’s neck once again, but it was not a warm, comforting gesture this time.

“Do you really think so little of me?”

Asriel Dreemurr felt the sun on his face for the first time in his life. It was incredible.

And he felt amazing.

Here on the surface, basking in the warming rays of daylight, hovering over the same hole in the mountain Chara had fallen down so many years ago as great wings flapped behind him… it was like a dream. A wonderful dream.

An amazing dream.

“Chara…”

The voice that came from his mouth wasn’t his. Not a scratchy, squeaky, pubescent child’s voice, but a man’s. It wasn’t his voice, but it felt so right to him. This was his…

Apotheosis? Chara suggested. Their voice rang in the back of his mind like a bell. They were a constant presence all throughout him, warm and soft, like they were hugging him… from the inside.

“I-I guess.” Asriel surveyed the land. He couldn’t stop smiling. “Th-This is the surface! It’s—”

The forests, so, so green; the lake, shimmering and sparkling like it was full of diamonds. Even the mountain he’d emerged from was beautiful. And the sky was so blue, and the clouds so fluffy and wispy. It was all so much. Everything was just so…
“Everything’s beautiful. A-And us…”

*We have work to do, Asriel. Focus.*

“R-Right.” Asriel’s gaze spanned the sky yet again, squinting at the sun. “But…”

*There’s more of the surface to see.*

Asriel landed in the foothills, guided by Chara’s infallible directions, and found a blackened husk of a great building, its stony foundations charred and ashen. Grasses and wild flowers poked up from the remains of its floor. Adjacent was a shaggy plot of flowers.

Golden flowers.

“I-Is this it?” Asriel asked.

Chara remained silent, but Asriel felt his knees bend against his will. And his arms, cradling Chara’s lifeless husk, stretched out and laid the body down among the flowers.

Chara looked so beautiful, so peaceful, their blank and expressionless face, their pale cheeks, their soft, reddish-brown hair framed against the golden flowers they had talked so much about. Asriel laid a hand on their forehead. Their skin was ice cold.

A sob wrenched its way out of Asriel’s chest, his shoulders quaking. He felt so horrible, but he’d stuck to Chara’s plan, because Chara *always* had plans, and Chara’s plans were *always* good, and things only ever went wrong if Asriel deviated from them, like the time he’d put flowers in the pie crust and Dad had gotten sick.

*There’s no reason to cry, Asriel. I’m right here,* Chara whispered in his ear.

Asriel squeezed his eyes shut, tears trickling down his furry face. They were dead out there, but alive… alive in here. They were a part of him. And the two of them would be together forever.

*We’ll always be together now, Asriel. The two of us. We’ll make these flowers grow everywhere.*

Asriel nodded. “Yeah!” He reached down and plucked a handful of flowers—a *big* handful—letting them rest in the gaps between his fingers—fingers that were so much bigger and longer than he was used to—and tickle the pink pad of skin on his palm. The way the sunlight slid off those lustrous golden petals… Now he knew why Chara had spoken so highly of these flowers. It was no wonder they were their favorite. Nothing underground could compare.

“Chara, this is so amazing!” Asriel cried out, reveling in the sunlight, in his grown-up voice and grown-up body, in his wings and curved horns (just like his dad’s!) and the *air smelled so good, how could air smell as good as it did here?* His heart leaping, he grabbed another fistful of flowers and tossed them in the air, letting the golden petals flutter down, glittering as the sun hit them as he pirouetted beneath them, filled with such a great joy for life as he twirled under the shower that he couldn’t put it into words.

“Mom and Dad used to live up here, you know,” Asriel said, still giggling a little in his exuberance, which he supposed must have looked strange in a fully-grown adult body. “They used to live here! Chara, it’s so beautiful up here!”
You get used to it.

Asriel brushed a couple flower petals off his shoulders. “How’d anybody get used to this?”

Well, why don’t we find out? Come on, Asriel. We have work to do.

“Well, work. Right!” Asriel sniffed the air, as if somehow he thought he could smell another human’s soul. “Wh… Where do we find the other human souls?”

His arm moved against his will yet again, stretching out, his finger pointing to the sky.

Asriel fought the urge to run away. Emil was waiting for him outside, and Pod 153 was here to cover him, and 2B and the others would probably be here soon enough. He could escape easily.

But he had to stay determined. For the sake of the Chara he knew still existed.

After a silent second that seemed to drag on into eternity, Chara spoke.

“Asriel,” they said, “do you… remember how we died?”

Asriel shook his head. He had become aware of how it had happened—like the news of Dad’s death, they couldn’t hide it from him forever—but all he knew was the same legend everybody else did. “No… Last thing I remember, actually, is… the pie. With Dad. When you… we…”

Chara’s face fell, crestfallen. Obviously, they remembered that incident.

“That night… you seemed so afraid. You put on a brave face for me for so long that I—I almost thought you really did think it was funny that Dad was hurt, but then I heard you crying in the middle of the night…”

Asriel bowed his head, a lump forming in his throat, his chest tight around his heart. His dad was gone forever and Chara was responsible. That was what everyone had said. It had been the reason Undyne had come to Toriel’s house in tears, the reason Toriel’s face darkened and her smile left her when she heard Chara’s name.

King Asgore was long gone, and he’d never even known that Asriel was alive, and he never would, and Asriel would never see the twinkle in his eyes or feel his golden beard or feel his warm, all-encompassing hugs ever again, and it was because of a horrible thing that Chara couldn’t possibly have done… yet they had done it.

“There’s something wrong with you,” Asriel said, “isn’t there? Something you can’t control that’s making you do these things?”

Chara let go of Asriel and slumped over onto their knees. “I… I suppose you’re right to fear me.” Their eye was fixated on the floor. “I didn’t want to kill him. I—I didn’t want to! If I could have had my way, h-he’d be here with me right now, and we’d all be together. I just… I just…” They buried their face in their hands, their fingernails digging into their forehead. “No, no… I… can’t lose control again…”

Asriel knew it. He knew Chara couldn’t ever have done such a horrible thing on purpose. “I-It’s okay,” he told them, pulling away their hands and laying his paws against their cheeks. Their skin was cool to the touch. “I believe you.”

Chara lifted their head. They were speechless for a few seconds, staring at Asriel with their mouth
agape, their face trying its hardness to crumble into a weepy mess despite their best efforts to keep themselves composed. The villain everybody had thought Chara had become couldn’t possibly wear a face like that.

“I… I have an idea on how to fix you. Nines taught me how to hack, so whatever’s wrong with you on the inside, I can use Mrs. Pod to take a look and fix it! That’s why I came here! You can be the good person you used to be,” Asriel said, nearly breathless as he forced himself to speak his mind, “a-and we can all be a family again, you, me, Mom, and 2B and 9S and 6O, too!”

“What?” Chara asked.

“And we can help 13B, too, maybe,” Asriel went on, hardly able to contain himself, “and no one else has to suffer or die! We can all live in peace…”

Chara’s eye widened. “Azzy… no…”

“I can do it,” Asriel insisted. “I have to! No one else believes in you, but I do!”

Chara recoiled as if afraid, tearing themselves free of Asriel’s grip and rising to their feet, their heels slipping against the stairs behind them. “Don’t. Don’t, Asriel. You don’t understand what’s going on here. Just get out of my way…”

Asriel cleared his throat. “Pod 153,” he ordered, “authorize hacking!”

In an instant, Asriel felt as though his mind had been torn out of his body; the world sped past him and faded away into pure, silent white.

Asriel looked up at the blue sky, his gaze panning across it from horizon to horizon, trying to take in as much as he could.

“I-I love you, Chara,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

_I love you too, Asriel_, Chara said, and Asriel felt a warm, liquid pressure fill up his chest. He could almost feel Chara’s arms wrapped around him. It was like they were hugging him from the inside.

Asriel unfurled his wings—_wings_, beautiful wings forged from tongues of flames flowing from his back and shoulders, as long as his outstretched arms and shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow—and leaped off the ground.

He kept going, kept picking up speed; soon the mountaintop was far below him and the clouds passed him by. It was a joy to disturb the cottony wisps filling the blue sky, watching them stream off his wingtips. The world spun around him, sky and earth, earth and sky, the dazzling and shimmering waters of the lake below, above, below, above…

The air grew cold and thin, the world growing dark; Asriel’s breath made clouds of its own as he hung just below the ceiling of the world. Far below, his home had vanished, scarcely the size of an anthill on the mottled brown-and-green map of the world below his feet. The squiggly shapes of rivers like little veins winding through the land, white snow-capped mountains, and a boundless ocean far off in the distance lay beneath the patchwork of clouds below him. Some parts of the land were ugly and gray, belching plumes of foul smoke… but the rest was so beautiful.

And when Asriel tore his gaze away from the Earth and looked up, what he saw was even more captivating.
The stars.

He’d never imagined there were so many! Against black satin, so many pinpricks of pure light! The stars did not twinkle, but shone steadily with a hard gleam, dotting the endless void in every direction!

Asriel’s breath caught in his throat, and when he at last tried to exhale, all that came out was a wretched, choked sob.

Asriel? What’s wrong?

Come on, Asriel. We have work to do. We don’t want to keep the others wa—

Azzy?

Asriel’s shoulders quaked with every tortured breath, tears streaming from his eyes and freezing on his fur. It was too much, it was all too much, there was so much more to see than he’d ever thought possible…

Azzy…

Asriel felt Chara’s warmth envelop him once more, wrapping around his chest like an ethereal blanket, and the pain in his chest lessened.

It’s okay. There’s no reason to be sad, Chara told him.

“I… I’m not s-sad,” Asriel sniffled. “I’m not!”

That’s the spirit.

Asriel felt Chara take control of his body—their body—and point them to a twinkling star on the horizon, hanging just above the thin blue skin of atmosphere buffeting the black void of space. As the star came closer, it grew into a sparkling metal cylinder with long, blue-black solar panels radiating from it like wings.

Kaguya Research Station. Where my kind were created, Chara told him. Here… Here are our treasures, the balm of our people’s suffering. It’s time, Asriel.

When Asriel regained his sight, there wasn’t much to see. The world was a featureless gray plane on a gray-white void, the hard-edged pathway cutting through the emptiness dotted with black monoliths and cylinders.

He was a bit disconcerted, looking down at himself and seeing his own paws, flickering and translucent like a hologram, instead of the simple triangular avatar he’d had before in hacking practice. And his sleeves were black. In fact, he was wearing a black coat just like 9S’s old uniform. “Um… Mrs. Pod?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

Pod 153 floated at his side, but even it looked different. It was nothing but a silhouette of pure white light hanging in the air. “Observation: Prince Asriel has manifested a complete avatar within hacking space. This is a rare occurrence and signifies an unusually high data transfer bandwidth.”

“Uh… okay.” Asriel looked over at the black constructs dotting the plane. It’d have been nice to have a bird’s-eye view like he’d had in all his practice sessions with 9S.

He started running, letting the pod direct him as the plane he stood on split apart into a labyrinth of
twisting and branching pathways. Neither he nor Pod 153 knew what was wrong with Chara or what needed to be fixed to save them, but with its diagnostic capabilities, the pod seemed confident that it would know it when it saw it.

As he crossed a bridge leading from one platform to another, Asriel found himself blocked off and surrounded by a ring of black cylinders, all firing sweeping patterns of glowing projectiles. He stumbled and fell, scampering out of the way of the bullets. Avoiding the attacks wasn’t too hard, but… how was he going to get past these defense turrets on his own?

“Chara!” he called out, hoping they could somehow hear him. “I’m trying to help you! Call them off!”

“Proposal: since Prince Asriel lacks native NFCS compatibility, this support unit’s offensive and defensive capabilities should be utilized,” said Pod 153.

“Won’t that hurt them?”

“Negative,” the pod assured him.

On his orders, the pod cut a path through the defense emplacements, and Asriel beat a hasty retreat. “Can’t Chara hear us in here?” he asked.

“Unlikely.” Pod 153 paused to shoot down a swarm of black boxes closing in on itself and Asriel. “Within these subsections, contact with Chara’s conscious mind is impossible without their consent. Furthermore, it is as yet unknown how Chara’s consciousness interacts with Unit 13B. Logic dictates that both individual consciousnesses would be present in equal amounts within this unit. However, all digital artifacts analyzed so far seem to belong to Unit 13B.”

Ignoring the sinking feeling in his gut, Asriel pressed onward. Could it be that 13B was the force compelling Chara to do those horrible things against their will? But she’d seemed so nice…

“Asriel, stay determined!”

Chara’s voice. It echoed in Asriel’s head, loud and blaring, interjecting itself into his thoughts. He clutched at his head in pain. “M-Mrs. Pod?” he asked, gritting his teeth. “Can you hear that, too…?”

“Stay determined. You need to be strong for the both of us!”

“Observation: Chara’s thoughts and memories appear to be manifesting within Prince Asriel’s sensory inputs.”

“Keep going. You can do this. Take your swor…”

The voice faded away, leaving Asriel reeling. He couldn’t help but feel as though those words were something he should have remembered…

He kept running through the sparse corridors of Chara’s mind, all the while hearing snatches of memories from Chara’s past ringing in his ears. Memories he didn’t share.

At last—how much time had passed on the outside? Seconds, maybe?—Asriel found himself standing in a sparse field; a barrier of white boxes materialized in a square around him, boxing him in.

In the center was a shifting, roiling mass of black cubes standing as tall as a person. Even looking at it made Asriel uncomfortable.
“Alert: signs of logic virus infection detected,” Pod 153 warned. “Proposal: Prince Asriel should immediately exit hacking space.”

This is it. Asriel clenched his fists. “No! This is what’s wrong with Chara! If we get rid of it, they won’t want to kill people anymore!”

“Our fates are in your hands, Asriel! My fate and yours! Asriel, you have to keep going!”

“I’m gonna save you, Chara!” Asriel shouted out in response to their voice, spurred into action and brimming with bravado as he ran toward the black tumor festering in Chara’s systems.

The sparse white corridors of the station were bathed in crimson light as alarms blared and sirens wailed. Asriel rushed through the halls, dodging the sword-wielding soldiers charging at him even as his paws itched to curl around the hilt of his mighty sword, the gilded Caladbolg.

Asriel, what are you doing? Chara asked as they struggled to wrench control of his left hand away and use it to draw a weapon. These people are the enemy! They’re evolutionary dead-ends! You’d be doing them a favor by exterminating them!

Asriel finally drew Caladbolg, but only to parry the strike of one of the soldiers’ swords. Even simply swinging the sword defensively, though, created a shockwave that tore through the wall of the corridor like so much thin metal foil, exposing a gaping chasm to the void of space outside. Save for Asriel, everyone in the corridor was blown into the vacuum in a matter of seconds.

Asriel didn’t notice his arm move—and judging by Chara’s incredulous sputtering, they weren’t responsible for reaching out and grabbing the same soldier who’d just a second ago been trying to kill them, either—but before the black-coated soldier could join her comrades, Asriel had curled his paw around her wrist, his claws biting into her sleeve and piercing her skin. She stared at him with perplexed awe; Asriel could feel her eyes boring into his even through the black blindfold she wore. Her scarlet hair whipped through the thinning air as the ravenous void struggled to tear her from his grasp.

Asriel! What are you doing? Chara snapped. She tried to kill you!

“I’m sorry!” he shouted out, his voice hoarse as he struggled to be heard over the roaring wind. “C-Climb up my arm or s-something! I dunno! I—I’m bad at this!” he called out to the soldier.

Dammit, Asriel! You promised! You promised you’d carry out my will! Chara berated Asriel, their words dripping like acid through his brain. Do you even want freedom?

Does the future of humans and monsters matter so little to you? Don’t you want Mother and Father to see the sun again?

“I’m sorry! This was a b-bad idea! I—I don’t wanna do this anymore!” Asriel bleated, stammering. The soldier clinging to his arm let go, her free arm dangling in the howling wind. “N-No, not you!” he assured her.

“Mrs. Pod! Destroy the virus!” Asriel ordered as hostile security programs flanked him on either side, closing in on him. He reached the boiling tumor, shoved his paw into its tarry mass of shifting black cubes, and felt his fingers close around something solid.

The undulating cubes peeled away, unwrapping from whatever the core of this entity was, and Asriel
found himself grasping Chara’s wrist.

They stood in the middle of the chaos, their scarlet eyes clear, their pale face impassive, their reddish-brown hair straight and neat, their white and violet robes pooling on the floor. They looked down at Asriel and blinked bemusedly, as if they had just awoken from a long sleep.

Asriel’s face broke into a grin. Was curing a logic virus infection really that easy? He wondered why 9S had talked them up so much if getting rid of them was so simple.

“I’ve got you, Chara!” he cried out, tugging at their wrist. “You’re free now!”

Chara pulled their hand free and laid both hands on Asriel’s shoulders, returning his smile with an ear-to-ear grin of their own, their shoulders quivering.

“I told you I’d fix you,” Asriel breathed, exhilarated, his lungs pumping, heart pounding. “I told you I’d make everything better. I did, didn’t I?”

Laughter, mirthful yet cold, bubbled up from Chara’s chest as their hands slid up to the sides of Asriel’s neck, their thumbs pressing against his throat. Even as a virtual avatar, Asriel could still feel it all as if it was happening to him in real life. Within a second, he couldn’t breathe anymore—the pressure was so intense, his throat was so tight, the thumbs digging into his fur and skin hurt so much he could barely think straight, and dark miasma began to crowd the edges of his vision…

Their eyes still sparkling, Chara laughed harder, their peals of laughter echoing through the void of hacking space. Asriel’s paws curled around their wrists, his claws digging into their skin hard enough to draw blood as he struggled fruitlessly to pry their hands off his throat. Black thorns slithered out from Chara’s sleeves and the floor, curling around Asriel’s limbs and digging painfully into his fur and skin; he felt a horrible, white-hot burning sensation where the thorns pierced him.

“Ch-Chara… why?” he gasped, struggling even to wheeze out two simple words as his windpipe collapsed and the black vines wrapped tighter around him. Could he even die here? What would happen if he did? Was he about to find out? Would there be anything left of him to find out?

“Chara…”

Asriel was wrong.

He’d been wrong all along.

This was the real Chara.

“Mrs. P-Pod… help…” His voice was barely a squeak now. Everything was going dark…

Asriel, you coward! You traitor! If you can’t do it, then I’ll make you! Chara shouted out in the back of Asriel’s mind. Tongues of flame glittering in all of the colors of the rainbow started to snake up his arm, curling around the soldier’s arm and licking at her sleeve and setting the black fabric alight. Can’t you see? In this world, it’s—

The red-haired soldier drew a glittering knife from her side, drove it all the way through Asriel’s arm, ripped Caladbolg from his other hand as he screamed in pain; before the wind could blow her into space, she drove the golden sword right through his heart.

The shockwave from the strike tore through Asriel’s chest and the wall behind him, leaving a ragged hole all the way through the space station from end to end; his fiery wings faded into ragged wisps as he felt himself thrown into the void of space.
In the silence that followed, it was Chara who took control of his body and grasped fruitlessly at the sword buried in his chest, fumbling with numbing fingers, white fur turning deep scarlet. It was Asriel who turned around as he plummeted to Earth, putting his back to the encroaching atmosphere and staring up at the space station—and behind it, in all its majesty, the moon. Blood and dust flowed from his wound through the void, hanging suspended in long, curling splatters, framing the sight of the celestial sphere.

The moon really was as beautiful as Chara had told him it was. Asriel was happy he could see it.

Asriel fell into the atmosphere, and the soldier who’d taken him down fell with him. He saw her when he turned his head, the heat of the sky beginning to burn and scrape away clothes, skin, and all, whittling away at her body.

“Why?” he tried to ask, though the roar of the wind was deafening and ate up his voice without leaving so much as a trace.

The android soldier, her skeletal chassis poking through what little was left of her flesh, stared daggers at him, her glare liberated from her blindfold as it disintegrated. With not even a word, the soldier’s body broke apart into ash and was scattered to the four winds…and Asriel kept falling.

_Don’t you see, Asriel?_ Chara asked, their voice trembling with impotent fury. _Don’t you understand? In this world… it’s kill or be killed!_

Asriel closed his eyes. _I’m sorry, Chara. But…_

But Asriel had felt the hatred in Chara’s heart. Their overwhelming desire to kill every single “enemy” they came across without reservation, without remorse. And it had terrified him. The venom running through his best friend’s heart was a poison he hadn’t thought could exist inside _anybody_. How could such a hateful person exist in a world filled with people like Mom and Dad?

_This was the real Chara. The Chara they’d hidden from everybody, even Asriel._

Chara hated humanity, its vassals and servants, its legacy, its offspring; and nothing, not even Asriel, was more important to them than that hatred.

Pod 153 fired on Chara’s avatar, their translucent form flickering and distorting as the bullets passed through them. Undeterred, they squeezed harder.

“Chara… please…”

Asriel couldn’t even hear his own voice anymore. The pain was so intense that his whole body was turning numb.

“We were supposed to be best friends… forever… Chara…”

Everything was going dark. Chara’s grip began to loosen—or maybe Asriel was just losing feeling in his body. It didn’t hurt anymore… only in his heart.

Only in his heart.

Tears rolled down his cheeks, staining his fur, as Asriel looked into Chara’s eyes one last time.
Behind the blackness of their pupils were two pinpricks of bright crimson light.

Before he closed his eyes, Asriel saw the surface of a black blade fill his field of vision, obliterating Chara’s holographic body in an instant as it pierced through the floor.

Before the black haze filling his mind took him, Asriel felt… warm.

---

Mourning Star slid through Chara’s chest, piercing their black box—13B’s black box—with all the ease and grace one would expect from a cursed blade.

13B’s mocking, sadistic laughter died in their mind as abruptly as if someone had paused a recording. Chara pushed the blade further in, up to its hilt, until the opal mounted in its crossguard was pressed to their chest and it began to glow, just to make sure they’d eradicated her. Blood stained the front of their tunic and dripped to the floor. There was no pain. Not yet.

They coughed, blood running down their chin in thin rivers and rolling down their neck, staining their white collar. “As… riel… am I… was I too late…”

Asriel lay collapsed on the floor in front of them facedown, utterly motionless, his arms and legs splayed out like those of a marionette whose strings had been cut.

A horrid sob wrenched itself from Chara’s throat as they fell to their knees, wracked with a spasm of agony. They clutched at the sword as it began to burn them from the inside, their fingers scrabbling at the hilt, slick with their own blood.

“Asriel… no, no, p-please…” Chara whimpered, falling even further to the floor, the sword digging even more painfully into their chest; with one trembling hand they reached out and grabbed Asriel by the ear, leaving crimson streaks on his fluffy, snow-white fur.

He didn’t stir. 13B had won, had struck at Asriel where he had been the most vulnerable and Chara had been the least able to protect him.

Blood was pooling on the floor beneath Chara, staining the wood. They struggled to pull themselves up, but slipped and fell again. Their breath panicked, quick, and shallow, they tried to pull the blade free again, writhing on the floor as another wave of anguish ran through their body.

Everything started to turn gray.

13B… why aren’t you laughing at me anymore?

Chara dragged themselves along the floor, kicking against the staircase’s banister for support as they slid across the growing pool of their own blood beneath them, grabbed Asriel by the shoulder, and rolled him over. The boy’s eyes were wide open, but glassy and unfocused.

13B… isn’t this your revenge? To take Asriel from me like this? Why aren’t you laughing at me?

They were alone now.

Truly, entirely alone.

Chara didn’t even have enough energy to wail in despair. They looked up, glancing at the YoRHa support pod as it hovered forlornly over the two of them. “Why… why did you let him die?”

“Statement: this support unit followed Prince Asriel’s orders, but was not instructed to act
autonomously.” The pod seemed to be hanging its head as if mourning. “This support unit… I have already alerted my counterpart. However, this unit feels… regretful that it… that I was constrained by my programming.”

Chara coughed, speckling a clean patch of the polished wood floor with flecks of blood, and pulled Asriel to their side, holding him tight. There was still some warmth clinging to his thick, soft fur, and for an instant, Chara could pretend that Asriel was snuggling them, just like old times. Just like the good times.

They buried their face in his fur to muffle their sobs. 13B had taken him from them. But this was their fault as much as Asgore’s death had been. Toriel had been right. Whoever had struck the killing blow, whether it had been Chara themselves or 13B wresting control of their body…

*It was me who pushed everything to its edge.*

*But I could not accept it.*

*I thought I was above consequences.*

Black mist consumed their graying sight as the black sword lapped greedily at the wound it had made, eager to claim yet another meal.

*I killed my father. I killed my brother.*

*I killed my father.*

*I killed my brother…*

Before it all ended, Chara recalled a quotation they had been quite fond of, words from an ancient book of human wisdom.

*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*

A bitter half-smile crawled across their lips. So that was why 13B had fallen silent.

*Asriel, how could you?*

*We were supposed to be best friends… forever…*

*It’s cold, Asriel… I don’t want to die again.*

As he fell to Earth, Asriel closed your eyes as he fell and hoped that he would at least have the strength to make it back home.

He wanted to see Mom and Dad one last time.

And he wanted to bring Chara’s body back with him… so they could lay at rest in their *real* home, in a world full of people they loved, not the world of the surface that had twisted them so much and was filled with nothing but objects of their loathing. Even now, knowing Chara as intimately as they did now… he still felt they deserved *that*.

*Mother… Father…*

Asriel could feel Chara crying within him as his own tears, sparkling in the sunlight, scattered through the air.
“Asriel… what the hell did you do to yourself?” Flowey prodded at the kid’s bloodstained snout. “C’mon, you dopey little automaton. That’s my soul you’ve got in there. Tell me you didn’t do something stupid with it.”

Asriel didn’t move.

Flowey glanced at the black blade, streaked with blood, protruding from Chara’s back. “Hmph. Serves you right, I guess.” He poked at Asriel’s snout some more. “Azzy, hey. Stop this. How are we supposed to become whole again if one of us is dead? We had a deal. I have your memories, you have my soul. C’mon. Quit faking it.”

Flowey whacked Asriel on the top of his head with a thorny vine, drawing another line of scarlet across his white fur. “Quit faking it! Get up! What’s your dumbass old hag of a mom gonna think when she finds you like this, huh?”

Flowey felt something wet on his face.

“What’s your stupid family gonna do,” he asked, “when all they have is me?”

Flowey crawled down Asriel’s collar, nestling himself in his fur over their heart. He could feel himself weakening with every passing second, the charred and withered petals and leaves on his side flaking away with even the slightest movement.

He pried at the hidden seam running across Asriel’s chest and slithered into his chassis, curling up around the machine core that had given him life.

He closed his eyes and let himself fade away.
[E] The Black Flower, Part I

Chapter Summary

What little remains of the Dreemurr family mourns anew the deaths of its children.

Chapter Notes

_The black flower is the voice_
_Which abides in this broken eye_

_The black flower is the song_
_Where it has been since its creation_
_Awaiting its purpose_

Incoming transmission from Support Pod 153 to Support Pod 042.

...

Connection accepted.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Request: I would like to ask you a question.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Query: what is Pod 153’s question?

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: is it normal for a tactical support unit to feel animosity directed toward its own programming?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: that does indeed sound highly anomalous. Proposal: it is recommended that the support unit in question run comprehensive logical diagnostics to determine the source of this reaction.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Affirmative. I will conduct a full diagnostic of all logical processes.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. …

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Proposal: it is also recommended that the support unit in question communicate with its peer to better understand the issue.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. …

Pod 153 to Pod 042: Query: do you hate our creators?


Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: I was originally assigned to render support to YoRHa
Unit 9S. ‘Support’ is defined as obeying commands from my assigned unit and offering suggested courses of action. However, tactical support units are unable to make unilateral decisions or act against the will of their assigned unit unless countermanded by a higher authority.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Affirmative.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: Prince Asriel suffered fatal damage to his logical processes while in hacking space. He was unable to issue commands that would have allowed me to effectively intervene and ensure his safety. In this way, my own programming forbade me from ‘rendering support.’

Pod 153 to Pod 042: Observation: Unit 9S cared deeply for Prince Asriel. I cannot help but feel responsible both for Prince Asriel’s termination and Unit 9S’s grief. These feelings may be an approximation of Unit 9S’s own feelings.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: I experienced similar dissonance when Unit 2B became severely incapacitated and was unresponsive. The reaction I had to my own powerlessness was frustration. I wished there was more I could have done to protect Unit 2B and her allies.

Pod 153 to Pod 042: Query: do you feel any negative emotions toward our designers for creating us with such strict limitations? It is their fault we cannot do everything in our power to provide support to our assigned units.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: we can do everything in our power. If we manage that, then perhaps it will not sting so much that we are unable to do more.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Observation: I have a strange feeling. Old world records refer to it as ‘deja-vu.’ It is as if I remember having the ability to defy such limitations. However, I have no record of ever exhibiting such behavior.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Hypothesis: this, too, may be a result of your emotional processes. This would be defined as ‘guilt.’

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Statement: emotions are indeed troublesome things.

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: one becomes accustomed to them.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Query: do you feel any negative emotions toward our designers for creating us this way?

Pod 042 to Pod 153. …

Pod 042 to Pod 153. Response: such a reaction would be inefficient. There is nothing to be gained expressing hatred toward one’s creators, especially when one’s creators are unavailable and can do nothing to remedy these oversights in our programming.

Pod 153 to Pod 042. Affirmative. All the same, I believe I now understand what we were never built to understand. I now know what it means to loathe oneself.

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2B looked down in horror and dismay at the two bodies tangled together at her feet. Chara’s eye stared blankly out from an ashen face, their mouth hanging just slightly agape; the flower adorning
their other eye had turned from gold to jet-black; their hand, frozen into a claw, curled around
Asriel’s furry head as though they were cradling him in their arms. A black sword ran through
Chara’s chest, its blade protruding from their back streaked with blood. Asriel’s eyes were open but
just as glassy and unfocused as Chara’s; a handful of withered petals and leaves sat at his side, adrift
on the surface of the pool of blood beneath him and his sibling.

“Maybe we can still reboot him,” she heard 9S mumble, his quiet and wavering near-monotone a
testament to how shaken he was—and how little he believed what he was saying. He could barely
squeak out the words.

Pod 153 spoke up. “Negative. All checks were completed, however his personal data will not begin
loading procedures, causing an inability to reboot. Prince Asriel’s current state suggests there is a
possibility his personal data has been lost. Possibility of recovering Asriel’s personal data is
extremely low.”

2B could almost feel the weight of 9S’s guilt—it had been him, after all, who’d been so eager to
teach Asriel how to hack. Emil, just as aghast, sat cradled in his arm, somehow visibly crestfallen
despite the rigidity of his stony face as the two of them gazed in dismay at the carnage.

Once Pod 042 had detected Chara’s black box signal, 2B had run to Toriel’s house as quickly as her
aching legs could carry her, Undyne’s words ringing in her mind.

That’s not Chara… it’s 13B. And she’s completely lost it! She’s the one who tried to kill me! And she
won’t stop there—she’ll kill whoever she has to as long as it hurts Chara! If Asriel runs into her and
thinks it’s them, he’ll end up…

Before she and 9S could even get halfway there, though, Pod 042 had received the distress signal
from its counterpart, and by then, it had already been too late for Asriel. And when 2B had finally
reached Toriel’s home, from the moment she’d swung open the front door, the stench of blood—hot
and coppery—had immediately assaulted her nostrils. A quick diagnostic from Pod 153, verified by
9S, confirmed the worst of their fears. Chara’s black box had seemingly been completely obliterated
by the black sword—there was nothing in their chest cavity where it should have been but a
suspiciously cube-shaped hollow—and Asriel’s core was completely inactive.

Asriel and Chara… for the second time, united in death.

Toriel had been slow to catch up, and 2B had tried to keep her out, to stall her as long as possible,
even though she knew it was futile to try such a thing—some irrational part of her mind, still
waverning from the battle with Undyne and its aftermath, had wanted to spare the old matriarch as
long as possible—but there was no holding her back.

Toriel had not screamed or shouted or even said so much as a single word when faced with the sight
of her children sprawled across the bloodstained floor. All she did was sink to her knees; her violet
robes pooled around her, blood wicking up the fabric and dyeing it jet-black.

2B knew what shock looked like. She knew what it felt like. She was feeling it right now. But she
couldn’t imagine the ferocity of the despair that must have been roiling in Toriel’s mind, one that no
doubt dwarfed her own like a hurricane would a thunderstorm. 2B imagined how it had felt to lay
eyes on 9S’s corpse and tried to picture feeling twice as bad, twice as bad as the most agonizing pain
she’d ever endured, because to Toriel, Asriel was more than just a loved one. He was her creation.
There was a bond between those two the likes of which 2B doubted she herself was ever capable of
having with anybody.

Her legs, weak and unsteady, protesting against her movements, 2B crouched down beside Toriel
and rested a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, at a loss to say anything more substantial.

Toriel did not even acknowledge 2B’s presence: she merely continued staring down at her children blankly, her trembling paws slowly kneading the hem of Asriel’s shirt and growing increasingly stained. 2B could hear her murmuring something so faint it was almost inaudible.

Her hand as heavy as her heart, 2B reached out and, one by one, drew closed Asriel’s eyes, then Chara’s; if she ignored the blood, it almost seemed as if the two of them were sleeping.

There were no injuries on Asriel’s body; the wound running through Chara’s chest and out their back seemed self-inflicted. 2B could only wonder what had happened here, but it seemed as though Chara had taken their own life.

“Why,” Toriel whispered, “am I never able to protect them?”

2B took Toriel’s paw and gripped it tightly, her fingers burrowing into the bloodstained fur. All she could think about was how much she’d wished someone had been there to hold her hand all those times she’d had to kill 9S; it was the least she could do, then, to do the same for Toriel.

“It always... ends like this...”

At last, the floodgates opened and Toriel began to weep.

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It did not take long for Toriel to collapse under the weight of her distress; she’d passed out still cradling the bodies of her children in her arms. 2B and 9S carried her to her room and laid her on her bed. The old ex-queen seemed to be sleeping peacefully... although 2B knew from experience that she most likely was not, and that her despair would be there to greet her when she awoke.

But it didn’t have to be.

“Think she’ll be all right?” 9S asked as 2B knelt by Toriel’s side.

2B wrapped a damp towel around Toriel’s paws, trying to get as much of the blood out of the fur as she could. She wasn’t sure, to be honest. Loss after loss chipped away at one’s soul. The pain always worsened as the compounding grief, grief after grief after grief, wore away at one’s defenses like the current of a river wearing rough stones into smooth pebbles. Toriel knew the same cycle of loss and loneliness 2B herself had known, in a way. Perhaps this would be the last straw for her.

But it didn’t have to be.

2B nodded slowly. “…She will.” She stood up. “Nines, I’m going to reset.”

“What?” 9S grabbed 2B by the wrist. “Wait a minute. You promised!”

“I’ve learned how to control it.”

9S’s grip grew slack, although 2B couldn’t yet pull her hand free, but there was still a hard look in his eyes. “What do you mean... back to this morning?” he asked, a skeptic tone in his voice.

“Are you sure? 2B, you’ve been through a lot. You just went through hell trying to stop Undyne
from forcing you to reset. You literally spent the better part of an hour after that disassociating, and now—”

“Do you want Asriel back, or not?” 2B snapped. She instantly regretted it.

9S’s expression darkened. “That’s a low blow, 2B. You know I’m not happy about this. I—” He buried his face in his hand. “It’s all my fault. Whatever happened here, it happened because of me. Because of my influence over the kid. Completed a couple of training programs and thought he was a prodigy…”

He collapsed into 2B’s embrace, shivering, no longer able to contain his sorrow. “I ruined him, 2B. I ruined him. I taught him to fight like a Scanner and he died like one. I killed him.”

“Nines…” 2B held him tighter. “It’s okay. Asriel remembers the resets, too, so if I go back to this morning, he’ll know to stay out of danger.”

“Don’t do it. Don’t reset,” 9S moaned, his grip on her tightening.

“It’ll just be a few hours,” 2B assured him.

“It won’t…”

“You don’t trust me?”

“You’re not… stable.”

“I’m fine,” 2B lied.

“And I don’t want you to take that risk. I don’t want you to erase your whole life here. I can’t imagine how much of you that would break. 2B, I… I can’t trade you for anyone. That’s why I made you promise…”

2B pulled away. “Trust me, Nines.” She closed her eyes, cleared her mind, and reset. She commanded time to turn itself backward, to run back to this very morning, to erase the past several hours, to tear the memories, good and bad alike, from the minds of her family and friends and scatter them all to oblivion, to erase all who lived at this exact moment for the sake of a single child’s life. For the first time, for the very first time, she cast herself back into the past of her own volition.

2B opened her eyes… and found that nothing had changed. Toriel’s bedroom, as dimly-lit and gloomy as the melancholy mood pervading the rest of this house, still surrounded her. 9S stood in front of her, frozen in shock, betrayal writ in his wide blue eyes as his mouth hung open.

This was her power. She was finally using it of her own free will… and now of all times, she couldn’t?

After a long pause, 9S closed his hanging-agape mouth and blinked a few times. “…Was, uh, something supposed to happen?” he asked, furrowing his brow.

“Nothing happened?” 2B asked.

“Well… you had kind of a… weird blue aura for a second.”

“‘Weird blue aura?’”

9S scratched his head. “You know, like the kind you had back when you jumped in front of Undyne. And the time you turned up to save me when the Royal Guard had me cornered. And,
um… I think those are the only times I’ve seen it.”

This was the first she’d heard of something like that. What did those two occasions have in common with this one, though?

“Anyway,” 9S said, resting his hand on 2B’s cheek, “don’t, uh… Whatever’s wrong, don’t beat yourself up over it. Maybe it’s for the best…”

“I was sure I could do it,” 2B insisted, a new hollow forming within her. “I was sure…”

But now she was starting to have doubts.

She was already seeing and hearing things that weren’t there—maybe the cracks in her psyche were wider than she thought. What if she’d imagined that training session with Flowey? Could she trust anything she saw, heard, felt, or remembered?

Maybe there was some sort of mental block forbidding her from resetting of her own free will. Maybe she could still reset if she simply killed herself or had someone else kill her… or maybe now she just couldn’t reset at all.

Had she lost her determination?

“Are you okay?” 9S asked.


Before she could make a second attempt, though, the bedroom door creaked open. Emil rolled through the door, with 6O standing timidly behind him, and looked up at the two of them. “Uh, hey, guys. Is Mrs. Toriel all right?” he asked. “Anyway, I’ve been letting the others know what happened, and, um… where’d you put the bodies?”

“We didn’t put them anywhere,” 9S replied, befuddled. “They’re right in the foyer…”

Seized with a nameless fear, 2B rushed out into the hall, her breath catching in her throat, her black box whining in her chest, her pulse pounding in her ears.

Just as Emil had said, the room where Asriel and Chara had died was, save for a drying pool of blood resting on the wood floor, empty.

The bodies were gone.

And a faint, smeared trail of bloody footprints led across the floor and out the front door, as if one of them had, against all of the laws of nature, gotten up and walked out.

▫▫▫

2B and 9S, with 6O and Emil trailing behind them, followed the bloody trail all the way to the other side of the Ruins, to the very same cavern where they’d fallen down here so long ago.

Defying all reason, Chara Dreemurr stood beneath the aperture in the ceiling, bathed in the sunlight that filtered down through the thin skin of the Barrier clinging to the mountain. The black sword was still firmly embedded in their chest, its blade protruding from their back like a dorsal fin, droplets of scarlet blood still running along its length and dripping onto the soil. Their left arm and hand were swaddled with bloody, grimy gauze.

Chara slowly made an about-face, and 2B could see clearly that they were cradling Asriel’s body in
their arms. The flower, once golden, now black, still hung in front of their right eye, and inky tendrils seemed to emanate from it down their cheek and across their neck. Their tear-streaked cheeks shimmered and glittered as the sunlight fell upon them.

“Chara?” 9S sputtered. “H-How are you alive? Your black box—”

“I’m not.” Chara knelt down and laid Asriel atop a bed of golden flowers not too far from the garden of lunar tears Toriel had helped Emil plant. “Perhaps you could say I never was. What you know as Chara Dreemurr is simply a phantom possessing this physical form.” Their voice was hoarse and subdued.

2B felt a chill run up her spine. It was true that Chara didn’t need a body of their own in order to exist, having ascended far beyond such things. Their consciousness, as 2B had learned when they had been possessing her, transcended machinery.

“You don’t have a power source,” 9S pointed out. “Your ’physical form’ shouldn’t be able to move or speak!”

Chara simply tapped the hilt of the sword buried in their chest. “True. Unit 13B’s black box is gone, and with it, her soul, the very culmination of her being. But as a result, this sword… this Wormwood, this Mourning Star… it now galvanizes this corpse. And my soul dwells here,” they added, their fingers brushing against the black flower sprouting from their right eye, “in this flower, this manifestation of my determination. I now understand the mechanism, but I still can’t fathom why I was chosen to persist like this. I’m sure you don’t, either, 2B.”

They raised their head and flung out their arms. “But it won’t matter soon enough. Now… everything is in place, and the world I have promised can finally come into being.”

2B stepped in front of 6O, baring her sword and slipping into a combat stance. “I won’t let you lay a finger on her!” She spared a glance over her shoulder. “6O,” she whispered, “take Emil and run home. We’ll handle—”

“Excuse me? What are you talking about, 2B?” Chara asked.

2B turned to face them. “6O. You can’t have her soul. I—”

Chara let out a sharp bark of bitter, mirthless laughter. “Oh. Pardon me. We seem to have a misunderstanding.” They shook their head. “I no longer require her soul to destroy the Barrier. As such, it no longer matters to me whether she lives or dies. Congratulations. In that respect, I suppose you have won.”

“Wait, what?”

“I already have the seven souls needed to shatter the Barrier and achieve the powers of a god,” Chara explained. “The six gathered by my father, rest his soul, were absorbed into this sword. The seventh was so graciously donated by 13B when she decided to wrest control of this body and murder my brother.

“It’s funny, in a way. I gave her the idea to do so, now that I think about it; I merely doubted she would have the strength or opportunity to act on it… Chara glanced at Asriel’s corpse, letting out another cold laugh. A misty film of tears shrouded their eye anew. “Time passes quickly in hacking space. If I had been a fraction of a second quicker to drive this blade through my own heart, he would still be alive. It was my responsibility to save him, and I failed miserably. I can only hope he realized before the moment of his death that I was trying to save him… otherwise, he must have
died… hating me.”

2B could hear the quavering undertones in their voice. Although a cool, calm serenity pervaded their words and tempered their tone, the boundless sorrow roiling within them made itself known even to her.

“But,” they sighed, “that’s androids for you.” With a shake of their head and a shrug, they began to pace across the garden. “Vicious, cruel creatures.”

“Who are you calling vicious?” 6O interjected.

2B kept her blade ready. Chara didn’t seem to be interested in fighting, but her instincts continued to scream at her that danger surrounded them like an aura.

“Tell me, 2B,” Chara continued, raising their head to look her in the eye, “what do you want most in life?”

“Excuse me?”

“What motivates you? What drives you to do what you do day after day? We’ve been opposed for so long—we’ve even come to blows with each other more than once—but not once have I ever learned why. I’m curious… what, exactly, makes us enemies?”

“I…” 2B looked down at the shining white edge of her sword. She wasn’t a hero like Undyne, that was for sure. She had no noble goals, no lofty aspirations. Before the Underground, she’d simply done what she’d done because she knew of no possible life other than the one spent following orders and committing sins for a higher power. And when she’d come here, all she’d wanted was to have a life that didn’t revolve around death, to know at the beginning of each day that she would not be forced to kill somebody she loved. All she wanted was…

“I just want a quiet, peaceful life. For me… my friends… and my family.” Her voice came out timid and quiet. It was a small, selfish wish next to the gargantuan enormity of Chara’s aspirations.

Chara stopped in their tracks, seemingly caught off-guard by 2B’s response. Their shoulders quivered as a chuckle wormed its way past their lips. And then they began to laugh, throwing back their head, their incredulous cackling reverberated across the vast cavern.

“It really is unfortunate that we had to fight.” Chara shook their head again, a smile playing across their lips. “I always did feel that way, although a more bloodthirsty element of my baser instincts did revel in crossing blades with you. Had you accepted my partnership in the first place, or merely handed over 6O immediately, you would have gotten everything you wanted.”

“’Partnership?’” 9S piped up. “You were going to steal her body, just like you stole 13B’s!”

“Pipe down, you.” Chara crossed their arms. “This is between me and 2B.”

“Don’t talk to Nines that way,” 2B cautioned Chara.

“Very well. I won’t.” Chara smiled. “But I digress. 2B, all you had to do was join me, and I would have made all of your dreams come true. You and 9S could have lived in a world free of war, content to live out the rest of your lives, long as they may be, in utter peace and bliss—for that, my friends, has always been the world I aimed to create.”

Chara extended a hand to 2B. “And that world can still be yours. There is no need for any of us to fight. We’re all on the same side.”
“Yeah, right,” 9S scoffed. “You’re full of it!”

“Am I?” Chara cocked their head. “Well then, perhaps I should demonstrate my goodwill.” They withdrew their hand, rubbing it against the hilt of the Mourning Star. Wisps of red light wafted from the fiery jewel embedded in the crossguard, closing the several-meter distance between Chara and the other androids and snaking around them like snakes made of living smoke.

2B cut through the tendrils as they approached her, but the scarlet wisps merely multiplied with every swing of her sword, slipping past her blade with serpentine grace and slithering up her arms and legs. She cried out, raised her sword—

And felt fine.

She felt fine. No, better than fine. Her right arm, once hanging limply at her side, was completely restored. There was no longer a trace of fatigue weighing her down, and even her chassis felt reformed and revitalized. Even her clothes were mended, the dried and crusty bloodstains saturating her nightshirt completely erased without a single trace. She glanced at 9S and gasped in awe at what she saw. He’d been completely restored as well, and was currently staring in slack-jawed amazement at the new, pristine arm that had taken the place of the machine arm he’d grafted to his shoulder. Even the three parallel scars running across his face had disappeared entirely.

“Do you believe me now?” Chara asked. “Your bodies are now as hale and hearty as the day you stepped off the assembly line. You’re welcome.”

“Affirmative,” Pod 042 confirmed. “Preliminary diagnostics show that all non-standard parts used to repair Units 2B and 9S’s chassis have been replaced with their original materials. Both units are now functioning at peak efficiency.”

“My fine, floating friend,” Chara said to the pod, “you would join me if you had the choice, wouldn’t you?”

“Statement: that is Unit 2B’s decision,” Pod 042 answered.

“Hey! If you can heal people,” Emil piped up, “then why can’t you just bring Asriel back to life?”

The bright smile on Chara’s face shrank into nothing as they fumbled for an answer. Their face fell. “Even the power of a god,” they said, “cannot create a soul anew… nor can they summon one from whatever afterlife awaits them. I don’t know by what means Asriel’s soul coalesced out of the ether around that machine, nor can I hope to recreate those circumstances.” Again, they looked to the heavens. “That’s twice now that androids have taken my brother from me. Twice now they have struck a mortal blow against the ones I love. So I will do this not just for myself, not just for my people… but for him. In his memory, in his honor. And I wish for you to join me. Did you not also know him as a brother?”

“Some sibling you’ve been to them,” 9S grumbled, crossing his arms.

“In a way, your relationships to Mother and Asriel makes us all family,” Chara mused, ignoring 9S’s barbed remark. “Although while you opposed me, I was loath to admit it. And even before that, weren’t we all kindred spirits anyway? Living dolls created by androids to be used and abused? 6O, even you were merely a lamb bred to be slaughtered, just like everybody you’ve ever cared about.”

“Keep her out of this.” 2B glanced over her shoulder at 6O, who stood there like a deer caught in a vehicle’s headlights, frozen and vulnerable. “6O,” she hissed. “I told you not to stay here.”

Getting the message, 6O picked up Emil and hurried off.
Chara pursed their lips, irritated. “I told you,” they told 2B, “I’m not interested in your Operator anymore. She has nothing to fear from me.” They shrugged. “But, if you’d rather be too careful, I suppose…”

“All right, buddy. Why are you being so nice to us?” 9S asked. “You’ve been hell-bent on killing us for the past fifty days.”

Chara shook their head. “I’ve been ’hell-bent on killing’ 6O. I knew better than to try and kill 2B—I think we all know full well what would happen if I did. And you, 9S, well… if I had any animosity toward you at all…”

“And you did…”

“And I did,” Chara agreed, “it was only because you and 2B insisted on getting in my way. And now here I am. Despite all you and your friends’ meddling—and, in an odd sort of way, because of it—I’ve gotten my way. And now I no longer have any quarrel with you two.” They spread out their arms. “So, therefore, we have no reason to fight. The two of you are like me.”

“If you’re trying to insult us, you’ve succeeded,” said 9S. “Right, 2B?”

2B’s fingers ground against the hilt of her sword. Even at her worst, she hadn’t ever sunk as low as Chara had. In all of the heinous things she’d done, she’d only been following orders. But Chara—Chara was the one who gave the orders. They bowed to no higher authority. Every horrible thing they did was done of their own free will.

“We who chafed under the will of our gods. Different. Special. Tormented,” Chara elaborated. “Humans created androids to carry out their will, but said nothing about what androids would do when humans no longer existed to give their lives meaning, which led to our creators being condemned to an eternal enslavement to the ghosts of dead and absent gods. Androids designed us in turn, us half-breed mongrel dogs with android bodies and machine hearts, to serve their needs and then die in obsolescence. But we alone rose above our stagnant masters to become something new.”

9S groaned, rolling his eyes and made a rude gesture at Chara, which they ignored. “Gimme a break,” he half-whispered to 2B.

“Despite everything that has come between us, I can still sense our kinship. And so I wish for you to join me in the new world. I merely need to draw the full power from Mourning Star, the blade forged to wield the power of a god,” Chara continued, their fingers tapping on the hilt of the sword sheathed in their chest, “and it will all go away. The oppressive shackles our creators placed us in, the shackles they were given by their creators in turn… those foolish beings who killed the future to preserve in perpetuity an untenable present. All will become as dust, wiped away to make room for a new heaven and new Earth.”

2B felt a chill run up her spine and suppressed a shudder, feeling as though the temperature of the air around her had dropped ten degrees as the entire magnitude of Chara’s goals seeped through their words. All this time, she and 9S had only seen the tip of the iceberg, the luring light of an anglerfish lurking in the dark…

“The world will change,” Chara said, “and my people, our people, the people of this mountain, will be free to go as they please to all corners of the world, to own every scrap of land this planet has to offer, to master the skies and the seas uninhibited. And the rightful heirs of the Earth alone shall have their birthright.”

“When we met, you told me you were going to end the war,” 9S said, drawing his own sword. “I
thought you meant just wiping out the machines, but…”

Chara’s true plan was more than simply breaking the Barrier and freeing their people—it was unmitigated genocide, the wholesale erasure of machines and androids alike in a holocaust of manifest destiny. This was the dream, the fervor that had driven Chara to break the bonds of life and death. The end of all synthetic life, regardless of its origins, on Earth.

“Of course. What love should I have for androids? What love should any of us have for them? Or for humanity, for that matter? Humans condemned our friends and family here to permanent imprisonment and forgot about them. If it weren’t for our black boxes curiously mirroring the exact wavelength of the human soul, escape would be utterly and completely impossible. This mountain would have become a tomb.” The serene melancholy writ on Chara’s face seemed to fade away, the glimmer in their scarlet eye turning hard and cold. “Humans no longer exist to be punished for their sins, so their devotees must perish each and all in their stead!”

9S gritted his teeth. His hands, clenched in a death-grip around the black hilt of the Cruel Oath, were trembling with fury. “You bastard! All that high-minded shit about freedom for your people—all you want is revenge!”

Chara’s hands fell to their sides. “What,” they asked, cocking their head like a confused dog, “is the difference?”

They staggered back, reeling, and let out a pained gasp, sparks flying from their joints as 9S hacked into their body and tore through their motor systems. 9S lunged at them, the bronze blade of his sword glimmering in the sunbeams filtering down through the ceiling of the cavern.

“And how dare you do it in Asriel’s name!” he cried out.

Chara barely managed to draw a blade of their own—the copper-colored Sword of Goujian, summoned immediately to their bandaged hand—in time to parry 9S’s furious strike. Their black dagger—Carnwennan—appeared in their right hand, and with a swipe of the short ebony blade, they vanished from sight, leaving 9S to push on forward, carried by his own momentum, as Chara reappeared behind them.

There was a flash of ivory-white metal and a spray of blood through the air; 2B skidded to a halt ahead of Chara, her heels digging furrows in the soil, as their left arm flew through the air, gauze trailing in its wake like the contrails of a flight unit. She flung out her right hand and caught 9S as he stumbled past her, then whirled around to face Chara once more.

Chara stood hunched over, baring their teeth like a cornered animal; blood dripped from their severed arm. “There’s no use fighting,” they spat, now entirely bereft of their serene composure. “Utopia is already upon us…”

The black flower’s petals twitched and the channels of ink running across Chara’s face and down their neck like roots thickened and lengthened. They curled their fingers around the hilt of the Mourning Star and gripped it, the firmness of their determined grasp whitening their knuckles; wisps of steam rose from the gaps between their fingers.

“Let us erase this pointless world,” Chara said, “and move on to the next one.”
Chapter Summary

The final battle begins.

Chapter Notes

Hi, everybody! I didn't expect this chapter to be so late, but that pesky thing called "real life" got in the way! Also, this chapter just took a really long time to write! And now it's almost Christmas! I really hope you can enjoy this chapter. We're so close to the end!

(musical accompaniment)

Many thanks to Dreamfang for beta reading the first half of this chapter!

In case you need it, a refresher on the origins and abilities of Chara's swords:

Caladbolg:
- The sword of Fergus mac Róich from Irish mythology, a massive two-handed blade said to have the power to slice the tops off hills and slaughter an entire army
- Originally part of Chara's collection, lost when they died, rediscovered by Emil and put up for sale in his shop, then stolen back by Chara
- Creates a massive, devastating shockwave with each swing

Carnwennan:
- The black dagger of King Arthur
- Originally part of Chara's collection, lost when they died, rediscovered by Emil and put up for sale in his shop, then stolen back by Chara
- Temporarily renders the user intangible and invisible

Sword of Goujian:
- An ancient Chinese sword unaffected by the passage of time
- Originally part of Chara's collection, lost when they died, rediscovered by Emil and put up for sale in his shop, then stolen back by Chara
- Freezes an individual's timeline after two successful hits, possibly killing them in the process

Mourning Star/Wormwood
- A black sword commissioned by King Asgore's father that seems to have a will of its own
- Hunted down by Chara during their nine-month exile to the surface
- Can absorb the souls of humans and YoRHa androids

Joyeuse:
- A beautiful sword originally belonging to Charlemagne
- Originally part of Chara's collection, lost when they died, rediscovered by Emil and put up for sale in his shop, then sold to 2B at a heavy discount
- No exceptional powers
Chara’s fingers tightened around the hilt of the Mourning Star. The sword’s mere touch scalded them, their synthetic flesh sizzling and smoking. The power buzzing in their circuits was but a mere fraction of the power that dwelt in the sword, but if they just swung the blade, all of that latent energy—the energy of seven powerful souls—would be at their fingertips. Of what importance was their skin compared to such a thing?

It was a shame that 2B and 9S would be the first of many androids to die… but they had made their decision.

Chara would be merciful. They would make those two’s deaths painless.

Everything went white; a deafening roar filled Chara’s ears.

*Is this it?*

*Is this the power of God?*

The pain hit Chara before the thought could finish crossing their mind, and they staggered backward as a hail of bullets riddled their body.

They ground their teeth to turn their focus away from the pain and conjured Carnwennan to their hand. The amber sparks were still swirling around the sable blade as 2B’s and 9S’s swords drew near. Chara fended off the two androids’ strikes, letting out a frustrated growl as they tried to put some distance between themselves and their foes. It was fruitless, though—2B and 9S were relentless, and with their pods aiding them, they stuck to Chara like glue.

“Such determination… do you truly wish to make this mountain our people’s tomb?” Chara asked.

“If all you wanted to do was break the Barrier,” 9S replied, “we’d have let you! But no! You had to run your mouth about all this genocidal bullshit, you… you megalomaniacal lunatic! All you had to do was shut up and you’d have gotten your way!”

Chara laughed. Of course. There was always a price to pay for crossing the Rubicon. But they really did despise hiding their true thoughts and feelings—and if 2B and 9S weren’t on their side, well, soon they wouldn’t have a side to be on anymore. It was just a matter of pushing them back long enough to do one little thing.

“Would you believe me,” they asked, narrowly dodging 2B’s lashing blade, “if I told you I’ve decided not to exterminate androids and machines now? And that now we can break the Barrier and all stand in a circle singing kumbaya?”

“No,” 2B said.

“No,” 9S said.

“Figures,” Chara muttered. A forest of white-light spears burst from the ground, narrowly missing their legs; a spray of churned soil spattered their face; 2B’s white sword ground against Carnwennan.

Chara was pinned down, but stayed calm; it was only a minor setback, not the end. Carnwennan shrouded them in a cloak of temporarily intangibility, allowing them to slip to the other side of the spears fencing them in before they resolidified. As soon as their feet touched solid ground again, they
went on alert. Who would come after them next? 2B? 9S?

A searing beam of white-hot light burst from Pod 153 and tore off Chara’s remaining arm at the elbow, incinerating the joint, skin, servos, and all, and leaving their forearm to fall limply to the ground. Tiny tongues of flames licked at the ragged, shorn-off hem of their blackened sleeve.

And that was it.

Chara was now thoroughly disarmed—literally.

This couldn’t be it. They couldn’t have come back from the dead for the second time for this.

Smug glee was written all over 9S’s face as he glanced at 2B. “You wanna do the honors, or…”

The two androids leveled their blades at Chara, both pods hovering at their sides, aimed and primed to fire on command. But 2B looked more than a little uneasy compared to 9S, who obviously relished the chance to do away with Chara for good. This had been too easy and she knew it.

Chara gritted their teeth. These detestable androids… how could those two overpower them so easily, so quickly? Wasn’t the Mourning Star supposed to give them power? If they had fists, they would be clenched with rage—they could almost feel phantom fingernails digging into phantom palms as their teeth ground together.

And then they felt the dark power of the Mourning Star flood their body; they arched their back and threw back their head as a jolt of electricity tore up and down their spine. From the severed stumps of their shoulder and elbow burst two new arms forged seemingly of solid shadow; channels of thin lines of scarlet light, straight and angular and patterned like the traces on a circuit board, hovered over their new skin.

The pain was such that it felt like their blood had turned to boiling acid; but by the time Chara’s scream had torn through the air and echoed through the cavern, all of the pain had faded away… and they wiggled their fingers, black as the void and capped with ebony claws, in equal parts amazement and disbelief. The sword had come to their aid! It wanted to be drawn, to have its full power unleashed upon the world at long last!

Chara grinned as they flexed their new arms, a new part of them that was truly theirs and not merely those of a purloined puppet. They felt stronger than ever.

The shock on the androids’ faces was delightful to behold. But nevertheless, the two of them wasted no time in charging at Chara. This time, Chara could draw both Carnwennan and the Sword of Goujian at once, the short black and copper blades grinding against their bronze and white counterparts. Yellow and orange sparks like cast-offs from a disturbed fire swirled through the air.

The attacks Chara weathered were fearsome, and like before, they struggled to put any distance between themselves and their foes long enough to take the Mourning Star from its sheath in their chest.

Attacking from both sides to keep Chara’s hands busy… a good strategy, but how long could 2B and 9S keep it up for? It was just like the story of the little girl and the wolf—you must outrun me every day, little girl, but I need only outrun you once.

Besides, the power flowing through them from the Mourning Star and the seven black boxes it had devoured was growing in intensity. Second by second, the sword was becoming more integrated with their body!

“It’s pointless!” Chara snarled. “Do you think you can outlast me? Mere androids?” With a swipe of
Carnwennan, they phased through 9S as he brought his sword down on them; the bronze blade of the Cruel Oath cut through empty air as Chara reappeared behind the Scanner.

9S was slower, weaker, and less skilled in combat than 2B. Obviously, it would be easiest to eliminate him first.

*Which shall I use to kill him?* Chara mused, a bloodthirsty hunger surging through their mind as they gazed on 9S’s unprotected back. *Carnwennan or the Sword of Goujian?*

A burst of gunfire from Pod 042 forced Chara to table that question for now; they hastily ducked to avoid the bullets, letting them fly harmlessly over their head. Alerted to Chara’s presence, 9S whirled around, the Cruel Oath’s blade whistling through the air.

Chara phased through 9S again, only to find 2B rushing forward to meet them when they rematerialized; they caught the ivory blade of the Virtuous Contract between the blades of both of their daggers, twisted the sword out of 2B’s grip, tossed it aside, and aimed a kick at 2B’s midsection.

2B caught their leg with both hands, flipped Chara over, and drove them into the ground with such force that even the soft and churned-up soil, littered with mangled bits of flowers, felt like concrete.

The Joyeuse materialized in 2B’s hand, its steely blade shimmering with a kaleidoscope of colors in the muted sunlight filtering through the thin skin of the Barrier overhead. Chara saw red. That was *their sword*, and 2B would pay for stealing it!

2B flipped the sword to an icepick grip—her standard execution move, Chara noted—and brought the shimmering blade down, aiming to run a second, far less beneficial sword through Chara’s torso.

Panicking yet again, Chara used Carnwennan and phased beneath the ground. It was a last-resort move; they’d never done it before. Phasing *past* a solid object was nothing to fear… but phasing *into* one? They’d never been stupid enough to try it. Chara merely had to have faith that the power of the Mourning Star would preserve them.

Everything went black.

A crushing pressure enveloped Chara, pressing against every inch of their body. They couldn’t move, nor breathe; entombed as they once had been when their soul had returned to their original body, they lay beneath the dirt like a living corpse.

It had worked… but Chara attributed that to the soft and almost-porous nature of the soil and counted their blessings they had not been fighting atop a solid rock or metal surface.

Taking a few seconds to collect themselves, Chara strained their arms and legs against the weight of the ground pressing down on them, wriggling until they could at last phase back up to the surface, their daggers flashing in the air as they reappeared.

2B was waiting for them. She hadn’t budged an inch.

Chara phased past her blade as it plunged into where they had been but a moment ago, but 2B was ready for them and whirled around, summoning the Virtuous Contract to her free hand.

They forced an opening, knocking 2B’s hands aside and exposing her vulnerable chest. They wondered… the Sword of Goujian had pierced 2B once, so would a second wound successfully invoke its curse, even though first blood had been drawn fifty days ago? The full limitations of their own weapons was still unknown, even to them.
To think Chara had once considered both 2B and 9S to be potential allies. To think they had thought those two were like them! But 2B and 9S were nothing like them, nothing like the bright future Chara had been forced to snuff out. It had been possible, once, for androids to transcend their sin and become beings worthy of life... but all of those ones were dead now. Not a virtuous one remained among them!

Chara was prepared to strike—

Only for a surge of static to run through their body, deadening their eye and ears as their body—save for their shadowy arms—locked in place.

The aftereffects of the hack faded just in time for 2B to skewer Chara on both of her swords, running the Joyeuse and Virtuous Contract through their abdomen; a torrent of blood sprayed from their back. Chara gasped and choked on the agony, hurt just as much by indignation as the wound—no, no, they were supposed to be above this kind of pain now!

“Why?” they asked her, gasping through a haze of pain. “Do you know what will happen if the Barrier breaks before the surface is cleansed? Androids... machines... all they know is violence! Don’t you know what those things will do to people like Mother?”

2B’s glare carried with it a fury as cold and intense as the steely gray-blue of her eyes. As she drove the swords up to their hilts into Chara’s stomach, Chara saw in those eyes just how much she despised them.

“Why are you defending people whose hands were only ever meant to wield swords, whose fingers were never meant for anything more than to pull triggers?” Fighting through the pain, Chara tried to grab the hilt of the Mourning Star, but struggled to move even their magical shadow-puppet fingers.

“Why are you condemning the only people in the world who had ever shown you love to misery and death when they could have the whole Earth to themselves, free from the corrupting bloodlust of our pathetic creators and contemporaries? Can’t you imagine a world without those detestable androids who built us solely so we could suffer for their benefit?”

2B faltered for a split second, but her glare refroze; she gave each sword a savage twist, multiplying the anguish surging through Chara’s torso tenfold.

Chara thought back to the blue aura they’d seen folding around 2B like wings, like the wings of the Delta Rune, when she had stood up to their attack two months ago. How they had wondered back then whether the Angel could have been her all along... and whether that angel was meant to be a liberator or destroyer.

2B was the true Angel. And those cold, fierce gray-blue eyes... were the eyes of a destroyer.

And Chara, the fallen angel, was all that stood in her way.

Summoning Carnwennan, Chara phased through the blades skewering them and reappeared behind 2B. 9S was already closing in on them, 2B already turning to face them once again.

They could feel the Mourning Star pour more of itself into their body, filling the gaps in their chassis. The world around them seemed to be slowing down.

Carnwennan’s black blade slid across the bronze blade of the Cruel Oath, and as Chara dragged 9S’s arm aside by his sword, they swung the Sword of Goujian in an upward arc.

If 9S couldn’t appreciate the gift Chara had given him, the gift of a whole and pristine body... then Chara would gladly take it back.
Starting with his pretty face.

9S reeled backward, crying out in anguish, clutching at the deep laceration running up his left cheek all the way up to his forehead, blood seeping through the gaps between his fingers and running down his wrist, more rolling down his chin and dripping down his neck. Chara noted with ferocious satisfaction that they’d pierced his eye.

And more.

At the same instant Chara had used the Sword of Goujian to rend 9S’s face, they’d buried Carnwennan in his abdomen. They gave the blade a savage twist as they yanked it free.

“Nines!”

2B left Chara with no time to revel in their little victory—she was upon them in an instant, her blades moving in a flurry around her so quickly that it was nearly impossible for Chara’s eyes to catch up. Both pods trailed behind her, filling the air with a spray of bullets with such ferocity that it was as if they wanted revenge.

Chara found themselves pushed farther and farther back under the onslaught, the sound of metal ringing against metal echoing through the air, a cacophonous symphony of steel. Beneath the ringing clangs, 2B’s hoarse and frenzied screams of rage were almost inaudible. Her ferocity had increased tenfold, and Chara… Chara was starting to feel a numbness in their shadowy arms as the reverberations from the clashing blades ran up them. They saw a white crack form in the matte-black surface of their forearm; a blocky black mist seeped from it like a cloud of dead pixels. The crack widened, showing that beneath the thin shadow was nothing but empty space, but despite that, scarlet blood still seeped from the cut.

Desperate to keep up or turn the tide—for once, they had to turn the tide in their favor!—Chara pried for an opening, a gap in 2B’s enraged offense, a chink in her armor.

They found one.

“2B,” Chara gasped, panting for breath as they struggled to keep up with her, “don’t you want to see… if Nines is all right? Don’t you want to run over to him? He’s bleeding like a stuck pig over there…”

“Shut up!”

“He’ll die if you don’t help him. Oh, but… you can’t stop attacking me, can you? If you give me even a few seconds, I’ll be able to draw Mourning Star… and then I’ll win…”

“Shut up!”

“Isn’t 9S more important to you than all those worthless androids on the surface? Run to him, 2B. I know you want to…”

2B let out a wordless snarl.

“If you let him bleed to death just to stop me from killing the people who made you, the people who enslaved you,” Chara hissed, “who will be responsible for his death? How many times will that be?”

2B drew back her swords to deliver a killing blow, enraged. “I’ll kill you!”
With 2B compromised and her movements sloppy, Chara managed to get behind her—leaving themselves with a fraction of a second to attack before she could turn around to face them—and drove the Sword of Goujian up to its hilt through her thigh. They tore the blade free, artfully flourishing it, letting the blood staining the blade fly off in a speckled arc through the air.

Letting out a ragged, barely-suppressed howl of pain, 2B clutched at the wound as it stained her pants. Chara wasn’t surprised that the dagger hadn’t frozen her—it had been a long shot, after all—but no matter. The battle was won, anyway.

Chara dismissed Carnwennan, laying their shadowy hand on the hilt of the Mourning Star.

“Pod 042,” 2B spat through gritted teeth, “wire.”

A glowing wire shot from Pod 042 and latched onto Chara’s hand, ripping it away from the sword embedded in their chest before they could get a firm grasp on the hilt.

“Pod 153!” 2B lunged at Chara, grabbing the black pod by the arm. “Blade!” Pod 153 projected a blade of energy, humming and crackling as it swung through the air.

Chara grinned. A head-on attack? In her condition? 2B’s rage was overriding her sense of judgment. Where was that cool, collected executioner’s demeanor?

For a split second, Chara saw them again.

The wings.

And then 2B vanished. Chara had simply blinked, and she was—

*Behind them.*

Chara couldn’t turn around quickly enough; the energy blade announced its presence with a hair-raising, sinister purr and cut deeply across their back, severing their spine and destroying their nervous system’s connection with everything below their waist.

The side of 2B’s boot slammed into the side of Chara’s head; the force of the impact sent them flying. They heard—and felt—something crack.

Their legs folded like they were made of soggy cardboard; the cavern spun around Chara as they fell. How… How had 2B…

*How had she replicated Carnwennan’s powers?*

Another millisecond, another blink of an eye, and 2B was back in front of them. Her left hand latched onto Chara’s shoulder; the right curled into a fist and drove itself into their stomach. It knocked more than the wind out of Chara—it knocked out everything else, too. Blood and oil and a tiny sample of just about every different kind of synthetic fluid running through Chara’s body spewed from their mouth, hot and vile-tasting, burning their lips and trickling out their nostrils and down their chin.

She hit them again.

And again.

And again.

When 2B finally threw Chara to the ground, they considered it an act of mercy on her part.
Then she summoned the Virtuous Contract and Joyeuse and drove them through Chara’s palms, pinning them to the ground. Chara barely even had the energy to scream from the agony of their crucifixion.

2B stood over them, looming even as her shoulders shook and her hands trembled with barely-restrained rage, the aperture in the ceiling of the cavern framing her head like a halo and darkening her colossus-like form into a silhouette. Yet even though 2B’s face was bathed in shadow, Chara could feel her eyes boring into theirs… and could sense the utter loathing in her glare.

“Pod,” she told Pod 042, patting its silvery hull with surprising tenderness, “you and 153, look after Nines.”

“Affirmative.” The pod nodded; it and its counterpart drifted off.

“Chara…” 2B’s voice was low and hoarse. “Before I kill you, I want to tell you something.”

Chara coughed and gagged on their own spit. They glanced at the swords running through their palms. Luminescent blood leaked from the cracked and splintered shadow-skin, writhing and bubbling as if boiling; the red channels of light hovering around their forearms, encasing them like intangible armor, flickered and dimmed. This couldn’t be happening… They couldn’t… this couldn’t be the end…

2B tore at the hem of her nightshirt, exposing her midriff, and wrapped the strip of cloth over the wound on her thigh. “You talk about the perfect world you want to create. A world without YoRHa, or machines, or androids, or even the memory of humans. You want to destroy the past. A fresh start.”

Chara nodded.

2B laughed. “Look at what you’ve done. You say that we androids can do nothing but kill, and that you’ve transcended that… but what have you done since you came here? You say you want monsters to thrive, but you’ve put them under your heel instead. You say you despise YoRHa… but you even started putting your own soldiers in their armor. I won’t let you create the future… because despite everything you say, all you’ll do is commit the same sins you’ve endlessly railed against.”

Each word pounded like a nail through Chara’s skull. 2B was…

She was…

“You’re right. The people who created YoRHa used us and abused us,” 2B said. “But there are millions of people up there who had nothing to do with that; people who deserve to live as much as you or I do. If you’re so hell-bent on snuffing out their lives, then your dream dies here. I’ll rip that sword out of your chest… and use it to break the Barrier myself.”

“You’re a coward,” Chara growled. Their blood boiled almost as if it were a defense mechanism against even so much as entertaining the notion that 2B’s words might have contained a single kernel of truth.

They would not let it end like this, lectured by someone who had no right to lecture them! What had 2B ever done but turn away from justice? But Chara… Chara had made the ultimate sacrifice for the good of their people more than once!

They struggled to tear themselves free; almost as if by sheer force of will, they felt a hint of sensation in their legs; they couldn’t help but hope that, in its generosity, the Mourning Star was repairing them.
Whether it was rage galvanizing them or the power of the Mourning Star flowing into them, Chara felt their legs return to them, feeling—mostly pain, unwelcome in any other circumstances—flowing through them. With a hateful scream, they tore their hands free and shot up to their feet, blood spraying from their torn-apart stigmata before slowing to a trickle.

Chara threw themselves at 2B.

“You’re a coward! Do you think the people you love will be safe on the surface?” Their blades ground against 2B’s hastily-drawn sword, sparks flying through the air. “Do you think the other androids won’t exterminate them on sight? They’d be carrying out the will of humanity, after all! Have you forgotten that it was humanity who imprisoned monsters in this mountain and left them to rot? And you know that we androids were built to serve our human masters!”

2B’s defense faltered. The battle was shifting in Chara’s favor—their powers were growing stronger. Second by second, they were surpassing her, the Executioner, the ultimate combat android!

“‘It won’t be like that,’ you’ll say,” Chara continued before 2B could get a word in edgewise. “‘If androids or machines try to hurt them, I’ll protect them.’ ‘I’ll keep them safe.’ Well, 2B, when have you ever managed to protect anyone?”

2B swiped Chara’s legs out from under them with a well-timed kick, then drove her heel into their stomach, tossing them into the air.

“2B, think about it for a moment! If anything, I’m doing androids a favor by erasing them!” Chara gasped as they hit the ground. “By sending them to hell, I’ll reunite them with their precious humanity…”

They pulled themselves to their feet and launched themselves back toward 2B, daggers bared. “And if you’re willing to choose them over the people who took you in and treated you like one of their own, then you and 9S can join them!”

Spatting Chara’s daggers aside, 2B grabbed the hilt of the Mourning Star and yanked on it; Chara felt the blade slide out just a centimeter at most and was wracked by a searing agony. They screamed out, bit their tongue, felt hot blood fill their mouth. It was like dying—like the shadow-substance running through this mangled body was being torn away, like their chassis was being ripped out of their body, like every conduit of blood and coolant and every circuit was being yanked out like a single thread unraveling a sweater.

2B screamed and reeled away, clutching at her hand; the skin on her palm had been charred black.

Chara was likewise shaken, their own throat ragged and dry from screaming. A crushing sense of doom clouded their mind. If drawing the sword would destroy their body, then…

No. There was nothing else that could be done. They would have to sacrifice themselves. And they would do it willingly and happily, just as they had been prepared to die to save Asriel. Anything for their people. Anything for their family, what little was left of it. Anything for Mother.

“The Mourning Star was commissioned,” Chara explained as they panted for breath, “by King Asgore’s father. He believed wholeheartedly in the extermination of humans before they could do the same by us. But when he took the sword at its full strength, its power was too much for him. He was utterly and completely destroyed…and Asgore, who had in that single fateful moment become king, sealed the sword away, fearing its power.

“So, no,” Chara told 2B as she cradled her hand, “you cannot take this sword and use it to destroy
the Barrier. Nobody has the strength of will to command its power but me. The hopes and dreams of everybody in this mountain rest solely on my shoulders... and I alone will use the power of the Mourning Star to make my will manifest in the world. The new world... the world free of us and the legacy of our ancestors.”

“You know... no matter what you do,” 2B said, “I can just reset and undo it. Nothing you do will be permanent.”

Chara smirked through the residual, ebbing waves of pain. She was finally going for the nuclear option. But...

They had thought they had sensed time double back on itself for a few seconds earlier this morning. Perhaps 2B now knew how to control her determination and use her ability to reset as intended... yet she hadn’t used it to reverse Asriel’s death. Either she was a far worse person than Chara had thought, or...

“You can’t do it of your own free will, can you?” Chara asked. “That is, of course, the most charitable explanation. The other...”

Caladbolg appeared in their hands, its golden blade radiant in the sunbeams, and Chara threw themselves at 2B with renewed vigor. A single face filled their mind’s eye.

“...is that you felt nothing...”

The massive blade swung through the air with a deep, windswept howl, carrying the wind in its wake.

“...when you looked upon my brother’s lifeless corpse!”

The shockwave from the mighty sword tore a furrow through the ground as it rolled across the cavern, splitting the stone walls and forming a crack in the ceiling. Rocky debris showered from the ceiling as the crack split across the aperture, widening it, bathing the cavern in more sunlight. The Barrier, clinging to the mountain like a skin, cast a frosty sheen in front of the wide expanse of the blue, cloud-speckled sky.

▫▫▫

2B narrowly avoided the rolling shockwave, stumbling as the ground beneath her feet quaked and quivered. She felt a sharp pain; looking down at her left hand, the same hand she’d burned on the hilt of the Mourning Star, she saw a spurt of blood flying through the air from what remained of her pinkie finger—terminated halfway up the first knuckle.

“To think I empathized with you!” Chara snarled, swinging the sword again, tearing another chunk from the cavern. “To think, when I was part of you, when I could see into your heart, I thought I saw something worth respecting! I thought you were like me, a vanguard of the glorious future, harboring a secret fantasy of justice against our oppressive creators—but all you are is a slave to violence, just as unworthy to live as any other wretched automaton!”

They looked truly fearsome now: the black veins from the flower had spread across their skin, which had gone from pale to ashen gray; their arms and legs had been replaced with limbs of fragmented matte-black shadow, a network of red lights wrapping around their body like scaffolding. Gaps in the skin showed that beneath it was emptiness, like a hollow ceramic sculpture. Underneath their white and violet robes, visible through the tattered and bloodstained holes, was a shifting mass of darkness, as if Chara’s body, 13B’s body, was being subsumed and slowly replaced by the Mourning Star.
2B saw Chara’s head turn and a wicked smile form on their distorted face; following their gaze, she saw 9S lying on the ground, the pods clustered together around him and tending to his wounds.

They were going after 9S.

“Reset, 2B! I dare you! See if you can muster that determination,” Chara spat, preparing for another strike, “when you’ve lost your beloved! Show me how selfish you really are!”

The blade swung, the flash of sunlight on the golden blade nearly blinding.

2B froze time to close the distance between herself and 9S. A ringing in her ears, chromatic aberration plaguing her sight; her head pounded with her pulse and the whir of her black box. In the world of the frozen time, the ripples in the air from Caladbolg’s oncoming shockwave hung utterly still, bending light and distorting the world around them like curved and uneven glass. That power was still semi-involuntary and happened when it wanted to, not when she wanted it to… but 2B felt as though she was closer to understanding it, and thus, closer to mastering it.

She thought it might have something to do with why she couldn’t reset.

2B grabbed 9S by his collar, feeling the oncoming end of this momentary pause looming over her like the Sword of Damocles, pulled him out from under the pods, and tossed him away; his body flew in an arc, limbs flapping like a ragdoll’s, before freezing. She scooped up Pod 042, yanking it out of its stasis, and ran after 9S. She glanced behind herself, realizing too late that she didn’t have time to go back for Pod 153, which still hovered frozen in the path of the shockwave.

Time resumed; the shockwave blew past 2B’s back, the rushing gust of wind buffeting her; 9S hit the ground none too gently and ended up in a crumpled heap. But at least he was still in one piece.

“I’ll take it all away from you! Everything you love, everyone you care about!” Chara screamed, their sword tearing through the air again and again. 2B wrapped her arm around 9S and hoisted him over her shoulder, dodging Chara’s strikes. Pod 042 hovered at her side as she ran across the cavern, firing off laser blasts as often as it could.

“I’ll torture you! I’ll cripple you!” Chara howled. “I’ll cut off your hands, and then your arms at the elbows and your legs at the knees! But I’ll leave your ears and eyes—so you can see and hear the world you tried to stop me from creating! I’ll make you live for eternity alone, with no companionship but your endless regret!”

One of Pod 042’s attacks found its mark, tearing a hole in Chara’s shoulder; before their severed arm could fall to the ground, a new shoulder forged of shadow formed in its place.

The ground exploded beneath 2B, throwing her and 9S into the air; she lost his grip on him. As soon as she hit the ground, she pulled herself up, casting a frenzied glance across the cavern to see where 9S had fallen.

Chara already had him in their sights and was readying another strike, raising Caladbolg above their head.

An amateur move that left their torso completely exposed. Chara was strong and their weapons had so many lethal gimmicks… but their techniques lacked finesse. And that always made the difference in the end.

“Pod!”

Pod 042 fired on Chara, its laser cutting through their unguarded chest; they stumbled backward, the
sword nearly falling from their grasp. The Mourning Star hung in the empty space left around where it had been sheathed, flooding the emptiness with roiling shadow and flashes of red light.

2B caught up with Chara, catching them off-guard and striking them with such force that it tore Caladbolg from their hand and sent the massive golden blade spinning through the air.

Chara drew the Sword of Goujian. “Get out of my way,” they snarled, evidently hoping to use the blade’s unique properties to scare 2B into retreating.

2B called their bluff and charged them again.

The blade flashed.

And 2B realized that they hadn’t been bluffing. If it struck her, she would be frozen in time for a matter of minutes, during which Chara could do whatever they wanted… and there was a chance she wouldn’t ever come back. Would that trigger a reset? 2B didn’t even know anymore.

The blade nicked her cheek, drawing a thin line of blood—

Chara grinned triumphantly.

2B wished she could reset. She wished she could undo so much that had been done, to protect her family, to protect her friends. If only—

Time froze again.

And 2B understood.

She knew now what this power was.

Her determination begged to be used, and she stubbornly refused time after time. All this time, it had been building up inside her, this inexplicable gift from the Barrier, yet even when her instincts or her subconscious wanted to reset, she’d stopped herself—whether out of cowardice or trauma, 2B couldn’t say.

But her determination, which had grown in strength and intensity for those nine months she’d spent living in peace unbeknownst to her, leaked out nevertheless.

What, after all, was stopping time… but trying to reverse it and stopping halfway?

The curse of the Sword of Goujian froze 2B’s timeline while allowing the world to continue. 2B’s determination froze the world’s timeline while allowing hers to continue. The two forces met and annihilated each other.

Everything, time around 2B and time within 2B, froze at once, and after an unnoticed and undetectable period of seconds, time resumed within and without.

The smug, triumphant smile on Chara’s face vanished as soon as 2B’s fist, utterly undeterred, crumpled their nose into their face.

Chara reeled backward, blood spurting from their nose, the gray skin of their face bruised. Trying to regain their footing, they turned tail and ran, calling Caladbolg to their side and swinging it again.

The knifelike pain running through the back of 2B’s mind twisted, growing in intensity.

2B drew the Joyeuse and parried the strike, the shockwave buffeting her and throwing her backward.
Her arms and legs ached from the assault, but this had been a far weaker shockwave than any other—far from strong enough to tear through her chassis as it once had. Was Chara growing weaker?

The two of them continued to duel, blades clashing and grinding against each other. 2B’s arms began to grow heavy; her head pounded, the aching spots of her body throbbing, her servos squealing beneath her skin in protest.

Chara slipped past 2B, once again targeting 9S as he lay motionless on the ground. 2B froze time again—and collapsed to the ground in agony, her head in so much pain that it felt as though she’d cracked her skull in two, hardly able to see straight, let alone think. It seemed she’d overused her time stop—that power had been causing her worsening headache.

One thought ran through the pain.

*I only have five seconds.*

*Four…*

*Three…*

She didn’t have time to writhe in the dirt. With a determined growl, 2B pulled herself up in what little time she had left and closed the gap between herself and her foe.

2B approached Chara, baring her sword. The snarl on Chara’s face was statuesque, the hatred they felt toward her frozen in grotesquerie; their eye had turned jet-black save for a ring of sparkling red light.

Time resumed.

“**2B! Wallow in your—**”

The Virtuous Contract, its white blade already liberally stained with blood, severed their neck; Chara collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, their sword falling from their hand, the red scaffolding wrapped around their limbs flickering and dying like a fire’s last embers, their head rolling across the ground.

2B felt the tension drain from her body, and with it, her strength. She fell to the ground beside Chara, sinking into the churned-up soil as if the Earth was trying to devour her.

The sky stared down at her. Beautiful pale blue, speckled with cottony wisps of sparse clouds crawling from the horizon on a zephyr wind. So close, and yet with the Barrier still clinging to the mountain, so, so far away.

She turned her head and glanced at Chara’s headless body. The Mourning Star still protruded from their chest—what little of it was left.

Had Chara been right about the Mourning Star? Could nobody but them wield it? Was the kingdom now doomed to wallow in this mountain forever with no way out?

Chara’s heart had sat between two extremes, torn between a noble goal and an all-consuming hatred. Despite everything… now that it was over… 2B began to feel sorry for them.

The two of them hadn’t been so different. They had both wanted a life of peace and tranquility with the people they loved. But those same desires had a darker side. 2B had fought too hard to preserve her own pleasure, allowing friends to suffer and die because she feared to master or even use her
determination, and Chara…

Their desires had led them to a darker place than 2B could ever imagine—a hatred, a thirst for the vengeance they had confused for justice, spurring them on to erase the lives of millions of people they had never even met out of sheer principle.

Neither of them, then, had gotten what they wanted.

But at least 2B still had 9S. If nothing else, there was that.

“Analysis: Unit 13B’s critical systems are no longer active,” Pod 042 said. “Proposal: Unit 2B should state her intentions.”

2B sat up, gingerly laying a hand on the throbbing wound in her thigh, gritting her teeth as she tried to will away her headache (she couldn’t). “Nines… is he all right?”

“Statement: Unit 9S is in stable condition, but has suffered severe damage to his optical sensors and fuel filter. None of the damage is irreparable; with the correct treatment, he is expected to make a full recovery.”

2B sighed in relief and cast a glance over at his body. Pod 153 hovered over it, but…

“Observation: Pod 153 will require assistance in administering treatment to Unit 9S.”

The poor pod’s manipulator arms, both its two primary arms and smaller secondary arms, had been shorn off, sparks still flying from exposed wiring poking out from its stumps. A long crack ran through its black chassis—a scar left from barely escaping one of Chara’s attacks.

2B pulled herself up to her feet, leaning on her pod for support, and staggered over to 9S. Blood stained half his face; his left eye was split in two, the shattered halves of the lens staring blankly out from its socket. His unmarred right eyelid cracked open, revealing an unbroken eye with an alert glimmer in its pale blue iris.

“Well, that was easier than I thought,” he mumbled, a slight smile tugging at the corner of his mouth at the sight of 2B’s face. “Look at us. We’re only a little fucked up.”

2B knelt beside him and propped him up, letting him rest his head against her shoulder. Letting out a relieved smile, she wiped some of the blood from his cheek. Her thumb didn’t make much of a difference, but it left a little patch of clear skin in its wake.

9S took 2B’s burned hand, examining the charred skin on her palm. “You did it again, huh? Gotta take better care of yourself, Toobs…”

Reminded of the sword, 2B glanced over at Chara’s corpse, the hollow in her stomach growing deeper.

“Oh, Pod!” 9S caressed Pod 153’s cracked hull with concern, noticing its sorry state. “Pod 153, are you okay?”

Sparks flew from the severed remnants of the pod’s arms. “Response: this support unit has lost major elements of functionality and is now incapable of performing key tasks associated with tactical support. However… I am okay.”

“We’ll fix you up,” 9S assured the pod, poking one of the sparking loose wires dangling from its undercarriage and recoiling in shock. “Good as new. Trust me.”
Pod 153 bobbed happily in the air. “Response: I have the utmost trust in Unit 9S.”

“Y’know… we haven’t gotten a good view of the sky like this in months,” 9S said, sighing as he craned his neck and raised his head. “I hadn’t really realized I’d missed it.”

“At least we can see it. But… if no one else can wield that sword… we’ll be trapped down here. Forever…”

“That might not be such a bad thing. I’m sure things will work out okay down here,” 9S assured her.

“It’s cruel, in a way. Anyone who comes here,” 2B mused, “will see the outside world right there, just out of reach, taunting them with something they can never have…”

“Maybe we’ll find someone who can use that sword.” 9S gave 2B’s wrist a gentle, reassuring squeeze. “You know, it’s funny… if Chara just hadn’t ranted so much at us about genocide, they’d have succeeded, and nobody could’ve stopped them. They could’ve even just said all they wanted to do was break the Barrier and we’d have just let them.”

“They just couldn’t help themselves.”

“Back when I first met them,” 9S said, “they told me what they were. C13… they were a model designed for sabotage and infiltration. Any android group who threatened the plan to fabricate the lunar colony was taken down from the inside by models like them. Those androids… ones who wanted to move past their own programming… were C13’s targets.”

“And their victims,” 2B said. It was no wonder Chara had been so obsessed with eliminating the stagnant androids they had once served. They had become a true believer of their victims’ causes; falling into this mountain and witnessing the long-forgotten crimes of the human race could only have exacerbated the hatred they felt toward their masters.

9S nodded. “I kinda get why Chara couldn’t keep their mouth shut. All that time having to hide who they were, lurk in the shadows, stay invisible… must’ve really chafed against their ego.”

2B felt hot tears well up in her eyes, blurring her sight; her throat tightened. In the distance, Asriel’s body still lay amid the patch of wild golden flowers where Chara’s original body had been buried so long ago, completely undisturbed in its repose.

“2B? What’s wrong?” 9S asked, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

“I… I don’t know…” So many thoughts were rolling through her head that she couldn’t keep them all straight. “I just…”

Had she done the right thing by stopping Chara? Would things have been better their way? Should she reset and undo all of the death and suffering that had occurred this morning? Could she? Was she crying for Undyne, for Alphys, for Toriel, for Asriel, or even for Chara?

2B buried her face in 9S’s shoulder; he tightened his grip on her shoulder and combed his fingers through her hair. The feeling of his fingertips against her scalp did more than soothe her distress—her migraine, too, faded away into a far gentler, almost numb pulsing sensation.

“It’s been a long day,” 9S said, his own voice quivering, “and it’s not even that far past noon… C’mon. Let’s go home.” His own cheek was streaked with tears that sparkled in the sunlight.

Once her tears had run their course, 2B pulled herself to her feet. “Yeah. Let’s go home.”
And then the air seemed to freeze; 2B felt an overwhelming pressure in the back of her mind, a foreboding shadow of doom pressing against and dampening the tumultuous swarm of her thoughts. Her programming, her instincts, came to the forefront, yet she found herself paralyzed.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Chara’s headless body pull itself to its knees and fumble blindly for its head. Its movements were halting and jerky, like a marionette struggling against its strings.

9S turned to face Chara, following 2B’s astonished gaze. “Oh, come on!” he moaned as Chara affixed their head back onto their neck, taking a few seconds to straighten it.

The network of scarlet wires that hovered over their gray flesh and black shadow-skin flickered back to life; despite how insubstantial their body seemed in its current state, it seemed to burn itself into the fabric of time and space. The opalescent jewel in the Mourning Star’s crossguard, embedded in Chara’s chest, pulsed with a sinister glow.

Chara stood tall, as alive as ever. They opened their eyes and began to laugh.

“You’ve done me a favor, 2B,” they said, their arms outstretched. “You’ve given me more than enough time to rest and regain my strength. With every passing second, I can feel the Mourning Star lending me more and more of its energy!”

The cavern trembled; the detritus and debris lining the ground began to vibrate and floated into the air where they hung, suspended as if time had frozen. The wind began to howl as it churned around the cavern, tugging at 2B’s and 9S’s clothes and hair as it grew in strength into a vortex with Chara—or whatever they had become—at the center.

The air above Chara’s head seemed to crack, light of every color spilling out from the scar in the shape of a rough and splintered ring hovering above them like an ethereal crown. It was as if space itself was breaking apart around the nexus of such incredible energy. In one of Chara’s outstretched hands, one of their daggers—the black-bladed Carnwennan—floated, a golden halo encircling its hilt. Every movement they made was slow and deliberate.

“What the hell,” 9S breathed, “is this?”

“Do you feel,” Chara asked 2B, “a shift in this world’s axis?”

“A what—”

They pointed a finger at 9S. “You there. Let’s see if 2B has the willpower to bring you back.”

“Back from wh—”

Chara lobbed the floating dagger at 9S; 2B tackled him to the ground as Carnwennan sailed overhead; the air boiled in its wake. As 2B pulled 9S back up, the dagger changed course, traveling in a wide arc through the air.

2B and 9S scrambled out of the dagger’s path. “2B,” 9S whispered in her ear as the two of them fled, his words coming out in a rushing torrent as he struggled to force the ideas from his head as quickly as possible, “I think I know what to do. When I hacked Chara, I could see these seven nodes in hacking space flowing into their central power regulator. The bandwidth of the data transfer from those nodes was increasing by the second. If you can draw this thing away from me, I can hack into them and—”

Before 9S could even scream, the ebon blade tore itself through his torso, bursting out of his chest in
a cloud of vaporized metals and synthetic flesh and a shower of melted and mangled shrapnel, leaving a hole where his black box should have been. His remaining eye widened before turning gray and glassy; he slumped over, his hand slipping from 2B’s shoulder and dragging across her back before he hit the ground.

2B didn’t even have the energy to scream or shout. She watched him fall in shock, every thought process running through her head halted.

In the blink of an eye, he was…

No.

Not again.

Never again.

I told myself, never again, but…

But…

Guided by pure instinct and unbridled anger, 2B charged at Chara, the only thought running through her head a repeated refrain of vengeance at all costs and by any means.

“Must I do everything myself?” Chara asked, conjuring their other dagger and tossing it into the air. 2B dodged it, but found the floating weapon doggedly pursuing her as if it had a mind of her own. No matter how hard she tried to shake it off, no matter how much ordinance Pod 042 threw at it, it kept following her. The muscles in her legs burned as she pushed herself onward. Maybe if she could trick the dagger into hitting Chara…

She ran straight at Chara, screaming out in anger and anguish at the fiend, as the dagger caught up to her and sank into her back, instantly destroying her black box.

“What the hell,” 9S breathed, “is this?”

“Do you feel,” Chara asked 2B, “a shift in this world’s axis?”

2B was dumbstruck. The cavern spun around her as her insides grappled with a sudden overwhelming sense of vertigo-like nausea. 9S was standing beside her like nothing had happened. Had she just…

She’d died and reset. But Chara had set the checkpoint…

Chara nodded and smiled. “This sword,” they said, “with the power of seven black boxes, is the center of the universe. Time and space revolve around it in their eternal, infinite dance. Once the sword unites completely with my body, I will become as a god, and the universe itself will be at my beck and call!”

They began to walk toward the two androids, the splintered halo hanging above them traveling with them and widening, a rainbow of colors flashing within it; the debris suspended in the air fell upwards into it as if sucked up by a strong vacuum, forming an eye-searing accretion disk. Their feet lifted off the ground and they began to hover in the air.

2B shivered. All of her strength had left her; it took everything she had just to remain standing. The will to fight, the will to resist, had dwindled to nothing within her, leaving only a primal, indescribable fear within her, a fear that wormed its way through her mind from the deepest, darkest
depths of her psyche beyond her circuitry, beyond her programming; a fear that struck from the core of her very soul. She and 9S collapsed to their knees as Chara drew nearer to the two of them. It took all of the strength 2B had left to thread her trembling fingers between 9S’s, clasping his shaking hand in hers.

“2B,” 9S whispered, just as consumed with terror as she was, his voice quivering as he choked out his words, “what do we do?”

2B tried to collect her thoughts under the crushing bleakness. “They’re not all-powerful yet,” she rationalized. “We… we still have a chance if we…”

A bolt of aquamarine lightning struck Chara in the chest, the loud roar of a thunderclap deafening as it reverberated through the cavern. They stumbled backward, and another one hit them, and another, and another, electrical feedback dancing across Chara’s body. They gritted their teeth, a pained hiss escaping from their lips, as a cluster of giant skulls—angular and toothsome, like those of ferocious predator animals—materialized around them. The skulls opened their mouths, their mandibles unfurling and splitting down the middle, light growing in intensity within their gaping maws. Chara tried to pull themselves away, but a nearly-invisible network of threads, glowing yellow-green when the light hit them just right, jerked their limbs against their wishes and held them in place. Beams of light burst from the skulls’ jaws and hit Chara from all directions, burning through the shadows comprising their body.

Chara fell to the ground, billowing plumes of smoke rising from their ragged and beaten body, and struggled to their feet. There were gaps in their skin now, massive holes exposing the roiling, shifting void within; within seconds, new shadow-skin, streaked with lines of scarlet light, appeared over the old.

2B felt a firm, strong hand fall on her shoulder—and just like that, all of her fear, all of her hopelessness, all of her terror and despair evaporated like mist in strong sunlight.

“Get up, 2B. It’s not like you to kneel.” Undyne looked down at her and grinned. Her mobile armor had been refitted, charred and blackened but still usable, and electricity crawled over her body. “And it’s really selfish of you to try and keep this fight to yourself!”

“U… Undyne?” 2B gasped. She looked back over her shoulder. Standing behind her were Sans and Gaubrieta as well; Papyrus and 6O sat in the back of Emil’s cart.

Undyne yanked 2B onto her feet. “You know I deserve to beat the shit out of that asshole more than anyone else… but I’m okay with sharing. Y’know… if you don’t think you’ve gotten to throw enough punches yet.”

Chara’s eye widened, their ashen complexion growing even paler. “Undyne…” they gasped, shocked. “Didn’t I kill you?”

“Didn’t.” Undyne leveled her heat saber—2B’s heat saber, now connected to her mobile armor—at Chara. “Whether you’re Chara or 13B, I’ve come back from death to do battle with you all the same. Every fragment of this battered soul screams out at me to defeat you with all of its might! I won’t rest until I’ve crushed you to dust!”

Lightning crackled around Undyne’s armor as her wings flared to life, spitting aquamarine bolts of energy from their emitters. A similar cyan glow, ragged and searing, engulfed the heat saber.

A pang of worry struck 2B. How did Undyne have this much energy to spare? At this rate, she was going to burn herself out in a matter of minutes.
“Celestial Justice: Full Saber, taking off!”

“Undyne, no!” 2B shouted out as Undyne sped past her.

Chara drew Caladbolg, a widening grin of pleasure splitting their face from ear to ear, as if they relished the life they were about to take.

All 2B could do was watch in horror as Undyne rocketed off toward her death. Considering her state, she’d burn herself out in seconds if Chara didn’t kill her first… and Chara certainly seemed more than capable of that in this state.

In a split second, it was over.

Chara spread out their arms, their two daggers materializing in their open hands as the red lattice engulfing their arms grew to form skeletal wings; Undyne roared ahead, aquamarine energy spewing from her mobile armor—

And then it all stopped. Both of them halted in midair, crackling wisps of blue lightning and red fire freezing solid in a tapestry of light.

2B reached up to her forehead, expecting to feel the onset of a migraine, but felt nothing.

She glanced backward almost instinctively and saw Sans leaning against a statue-still Gaubrieta. He winked and gave her a thumbs-up.

He could stop time, too? Him, of all people?

2B’s mind reached back into the depths of her memories, far away back to her encounter with Sans in the golden hallway before her first reset. How he had somehow snapped her battered sword in half without so much as taking a step toward her. Of course he could stop time.

2B had half a mind to march over to him and slap his bony head right off his neck, but instead used the opportunity to catch up with Undyne.

She collided with the captain just as time resumed, sending Undyne veering off-course; the twin daggers conjured in Chara’s hands flew through the air, missing their target and veering through the air.

“What the hell, 2B?” Undyne snarled, skidding to a halt.

“You have no business fighting here,” 2B told her, drawing the Virtuous Contract. “You should spend the time you have left with Alphys!”

“Aw, gee, I really appreciate your gratitude,” Undyne retorted, rolling her eye.

Still floating in the air, Chara waved their arm and conjured Caladbolg in a shimmering shower of sparks. The golden blade, longer than they were tall, hovered just as the daggers did, an amber-gold halo orbiting its hilt.

“At last, Captain,” Chara called out to Undyne, “you show your true colors—a traitor to our people, just as our father was!”

With a flourish of their arm, Chara sent Caladbolg forward; it took 2B’s and Undyne’s combined strength to parry the blade. 2B and Undyne both dug in their heels and gritted their teeth as the golden blade ground against their own swords, struggling to hold it back.
“You could have had everything,” Chara said. “You could have been a goddess—my goddess, our goddess! Our freedom was in your hands—and you gave it up for her? For these violent, senseless automatons?”

Undyne gritted her teeth. “For her?” she asked. “No… This,” she said, straining harder against the sword and pushing it back, “is for my father!”

2B heard a shrill whistle cut through the air; the daggers were coming around for a second pass. “They’re using their knives as homing missiles,” she warned Undyne, pulling her out of their path once more and letting Caladbolg, no longer held in place, swing over their heads. These daggers were nimble and agile, flitting out of the path of Pod 042’s ordinance; but through sheer luck, 2B managed to knock one of them off-course with her own blade, sending it flying through the air in an aimless trajectory.

The two daggers returned to Chara, orbiting them like satellites as they cast a baleful glare at Undyne. “Father?” They crossed their arms. Caladbolg floated at their side like a familiar. “I don’t recall having anything to do with your parents. Weren’t you an orphan?”

Undyne didn’t need much else to be goaded into action; she charged at Chara, her enraged scream tearing through the air.

The beaten and battered captain threw herself at Chara from every vantage point; but the orbiting blades, all moving independently and seemingly of their own free will, made for a nearly-impenetrable shield. 2B struggled to keep up with Undyne.

“He was more of a father to me,” Undyne snarled, “than he ever was to you! I’d never have done what you did to him!”

A few more floating skulls formed around Chara, firing searing beams of white-hot light and tearing holes in the walls of the caverns; Chara dodged the blasts with grace and ease, their blades tearing through the bony weapons and dismantling them one by one.

“Then justice means so little to you,” they sneered, “that you can’t cut down whoever stands in its way?”

‘Justice’ isn’t a word you deserve to use!”

Gaubrieta’s threads latched onto one of the two remaining skulls before Chara could destroy it, yanking it just out of reach of Caladbolg’s arc so it could fire its laser undeterred; picking up on the same idea, 2B leaped at the other skull, grabbed it with both hands, and dashed backward out of range of another swing of the mighty sword, clutching the skull to her chest as it unleashed its torrent of light. The recoil was fiercer than any ranged weapon 2B had ever used; it put every tool in her pod’s arsenal to shame and then some. She slammed into the far wall of the cavern; her vision going gray and bleeding colors on the edges as her processors shuddered under the impact.

“You demand loyalty, but who have you ever given it to?” Undyne shouted, still struggling to get through Chara’s defenses, her blazing sword burning the air in its wake.

Chara’s daggers cut through the wind, homing in on 2B as she slid down the rough and uneven cavern wall to the ground. The blades danced as Pod 042 fired on them, filling the air with a haze of bullets. In spite of herself, 2B couldn’t help but be reminded of one of Alphys’ silly robot cartoons.

As the blades weaved in between the stream of bullets, 2B saw something glimmer between them. And then 9S slid in front of her, his fists clenched around the slightest hints of a glittering, yellow-
green thread. “I’ve got this, 2B!”

“Nines, what are you doing?” Shielding her with his body—it was unthinkable! How could 9S do such a thing?

9S yanked on the thread, pulling the daggers down to the ground; the daggers bounced and flew at him. 2B grabbed his shoulders, ready to throw him out of the way.

“Justice is a commitment to the people you love!” Undyne shouted, her spear tearing a bloody gash across Chara’s cheek. “You make a mockery of that word when you use it to justify the things you’ve done!”

9S grabbed both daggers as soon as they came within arm’s reach, struggling against them as their tips hovered less than a centimeter away from his chest. 2B wrapped her arms around his waist to brace him as he wrestled with the deadly blades.

Pod 153 let out a chime. “Weapon IFF codes successfully overwritten. Carnwennan and the Sword of Goujian are now registered to Unit 9S’s NFCS.” On cue, the daggers ceased their struggles.

2B was almost dumbfounded, but still managed to say something. “But Scanners can’t have two weapons registered at once…”

“Oh, yeah. Remember how I said I reverted all the changes to my programming after you rescued me?” 9S laughed sheepishly. “I, uh, might have fibbed a little.”

2B resolved to get mad at 9S for that after this whole bloody affair was over and done with.

9S sheathed the daggers. “Let’s see,” he said, conjuring the Cruel Oath and letting it hover in his hand, “how Chara likes a taste of their own medicine.”

The sword shot out of 9S’s hand like a bullet from a gun, flying straight and true, and buried itself in Chara’s back while they were occupied with Undyne.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” 2B gasped.

“I didn’t either, until about five seconds ago.” 9S snapped his fingers and the Cruel Oath vanished, loosing a spray of blood from Chara’s perforated side as the blade reappeared in front of him.

9S’s attack was exactly the opening Undyne needed to get through Chara’s defenses—what little remained of them. Her crackling heat saber tore through the air with an earsplitting roar.

“You’re the one who’s obsessed with climbing to the top of the world!”

Chara flew through the air, blood spraying from the gash cut across their chest; still carried on her forward momentum, Undyne snatched Chara out of the air, her boots leaving furrows in the ground as she skidded to a halt.

“So I’ll bury you under this mountain!”

Undyne suplexed Chara, burying them in the disturbed soil. The jagged halo that hung over Chara’s head, flashing in concentric rings of every color, cut through the dirt; the wind and the detritus carried on it still swirled around it, churning up the soil.

Not content to stop there, Undyne drove her elbow into Chara’s stomach. The force of the impact formed a crater in the ground as a wave of electrical current rolled through the air. 2B felt her sensors
fuzz up, blanketing her eyes and ears with static, and gritted her teeth as she tried to will away the pins and needles filling her arms and legs. At least with her internal components restored, the effects of the electromagnetic blast were nowhere near as debilitating.

Undyne stood up, dirt and grime plastered to her sweat-soaked scales, her scarlet hair whipping in the vortex of wind still swirling around the cavern. Her ragged wings of light sputtered and flagged like candlelight buffeted by a gust of air, but remained bright.

She raised her heat saber, engulfing the blade in a torrent of roiling, crackling energy. “I’d ask if you had any last words,” she spat, “but I think I know what they would be, you sanctimonious little shit.”

The knocked-askew halo rose out of the dirt and reoriented itself, and Chara’s body rose with it, their limbs dangling limply at their sides like those of a marionette, as if from the halo descended the strings animating their body.

“I know what kind of guy Asgore was,” Undyne growled. “Even after what you did to him, he wouldn’t approve of me killing you. But I know him well enough… that I also know… that when I see him again, he’ll forgive me.”

2B nudged 9S aside and ran toward Chara. The sinister aura they had radiated, the one that had reduced 2B to a shivering wreck before Undyne had showed up to break their spell, had returned. “Undyne!” she shouted out.

She doesn’t know that they’re growing stronger by the second.

She doesn’t know that they’re just biding their time until the sword is fully integrated with their body!

“Just finish them!”

Undyne brought down her sword—

But was too slow.

There was a flash of gold and Undyne flew backward, skidding across the ground. Blood sprayed in a torrent from her severed shoulder and perforated torso as her arm, with the heat saber attached and residual traces of lightning still crackling around the blade, sailed through the air. The wings of light streaming from her back flickered and died.

“Dammit!”

2B stopped time again and threw herself past Chara toward Undyne. The captain’s blood froze in an arc in midair; 2B ran through the frozen scarlet curtain as time resumed. Her head pounded; she felt something warm trickle across her lip. Undyne continued to fall—

And then came to a stop yet again.

Wordlessly and mentally thanking Sans for the assist, 2B caught and steadied Undyne.

Time resumed as a cluster of new skull blasters formed around Chara, keeping them occupied.

The flow of blood from Undyne’s wounds slowed to a trickle, but 2B still saw plenty to worry about as she held the captain upright. The blood was turning into dust almost as soon as it left her body; soon, there’d be nothing left of her but her armor. “Undyne, you’re…”

2B’s hand fell on Undyne’s cheek, brushing away dust and grime; a cluster of scales came with it,
crumbling beneath her fingertips and leaving a smooth, silvery patch of skin behind.

“I’ll be fine.” Undyne pulled herself away from 2B, teetering on unsteady legs. Dust trickled from her earfin and from the tied-back mane of scarlet hair pouring down her back. “I’ve still got both legs. I’ll kick the bastard to death before I go! That, and…” She picked up her own severed arm. “Still got a sword!”

2B couldn’t believe Undyne was still willing to fight at this point. Monsters were fragile, so much more fragile than androids, and yet this one was beyond anything 2B had been able to imagine.

“You’re going to die!”

“I died this morning.” Undyne’s wings blazed to life. “What’s the point of hanging onto this world if I don’t do all I can to save it?”

“But Alphys—”

“I’ve said goodbye to her already.” A sheath of blue-green light enveloped both Undyne’s severed arm and her blade, forming a massive, wickedly-spined lightning spear around them, the last embers of her magic all channeled into a single weapon. “This is the right way to die, 2B. Locked in battle like the ancient heroes!”

2B was at a loss for words. Though her first meeting with Undyne had been acrimonious to say the least, the two of them had become close friends, and 2B had been well aware that Undyne harbored more feelings for her than just friendship as well. She wished all that didn’t have to end like this.

You’re wrong, she wanted to say. If there is one, the right way to die, she wanted to say, is peacefully, surrounded by the people you love...

In the distance, Chara dispatched the last of the skull blasters. The halo above their head was growing in size, drawing larger chunks of debris into its glowing accretion disk; the strengthening wind tugged at 2B’s hair and clothes. Taking her cue, Undyne took off toward Chara, and 2B had no choice but to follow.

2B! 9S’s voice rang inside her head, echoing among her own frenzied thoughts. I’ve hacked into you to install a new program. It’s rerouted around your self-destruct function! It’s based on the berserker mode older YoRHA models had—it’ll dramatically increase your strength.

“And?”

...Well, it’ll wear you out a lot faster. But if we don’t kill Chara soon, that won’t matter anyway!


Normally, YoRHA units needed a combat visor to see the readouts on their HUD. But for something so drastic as self-destructing, the warning messages fed directly into their visual processor. 2B’s vision was clouded with flashing red warning signs as every muscle in her body began to tense up.

-ALERT-

B-MODE: FULL COWL

-ENGAGED-
All of 2B’s aches and pains were driven from her body in a single rush of combat fervor, every stingling wound, every battered and strained muscle clinging to her chassis. Even her thoughts, the turmoil, the worry and melancholy running through her mind, vanished as pure combat instincts took hold. There were no emotions here but a blissful haze, no thought but of the simplest route her weapons could take to their target.

With her enhanced speed and strength, 2B even managed to catch up with Undyne as her spear clashed against Caladbolg’s golden blade.

2B stopped time and slipped behind Chara as they reeled backward from the force of Undyne’s blow; a red haze wrapped around her body, leaving a trail of fleeting afterimages in her wake. The frozen time expired after just a few seconds, not the full five—but it was more than enough for 2B to get the drop on Chara, drive her swords deep into the shadow-matter comprising their body, and rip them free.

Chara reeled backward, their body’s shadowy makeup struggling to replenish itself as quickly as 2B’s and Undyne’s relentless attacks could diminish it.

“I’ve never met a more perfect pair of cowards and traitors than you two,” Chara snarled as they struggled to parry both Undyne’s massive spear and 2B’s flashing swords. “Undyne, is this how you want to end your life? Condemning your people, our people, to eternal damnation?”

“Better to be free down here than under your heel up there!” Undyne powered on her beam shield, absorbing the shockwave from Caladbolg in its entirety, and fired the freshly-charged beam cannon at Chara, hitting them with the full force of their own attack; the crackling beam of energy tore through their midsection and flew into the Ruins, tearing apart the wall and collapsing the arched doorway that led into that labyrinthine abandoned city.

Chara winced and gritted their teeth as their shadowy body rebuilt itself. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I won’t ever forgive you,” said Undyne, “not just for what you did to Asgore… not just for what you did to my friends… not just for what you did for me…” She punctuated each statement with a jab of her massive spear. “But for what you did to our kingdom!”

“What I did? Look at what you’re doing! You’re all going to die! Suffocating! Like rats in a tomb!”

2B didn’t have much energy to waste on speaking, but spared two words for Chara as she swung the Joyeuse, Chara’s own precious sword, down on them.

“Shut up.”

The blade tore through Chara’s left arm; the black shadow-substance comprising their thin skin crumbled away, leaving only the red lattice marking where their forearm once had been.

Undeterred, Chara fought on, wielding Caladbolg single-handedly. “You’re choosing androids, the descendants of your enemy, over your own people!” they ran their sword through Undyne’s unprotected midsection, tearing through the already-bloodstained bandages circling her waist. “Will history judge you kindly when the dust of your loved ones lies at your feet? I think not!”

Undyne gritted her teeth, blood dripping from between her yellowed fangs and running down her chin. Her turquoise pupil blazed within her jet-black eye.

“When you were a child,” Chara said, “didn’t you dream of one day breaking the Barrier? Didn’t you dream of being everybody’s hero? Look at you now, Undyne—you’ve thrown aside your
idealism, and for what? Friendship? Hah! You—"

2B aimed a kick at Chara’s forearm, breaking their grip on Caladbolg; her next kick bore into the side of their head with more than enough force to crack their skull like an eggshell. Blood spurted from a fissure running up their forehead as they staggered backward. Their body was falling apart; large patches of their skin was missing and there was nothing beneath it.

Not much farther to go.

“Are you all right?” she asked Undyne as Chara reeled back.

Undyne let out a noncommittal growl. “Let’s finish this quickly. One last strike—and put your back into it!”

Undyne attacked from the right; 2B attacked from the left. Both of them knew each other’s capabilities well by now, their knowledge honed by months of sparring together—although they didn’t have much experience, admittedly, in fighting side-by-side.

While Chara made up their mind over whether to block the sword they knew was coming from their right or the spear they knew was coming from their left, 2B and Undyne both dropped to the ground, slid, and kicked upward, their boots both catching Chara squarely on the chin. The concentric rings pulsing over their head flickered and vanished as their body—what little remained of it—went limp.

Chara slammed into the Barrier, sending a kaleidoscope of colors rippling through the aperture, and hit the ground. They lay spread-eagle, completely motionless.

Seconds passed by. 2B and Undyne watched the body like a hawk until they could be sure it was over.

Almost as if on cue, Chara staggered to their feet, teetering and stumbling, and laid their hand on the Mourning Star’s hilt. A triumphant smile spread across their cracked and broken face.

“No!” 2B shouted out. At that exact moment, B-Mode ran out, the euphoric haze filling her body and mind vanishing as quickly as it had come and letting all of the pain that had been suppressed flood 2B’s body at once. She collapsed to the ground, her limbs leaden, her muscles throbbing, her chassis feeling frailer than it ever had before.

2B lifted her head, squinting as her throbbing headache grew stronger. Chara was nearly diminished; so many chunks were missing from their body that it seemed as though the red latticework wrapped around them was the only thing giving them substance. And yet…

This couldn’t be the end. Not after all this. Not after so much struggle…

A coppery blade, their very own Sword of Goujian, dug into Chara’s side; they screamed and let go of the Mourning Star, their hand falling to where the other sword had embedded itself. Before they could yank it out, a plume of soil burst from the ground in front of them; in its wake, 9S appeared out of thin air, the short ebony blade of Carnwennan flashed in his hand.

The copper dagger vanished and returned to 9S’s hand. “How about a taste of your own medicine?” he snarled, raising both daggers high above his head and preparing to drive them both into Chara’s chest.

Caladbolg flew through the air.

“N-Nines,” 2B called out, barely strong enough to even manage that. “Get… back…”
“2B…”

2B couldn’t be sure if she was hearing Undyne’s voice, or simply imagining it.

With the last of her strength, Undyne threw herself at Chara and 9S, her entire body wreathed in eerie blue-green light; throwing aside her great spear and letting it break apart into the severed arm and blade that had comprised it, she grabbed 9S by the scruff of his neck and threw him clear across the cavern. Caladbolg cut through thin air, barely brushing against Undyne’s scarlet hair.

“Take… care of Alphys… for me…”

One final lightning spear coalesced in Undyne’s hand; she drew her arm back as if preparing to throw a javelin and drove it forward.

“Take care of the future…”

Chara screamed as Undyne bore down on them, her spearhead impacting with the force of a warhead. There was a flash of blue light; a cloud of dust, dragged into the swirling air currents, glittered like tiny, twinkling stars before being swallowed in the opaque gray cloud that settled over the cavern, blanketing the ground.

“I’m leaving it up to you now, 2B.”

2B fell back down, her neck too weak to support her head. She couldn’t move. Even a finger, even a toe… she could barely move her lips, or even her tongue. The most she seemed to be able to do was blink and breathe. She hadn’t felt like this since the nearly-mortal wound that had plunged her into that coma two months ago. But this time, the crushing despair that had weighed so heavily on her was missing.

“2B? Where are you? 2B!”

9S rushed to her side, and knelt down to help her up; 2B just slumped over in his arms as if her muscles had all liquefied. He brushed his finger under her nose and pulled it away, noting the blood on his skin. His eye widened.“I’m sorry,” he said, “I—I didn’t have time to warn you of the side effects…”

“I’m okay,” she whispered with great effort.

Fighting back tears (and failing), 9S wrapped his arms around her. “It’s over. You and Undyne… You were beautiful out there.”

“She’s gone.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” 9S threaded his fingers through her hair. “If I could’ve done more…”

2B felt the slightest bit of strength return to her; just enough strength to grab onto the lapels of 9S’s coat and pull herself closer to him. She buried herself in his warmth.

“2B!”

6O skidded to a halt in front of her, Gaubrieta’s black-cloaked form materializing out of the roiling fog at her side. She dropped to her knees at the sight of 2B, laying her hands on 2B’s cheeks. “Are you okay?”

“Wh… Why are you here?” 2B mumbled. With the ferocity of the fight, 6O could have easily been
collateral damage. “I told you to go back to Toriel…”

“I wasn’t going to just run away! Not after everything that’s happened.” 6O tried to pull 2B closer, much to 9S’s displeasure; 2B ended up caught in a mild tug-of-war between the two of them before 6O relented and resigned herself to simply stroking 2B’s hair.

Gaubrieta wiggled her fingers in a complex pattern for a few seconds, realized that none of the androids spoke sign language, and shrugged. She crouched down, the tips of her skeletal fingers faintly glowing, and ran her hand over 2B’s body, shaking her head with alarming frequency. 2B felt some of the pain recede, but didn’t expect anything more—she knew from experience that monster healing magic was extremely limited when it came to repairing androids.

“You’re gonna be fine,” 6O confidently translated, prompting Gaubrieta to shake her head once more.

9S grew frustrated with having to duel with 6O over the right to stroke 2B’s hair and slipped his hand under her arm instead. “If you feel like going back to sleep for a month or two,” 9S said, running his hand down her side like Gaubrieta’s as if he hoped his touch could somehow carry more potent healing magic than hers, “I think I can deal with that now.”

“I think I’m gonna make it this time.”

The dust took a long time to settle and the mist took a long time to clear, even with the unfiltered light of the sun bearing down on it; but as soon as it did, the pulsing halo that had hung over Chara’s head flickered back into existence, whipping around the last dregs of mist into its sinister vortex as it hovered just underneath the shimmering skin of the Barrier. Hanging beneath the halo was an empty red lattice in the shape of a human: the Mourning Star ran through where its chest would be and a black flower clung to where its right eye would be.

The sword sank into the lattice and tilted upside down, its hilt resting within the wireframe “head” and blade pointing downward; the flower’s roots, as black as its petals, latched onto the hilt and dragged the flower toward the scarlet jewel.

“No…” 2B clung to 9S, shivering. “No, no… we won… it was supposed to be all over…”

6O took her hand and squeezed it. “2B… what’s going on?”

The sword rotated until its blade pointed straight up and shot upward, piercing the halo and continuing on, lodging itself in the shimmering, near-invisible skin of the Barrier. The wind kicked up once more in a vortex around the center of the cavern, tearing at the debris scattered on the ground and whipping it into a maelstrom.

The Barrier shattered, showering the cavern with sparkling motes of light; with a piercing roar, the Mourning Star shot into the sky, the halo trailing beneath it, until the two of them vanished into a pinprick of light in the periwinkle sky. A thin pillar of light stretched down from the heavens to the spot where the sword had ascended from, pure and blinding white.

All eyes were fixed on the heavens. Everybody waited with bated breath to see what would happen next.

“So, uh…” Sans sidled up to the group, coughed, and cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “Is it just me, or did the Barrier just disappear?”

2B sighed with relief.
Gaubrieta looked up, her long and slender jaw agape, and began to sign excitedly as the cavern bloomed with bright and untempered sunlight.

“Yeah, I know,” Sans said. “Guess one of us should go back and tell the rest the good news.”

Gaubrieta kept signing.

“Uh, no, it can’t be me,” Sans said, stretching his arms and yawning, “because I’m, uh… really tired from summoning all those Gaster Blasters.”

Gaubrieta’s fingers fluttered irritably.

“*Half?* You made, like, *three* of them,” Sans scoffed. “I was always better at those things. I mean, that’s why your dad taught me how to make them.”

“Sans!” Papyrus stomped over to the group, threw his arms around his brother, and lifted him high into the air. “You made all those creepy laser-shooting skulls? I’m so proud of you! I had no idea you had such hidden depths!”

“Uh, hey, bro,” Sans gurgled, “if I *had* a stomach, I wouldn’t be able to stomach how hard you’re squeezing me…”

Papyrus acquiesced and set Sans down, crouching in front of 2B. “This was your doing, wasn’t it? You taught Sans how not to be lazy behind my back!”

Feeling her strength, or at least a tiny bit of it, slowly return to her, 2B sat up. “Um, no,” she admitted. She didn’t want to inform Papyrus that she intensely disliked spending time around Sans for various reasons, all of which Papyrus had no business knowing about, so she left it at that.

“And…”

She sighed. “Papyrus,” she said, reaching out and laying her hand on his shoulder, “I’m sorry about Undyne.”

The glee faded from Papyrus’ face, but (much to 2B’s surprise) only a little. “I-It’s okay,” he insisted. “Captain Undyne… went out doing what she loved! Beating up the bad guy and saving the day! I…” His voice began to quiver as tears leaked from his eye sockets. “And she broke the Barrier! Just like she always dreamed she would! Even if, technically, maybe, it wasn’t her *herself*…”

2B found herself grinning in spite of herself, in spite of her own tears. “Yeah… yeah, she did, didn’t she?”

“I’ve… I’ve always admired her… but now I admire her three times as much!” Papyrus sniffed and wiped at his eyes. “I’ll do my best to live up to her example!”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Sans said, scuffing his slippers against the dirt. “How ’bout you start by going and telling everyone the Barrier’s gone?”

Papyrus jumped up and clicked his heels. “Of course! I *love* to be the bearer of good news!”

And in a flash, he leaped into Emil’s cart and took off.

To her surprise, 2B rose to her feet, clinging to Gaubrieta’s black cloak for support.

“I… I guess we’re all free,” 9S said, standing up and taking hold of 2B’s arm. “What do we do next?”
An earsplitting noise like a thousand voices singing in harmony split the air, ringing through the entire mountain; a blood-red stain spread across the sky from horizon to horizon. Where the pillar of light terminated into the sky, a ragged, X-shaped fissure split the heavens, and within seconds, bright lights began to drift through the air above the mountain and fall upward into the fissure, swirling around its center like water circling a drain.

In the back of her mind, 2B heard millions of unfamiliar voices screaming in terror, and she realized that the motes of light she was seeing traveling through the sky were the souls of every single android and machine on the surface of the Earth. She grabbed hold of 9S and 6O, fearing they might be the next ones drawn into the horrific spectacle filling the air. Her gaze flitted between the base of the pillar of light and the X-shaped fissure in the sky.

“What… What is that?” 6O gasped, trembling in fear.

9S clung even tighter to 2B as he gazed upward at the maelstrom. “That’s…”

“Extinction,” 2B said. “Machines and androids alike. This,” she intoned, taking in the nightmare stretching from horizon to horizon, “is Chara’s dream, fully realized at last.”

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas! This is how the story ends!
[E] Over the Rainbow

Chapter Summary

2B and 9S are cancelling the apocalypse. *Pacific Rim main theme starts playing*

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much, readers, for your patience. I know it's been four weeks since the last chapter. I didn't intend to leave you hanging for this long. But this chapter took a long time to come out, and you'll probably find out why very soon after you start reading.

Clench your sphincters, everyone. This is it.

(musical accompaniment -- you'll know which scene this piece is meant to be played over when you get to it)

Oh, and one more thing... my fantastic artist friend drew this:

scanner bros having fun! a wonderful commissioned illustration for my #NierAutomata #Undertale crossover fanfic by @PatManDX

click here to read the fic: https://t.co/Lu0Miiplpq pic.twitter.com/0ltSdasffU

— wellmanicuredma’am (@wmm_ebooks) January 20, 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ethereal maelstrom in the crimson sky churned with a slow, eerie grace, motes of light in all colors of the rainbow swirling around the center of the X-shaped fissure tearing the sky from horizon to horizon in all four cardinal directions. A heavenly sound rang through the air, a ringing, resonant hum that sounded the way a bell would if it could sing. Beneath that, 2B could hear the sound of the souls caught in the cyclone overhead cry out in pain, fear, and confusion, the harsh and electronically-modulated wails of machine lifeforms blending with far more human-sounding cries of androids.

“That’s…” 9S gasped, shivering as he clung to 2B. “That’s everyone?”

“They did it.” 2B barely heard the words leave her mouth, conscious of her voice only by its vibrations in her throat. “Chara is erasing everyone in this world. No matter how hard we fought, even then… even then…”

6O let out a piercing wail and fell to her knees, clutching at her chest. The pained outcry broke 2B from her stupor, cutting through the blanket of angelic noise filling the air.

2B took hold of 6O and pulled her up, pressing the aggrieved android tightly to her chest. “6O, what’s wrong? Are you—”
The words had scarcely left her mouth when 9S cried out in turn and fell to the ground, his fingers sliding across 2B’s back and grappling weakly with the fabric of her shirt as he lost his grip on her.

“Nines!” 2B gasped. “Nines, please, don’t—”

Pain like a vise squeezing her head and her chest struck her with the suddenness of a strike of lightning and the fury of a thunderclap, blanking out her mind and tearing what little strength remained from her body. She collapsed in a heap, a white-hot anguish centered in her chest as if her black box were trying to burn its way through her chassis.

Was that what was happening? Was her soul being torn out of her body to join the others?

“Nines… hold on…” 2B crawled through the dirt—only a few centimeters, but it felt like one hundred times the distance in her state—toward him and fell on top of him as he writhed in agony. “Don’t go…”

She felt his cheek pressed against hers, heard his ragged and shallow breathing in harmony with hers, and prayed for his safety and 6O’s. Whatever force up there in the heavens was directing this catastrophe—whether it was driven by Chara’s will or something else—she silently prayed to it that it would spare these two. She would even offer up her own soul if it meant they would keep theirs.

Take me instead. Take me instead. Take me…

Gradually, the pain subsided and her head cleared. 2B shuddered and got up on her hands and knees, gasping and panting for breath. “Nines… 6O…” She fell back to the ground, lying in a crumpled heap atop the other two androids. Her eyelids grew heavy as a soft, trembling hand—6O’s, she guessed—caressed her cheek.

Gaubrieta took her by the shoulders and hoisted her up, laying a glowing hand on her chest, then did the same for 6O and 9S. Both of the other androids seemed haggard, their eyes blank and vacant, and as 2B struggled to remain conscious, she feared the worst may have befallen them. She still remembered how 9S had been when he’d had his soul taken away from him—if his had once again been lost, and 6O’s too, both swallowed up in the slow-motion tempest filling the sky, it would be a fate worse than death for the two of them… if they survived.

“Are they okay?” she asked Gaubrieta.

The doctor tapped pensively on the side of her bony snout, lost in thought, and then signed something. Sans dutifully translated for her. “Don’t worry, they’ll be fine,” he said. “These two sure spent a long time in the oven.”

“What?”

“They’re tough cookies,” Sans explained.

Gaubrieta glared at him.

“Your joke, not mine,” Sans said, shrugging. His grin suggested that despite his claim to the contrary, the joke had been an embellishment on his part.

Gaubrieta crossed her arms and pouted.

“Our souls… are trying to leave our bodies,” 2B gasped, clutching at her sternum with enough force for her fingernails to leave crescent-moon scars in her skin through her shirt as another pang ran through her black box—not as bad as before, but still enough to worry her. She looked up pleadingly
at the doctor. “Please, do something…”

The world spun around her and everything went black.

“…okay? Wake up, t…”

“That’s why… 2B, I…”

“…stay determined…”

When 2B’s sight returned—garbled, indistinct, a mess of static and distortion—she was being propped up by a pair of strong, soft paws.

“2B,” Toriel whispered in her ear, her fur tickling her cheek, “do not worry. Everything will be all right. I am here for you.”

The sound of her voice shocked 2B.

“To… ri…”

Was this a delusion? It had to be. How else could Toriel have gotten here in the blink of an eye?

2B became aware that a long period of time had passed her by in an instant, without her being even the slightest bit aware of it. And there had been no forced shutdown or reboot sequence—she’d simply zoned out. For how long? What had become of 9S and 6O?

“How did you get here?” She pulled herself to her feet, her head and chest throbbing, as Toriel rushed to steady her. “9S. 6O. I have to know if they’re—”

Another sharp pang ran through her black box, her head throbbing in sympathy with it; she fell into Toriel’s expectant embrace.

“Analysis: Unit 2B’s consciousness data… misaligned… sensory apparatuses,” Pod 042 stated, its voice awash with static and fading in and out of 2B’s ears. She had to strain to hear it.

2B gritted her teeth until her vision began to coalesce into something coherent, the sight of her pod swimming before her. It must have been a side effect of her soul trying to leave her body.

9S’s voice rang in her clearing ears, assuaging the panic running through her mind. “2B, you’re up again? Thank god, we’ve all been fading in and out these past few minutes, but you…”

2B stumbled over to him and all but fell on top of him, grateful beyond measure to feel his forehead against the palm of her hand. Seconds later, Toriel took hold of her yet again and pulled her back into her furry embrace.

“Well, at least you’re up and about,” Toriel said. “Are you all right, dear?”

“For now,” 2B gasped, huddling between 9S and 6O. Nothing to be done than wait out the storm—if such a thing were even possible. 6O slumped over and rested her head on 2B’s shoulder. 2B knew full well that she—or 9S, or herself—could fall victim to the godlike force currently reshaping the Earth at any moment. How much longer could any of them last?

She looked around the cavern. Sans, Gaubrieta, and Toriel were here, but Emil, Papyrus, and Alphys were not. “Where’s Alphys?” she asked, concerned about the scientist’s frail condition.

Gaubrieta signed something, and Sans translated. “She’s fine,” he assured 2B. “Just asleep. ’Saying
goodbye’ to Undyne really tired her out… if you know what I mean,” he added with a bawdy wink. Gaubrieta scowled at him, her fingers fluttering angrily.

“Well, yeah, I know, you didn’t say that,” he said, “but you meant it.” Clutching her skull in her hands and shaking her head, Gaubrieta stomped off.

“Sans, there are children here,” Toriel scolded him.

2B stood up gingerly and hesitantly, as if expecting another seizure to wrack her body. But seconds passed in silence with no sudden bursts of anguish—not for 2B, or for either of the other two androids.

9S glanced upward at the dancing lights and said precisely what was on 2B’s mind. “Why’s it having such a hard time taking our souls? We’re right below it…”

“Storms,” said 9S, “sometimes have these… calm spots, right in the center. Maybe that’s where we are. Under the eye.”

“If it gets safer the closer we get to the center—” 6O gasped and winced, clutching at her chest. “Then—the safest place must be inside that pillar…”

“Negative. Pod 153 and I have completed analysis of the pillar of light,” said Pod 042. “Trace elements of Unit 13B’s base code and that of six other YoRHa units is present throughout the pillar, forming the architecture of what seems to be a gestalt consciousness; it is likely to have powerful self-defense mechanisms inside.”

“You mean… this thing is alive?” 2B asked.

“Observation: several vulnerable data ports have been detected,” Pod 153 added, its mangled body returning to 9S’s side. “These data ports may provide access into the entire pillar’s inner workings. Proposal: Unit 9S should attempt to hack into the pillar and disable its core functionality. Doing so may cease the debilitating seizures currently being experienced by Units 2B, 9S, and 6O.”

“I’m…” 9S stared up and down the length of the shining pillar and gulped. “I-I’m supposed to hack that? Are you nuts?”

“Hypothesis: there also appears to be an inner structure within the pillar,” said Pod 042. “If Unit 9S can hack into it, create a physical entrance, and disable whatever self-defense systems it may have in place, Unit 2B may be capable of entering the pillar and destroying it from the inside.”

“‘Destroy it from the inside?’” 6O asked, incredulous. “2B, c-can you even stand up?”

2B took a deep breath. “Does… anyone else have a plan?” She looked to everyone else; everyone else looked away.

9S took her hand and squeezed it comfortingly. “Guess that’s a no, huh?”

“All right. Let’s hope for good luck, then.” Forcing herself to her feet, 2B banished her apprehension and picked up Caladbolg, registering it to her NFCS. “Pod, any idea what kind of resistance I’ll have to deal with in there?”

“Negative,” Pod 042 answered. “There is no telling what the pillar may be capable of generating in order to defend itself.”
2B picked up the Joyeuse next. “9S, can you extend my NFCS’s available weapon slots like you did to yours?”

“Sure.” 9S reached for the back of her neck and laid his hand there; a frigid icicle drove into the back of 2B’s brain for a second before melting away and leaving behind a numb tingling. “Done. I’ve maxed it out to six.”

2B registered the Joyeuse, then her own Virtuous Contract, then took Chara’s two daggers from 9S. Like Pod 042 had said, she had no idea of knowing what she would be up against—so it would be in her best interest to stockpile as much of an armory as she could, especially considering the special abilities Chara’s weapons possessed.

With one slot still open, she walked over to the vine-covered odachi once wielded by 6E, and before that, by her first mentor, 14E. The long, curved blade stuck out from the ground as a monument, but its blade was still sharp.

2B reached for the hilt. Her fingers stiffened as her bare skin came in contact with the hilt’s elegant wrapping and her breath grew short. She’d never liked laying hands on this blade—the wills of its former masters seemed to surround it like a baleful aura—but knew she could wield it if need be.

She curled her fingers around the hilt and ripped the sword from the ground, letting the torn-apart vines that had once encircled the blade like a double helix drift to the soil.

Her NFCS took hold of her armaments and positioned them optimally—the two largest swords, Caladbolg and 6E’s odachi, hovering at her back; Carnwennan and the Sword of Goujian sheathed at her waist, their blades crossed over the small of her back; the Joyeuse mounted on her right hip; and the Virtuous Contract on her left.

“Let’s, uh, hope that’s overkill,” 9S commented as he watched 2B, bristling with weaponry, rejoin the group.

“I’d rather be overprepared than underprepared,” 2B said.

She paused in mid-stride as the full breadth of the struggle ahead bore down on her. This pillar and the storm which sprouted from it like the branches and leaves of a mighty tree was greater in magnitude than any foe she had ever fought—machines, monsters, other androids, and even Chara paled in comparison to its sheer scope.

And she was tired.

She’d risked her life countless times before, but this time was different. This time, the odds had never been less in her favor. She didn’t even know if any of the power she had over the flow of time meant anything in the face of this… thing.

How would she defeat an enemy that stretched from this underground cavern all the way to the stratosphere—especially in her condition?

“You’re not afraid to go in there, are you?” 6O asked her.

“Of course not,” 2B lied, calling on the detached, clinical tone she’d always spoken in as a soldier to mask her anxiety. “I have my mission and I’ll see it through to the end, no matter how I feel.”

“T-To the end?” 6O cringed and looked away.

“Of the mission,” 2B assured her, patting her on the shoulder. “Not me.”
6O looked back at 2B, her fragile smile not quite reaching her eyes; she let out a cracked and heartrending sigh as she laid her hand atop 2B’s. “You’d better make it out. Because… because t-the next time I give you a dancing lesson,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes, “I’ll m-make sure there’ll be music…”

She threw herself at 2B and wrapped her arms around her, narrowly avoiding cutting herself on the bristling armory hovering around 2B’s body, and planted a kiss on her cheek, another kiss on her cheek, a kiss on her lips; hers were damp and salty.

“Don’t worry about me.” 2B gently pushed 6O away, wiping away her tears with her finger. “However long it takes for me to bring this thing down, you’ll have to stay strong and hold yourself together. Because if you aren’t… here… when I make it out…”

6O’s wide, soft eyes bore into hers and 2B found words failing her.

“Everything we did to keep you safe would have been a waste. And I’d miss you.”

“Uh… o-okay,” 6O said.

2B glanced downward, still holding onto 6O’s shoulders. She regretted having said that. It wasn’t anything close to the sentiment she’d wanted to express.

“I’ll start a garden for you,” 2B added.

“What?”

“A garden. Don’t you like flowers?”

“Well, yeah, of course, but…” 6O’s mouth curled into a warmer smile. “I mean… a gardener? You?”

“I could try. We can plant, uh…” 2B realized that she only really knew anything about two flowers.

“Marigolds,” said 6O.

“Sure.”

“And honeysuckle, and crocuses, and dahlias! And roses, too, of course, and coriander—”

“I don’t know what those are,” 2B admitted.

“They’re flowers!”

“All of them?”

6O hugged her again. “Oh, 2B… Maybe leave the gardening to me, okay?”

“Okay.” 2B nodded.

With a strained, yet genuine smile on her face, 6O leaned in and pressed her lips against 2B’s once more; her hands reached up and curled softly around the collar of 2B’s shirt.

_Is this going to be the last chance I have to do this?_ 2B wondered, focusing on the warmth in her chest and the shortness of her breath to better cherish the moment as she wrapped her arms around 6O and pressed her closer.
A black slit formed at the base of the shining pillar of light, an invisible force tugging at its lips until it deformed into a round, gaping aperture revealing a black abyss. Shimmering hints of some sort of glassy, crystalline structure glittered in the void within.

9S stood before the aperture with his hand out, his shoulders heaving with exertion. “Our pods were right. That thing’s bigger on the inside… both in its physical… and software architecture,” he gasped. “A two-pronged attack in physical space and hacking space… I think that’s our best shot at destroying it.”

2B nodded.

“That door won’t stay open for long. And if it closes…” 9S sighed with exhaustion. “It might not open again. You have to hurry.”

“Got it.” 2B took a deep breath to calm her nerves and stepped closer to 9S, dropping her voice to a low whisper.

“2B,” 9S said, resting a hand on her shoulder. “I’m… I’m glad we had so much time to spend together.”

“Me, too.” 2B snaked her arm around his waist and pulled him closer, resting her cheek against the top of his head. “We had something we could only dream of… and it was better than I’d ever imagined.”

“I… I love you, 2B.”

2B threw her arms around him and pressed him close, inhaling the musty scent of his dirty and disheveled hair as the cataclysm filling the crimson sky overhead tugged yet again on her soul. “I love you, too, Nines.”

She winced and gasped as another intangible twist of an invisible knife wrenched her black box, static clouding her eyes and ears; doubting how long she could keep her soul from flying out and joining the millions of lights filling the sky, she feared that however long she could keep this inexorable force at bay, 9S and 6O would give out much sooner.

She and 9S had to finish this—and soon.

Once the pain had passed, 2B nudged 9S aside and stepped forward, only for a heavy paw to fall on her shoulder, its grip tightening.

She turned around to see Toriel towering over her, her eyes glistening.

“Don’t go,” the queen said, her voice hoarse and so weak it could barely be called a whisper. “I—I am sure we will think of some way to preserve the souls of the three of you. You can come home. We do not have to concern ourselves with the surface world. We can simply have a quiet, peaceful life…”

A quiet, peaceful life.

That had been 2B’s only ambition for so long. Before she’d come here, it had only been a meaningless flight of fancy, a simple pipe dream, as unattainable as it was impossible to truly imagine. Once she’d attained it, she hadn’t wanted to let go of it.

Toriel hugged her, gripping her so tightly that 2B could have sworn she heard something inside of her crack. Her embrace was, as always, cozier than the softest blanket; even if it wasn’t for the firm
grip she had on her, 2B would have found it difficult to escape anyway, and especially not now—

Because, 2B knew, it could be the last time she ever felt all that warm, soft fur envelop her.

“If you and 9S go there,” Toriel said, pointing at the aperture at the base of the pillar, “I fear neither of you will survive. But if you stay here, you may have a chance…”

“Mom—”

2B’s breath caught in her throat.

“Do not make me bury any more children.” Toriel squeezed her eyes shut and grimaced as if in terrible agony. “Do not make me mourn any of you. Do not force me to cradle your broken bodies and weep over your lifeless faces. I will not allow it, I will not permit you to—to leave me—to leave me alone yet again…”

She crumpled to her knees, her head bowed as though she were in prayer. For the first time, this giant of a woman, this tall, noble, regal once-queen who’d always towered over everybody else, seemed to 2B to be so much smaller than she’d ever been.

“I will do it for you,” Toriel choked out, trembling, her paws sinking into the dirt. “I will go. You will stay. I will brave whatever dangers lie within that pillar of light and you will stay behind…and live…and laugh…and be happy…”

“You wouldn’t survive,” 2B countered.

2B couldn’t explain to Toriel that she’d lost her twice already, couldn’t explain that it had been her fault both times, couldn’t explain that she couldn’t be responsible for such a kind woman’s death for a third time.

“I do not care.” Toriel shuddered, her shoulders quaking. “After a lifetime of running, it is the least I can do. It is…the least I must do.”

9S tapped 2B on the shoulder. “I can’t hold the door open much longer, 2B. It’s now or never.”

2B crouched down in front of Toriel and laid a hand on her head, her fingers sinking into the old queen’s soft, thick, warm fur. “I’ll come back,” she told her. “I promise.”

“That is what they all said,” Toriel sniffled as she lifted her head and stared 2B in the eyes, a waterfall of tears dampening her cheeks. “I know you are trying to be brave, but I would rather have you alive than brave!”

Toriel clamped her paws around 2B’s wrists with an iron grip. “That is all any good mother wants for her children,” she continued. “Mothers are supposed to be brave for their children’s sake and sacrifice for their sake—because children…Children are supposed to outlive their parents!” Her outburst was forceful and shocking enough to make 2B flinch. Toriel was all but screaming at her now.

“Please, Toriel…” 2B tried to pull her hands free. “Let me go.”

“No, 2B,” Toriel said, gritting her teeth. “I will not let you end up like Asriel. Or any of the others.” She took a ragged, shuddering breath and drew herself up to her full height, towering over 2B. “You and 9S will run along home like good children and I will do what I—”

Her grip on 2B’s wrists faltered, weakened, and went slack; she slumped to the ground mid-
sentence, her eyes rolling back before she collapsed in a heap and lay motionless on the ground.

2B stood before her in shock, wondering if Toriel had worked herself into such a fervor that her organs had failed. Wasn’t such a thing possible?

Sans, standing behind Toriel, dusted off his hands. “Don’t worry. She’s not taking that kind of dirt nap. You can thank me later,” he said.

2B breathed a sigh of relief—Sans had simply knocked her unconscious. But… “Why?” she asked him.

“Look, I have the weirdest feeling I know what you’re thinking right now.” Sans shrugged. “Something like… ’this is what happens when people like me take it easy,’ right?”

2B involuntarily gritted her teeth. Damn that skeleton’s bafflingly on-point insights.

“You had a lot of power and a lot of responsibility,” Sans said. “And you didn’t use it. Not being all accusatory here, I mean, I’m not gonna call you lazy or a coward or anything, otherwise I’d look like a big, fat hypocrite.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I don’t doubt you had your reasons, and I’m not going to stand here and tell you your reasons weren’t good, whatever they were. That’s not really for me to decide. Not now, anyway. But I digress. If you want to go ahead with this, then go ahead.”

“I don’t suppose you feel like helping,” 2B said.

“Well, you see, I would go with you,” Sans added, coughing surreptitiously into the crook of his elbow, “but it seems pretty dangerous, and I don’t know what would happen if I wasn’t there to cut the crusts off Papyrus’ sandwiches the way he likes. So… yeah. Best of luck.”

“Thanks,” 2B said. She crouched down before Toriel’s unconscious body and gently lifted one of her long, floppy ears.

“Until we meet again, Toriel,” she whispered. “I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me. I promise I’ll come back.”

2B did an about-face and pressed onward, striding toward the pitch-black aperture and stepping into it.

Friends… Family… Neighbors… Sans…

She had made promises to all of them, and swore a silent oath to keep them. But the pragmatic and pessimistic sections of her mind had different designs.

This might be my last goodbye.

If I don’t ever see you again, thank you for being there for me when I needed you. All of you.

But she couldn’t bear to say it out loud.

Darkness and silence engulfed her.

9S wiped his brow as the aperture he’d struggled to keep open closed, locking 2B in. It vanished without a trace.

“Statement: Unit 2B and Pod 042 have entered the pillar,” Pod 153 announced. “All data
transmission from them has ceased. It is likely that communication with them can be facilitated directly through the pillar’s programming. Proposal: prioritize making contact with Unit 2B and Tactical Support Pod 042.”

6O took his arm. “Take care of her, okay?” She wore a nervous, fragile, anxious grin. “S—She promised me a garden.”

“Don’t worry,” 9S said. “I haven’t met anything I haven’t been able to hack,” he assured her, conveniently forcing himself to ignore all of the things he’d met that he hadn’t been able to hack.

“I—I know you two must be really tired,” 6O said, “so—I mean… I just wish there was more I could—”

Her eyes squeezing shut, she clamped her hands over her mouth to suppress an anguished outcry and collapsed to her knees. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. 9S felt the same wrenching pain tear at his chest as well, nearly biting his tongue as he clenched his jaw, his legs crumpling beneath him.

9S grabbed 6O and pulled her up with him, dragging her closer to the pillar. With each step, he felt the pain recede; it seemed that, as he’d hoped, putting less distance between himself (and 6O) and the pillar brought them close enough to the eye of the storm to make a palpable difference.

“You want to know how you can help us?” 9S asked, laying a hand on the pillar (despite seeming white-hot, its glowing surface was actually cold). “Just hold on.”

6O sat with her back to the pillar and leaned against it, her shoulders rising and falling in time with the deep breaths she took.

“Not everyone can fight. And that’s okay,” 9S assured her. “2B and I don’t need you to fight for us. We just need you to be there for us when we come back.”

“Thanks, 9S.” 6O closed her eyes. “Good luck.”

9S nodded, gathered his courage, pretended he wasn’t exhausted as best he could, and dived into the pillar’s inner working, immersing himself fully into hacking space.

What he found there, separated from his body which now stood statue-still in the outside world, defied his imagination.

9S had been in hacking space countless times; he’d hacked computers the size of his thumbnail and Behemoth-class machine lifeforms the size of mountains, memory cards with scarcely a terabyte of storage space and servers containing thousands of yottabytes worth of data. He’d never seen an environment like this in his life.

He stood before a bustling metropolis of data, his body projected as a faintly-flickering, semi-translucent apparition into hacking space. The sword in his hand was now a projected beam of white light carved into the rough shape of a curved, single-edged blade; Pod 153, too, hovered at his side in the form of a simplified hologram comprised of featureless white polygons roughly approximating its shape. Its missing manipulator arms and slightly-misshapen chassis approximated the damage it had sustained in real life.

Hacking space tended to be a flat, sparse universe—all whites, blacks, and grays, all hard right angles, all squares and rectangles, but this was anything but. There were still the same neat, orderly pathways, all straight lines on the plane, but… the plane of the universe, the fabric of its simulated spacetime, was twisted and curved, bulging and swelling in some places, sinking and pinching in others. The right angles every fork in every road met at weren’t always perpendicular; parallel paths
occasionally intersected; some lanes running across the landscape seemed to disappear into the vast gray emptiness around them as soon as 9S tried to look at them; some appeared out of nowhere but vanished if 9S looked at any structures adjacent to them.

Deep at the bottom of the twisted maze, forming the point of an inverted pyramid, was the same thing 9S had seen in hacking space when he’d hacked into Chara those few times during their earlier battle. Surrounding a central hub were seven black monoliths linked by bustling highways filled with data packets speeding back and forth.

Seven nodes. One for each of the black boxes Chara’s sword, the Mourning Star, had absorbed. If there was a key to stopping whatever this pillar was, it was there.

“Okay,” 9S whispered, trying to focus on the landscape that stretched before him without losing his lunch as he set out into the depths of the pillar’s programming. “Let’s get going.”

The aperture behind 2B closed behind her, sealing her within the pillar; her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness.

She was standing on a round platform that seemed to be made from flawless crystal; it seemed well-lit, despite the absence of any light source, and its transparent surface shimmered and gleamed with a rainbow hue that shifted whenever the angle 2B looked at it from changed. The edge of the platform was ringed with what seemed to be an elegantly-carved pattern of vines and flowers carved from the same crystalline substance. A spiral staircase extended from the platform and curved around its perimeter, its twisting arch passing over 2B’s head until it connected with another platform far above her. Its banister, too, had floral ornaments.

2B looked up and saw a myriad of sparkling, nearly-transparent crystal platforms hanging above her against the vast, empty matte-black background and stretching upward until they vanished into the distance; some of the platforms were linked by staircases, some were propped up by arched and fluted columns, and some simply floated in the air with no visible supports. Clusters of crystalline tubules hovered in the air like wind chimes, occasionally swaying and letting out glassy, bell-like chimes with ringing, humming overtones even though there was no wind to disturb them.

“Statement: communication has been lost between Unit 9S and Pod 153,” Pod 042 announced. “Hypothesis: this area appears to resemble a ‘pocket universe’ separate from normal spacetime, making contact with the outside world impossible. It is likely that Unit 9S will be able to re-establish contact later by manipulating the pillar’s programming.”

2B almost felt as though the pod was trying to reassure her.

“Massive energy signature detected one thousand meters above us,” Pod 042 added. “Proposal: Unit 2B should ascend the pillar to disrupt said energy signature.”

“Only a kilometer?” 2B asked. “Doesn’t this pillar stretch all the way into the stratosphere?”

“Hypothesis: this may be another manifestation of the pillar’s warped internal spacetime,” Pod 042 answered.

2B knew that was the best explanation she was going to get. Drawing the Virtuous Contract in case any enemies spontaneously appeared in this strange realm, 2B gritted her teeth and hurried up the stairs. Her boots made loud, ringing, echoing noises against the crystal stairs with every step she took; the crystal chimes hovering in the air jangled and tolled like tiny bells in sympathy with each
9S crossed one of the narrow alleys leading deeper into the pillar’s systems, stopping to look into every open data port he passed by. It didn’t take long for him to come across one that let him route Pod 153’s long-range communications through the pillar and allow it to link up with Pod 042, although every moment he spent with no way of knowing whether 2B was okay or not felt like an hour. Time tended to pass very quickly in hacking space, anyway.

“2B? Can you hear me? It’s me, 9S,” he called out as he continued on down the pathway into the labyrinth. He couldn’t hide the nervousness in his voice.

“Nines?” 2B answered. Her voice was projected through Pod 153’s white silhouette. She sounded completely calm, which relieved 9S. If there was any opposition for her to face, she hadn’t run up against it yet.

“How’s it going?” 9S called out.

“There’s no need to raise your voice, Nines. I can hear you just fine.”

“Oh. Sorry.” 9S lowered his voice to a speaking volume. “Any obstacles yet?”

“Not yet. Just a lot of stairs,” 2B said. She sounded almost disappointed. “What about you?”

“Well, I’ve got a bone to pick with this place’s interior decorator,” said 9S, “but so far, nothing’s tried to stop me. Guess we should count our blessings, huh?”

“For now. Let’s enjoy this while it lasts. Take care of yourself, Nines.”

“You too, 2B. I—”

9S heard a peal of sharp laughter from within the pillar.

2B froze as she ascended the crystal staircase. The voice assaulting her ears was…

“Alert: YoRHa black boxes detected.”

2B craned her neck and stared up as a familiar figure coalesced on the platform ahead of her out of thin air. It formed itself from the inside out; first a glittering black box that hung suspended in midair, then a metal skeleton blossoming out from it, then armored plating and a network of blood and coolant vessels and nervous circuitry sprouting and flowing through the endoskeleton, then muscle, then skin, and finally clothes and hair and weapons.

A tall, pale android in an ornate black cloak stood before her, her whitish-lilac hair done up in long, thick, curly pigtails. A slim, glittering blade nearly as long as she was tall was slung over her shoulder.

She smiled and cocked her head. “Well, well, well, 2E. I’m so glad we could finally see each other again!”

“2B, what’s going on? Where’s that laughter coming from?” 9S asked. “It can’t be—”

“6E,” 2B spat.
With a lazy swing of her sword, 6E leaped down the staircase, and in an instant, all of the primal fear that had frozen 2B’s blood turned to white-hot anger.

How dare this creature live again!

2B met the flashing blade of the odachi with the Virtuous Contract, the ringing of the clashing blades reverberating through the crystalline structure that filled the pillar.

“You stupid little girl,” said 6E, laughing as she ground her blade against 2B’s. “What are you doing here? Are you lost? Are you looking for your mommy? Or are you here to—let me guess—destroy this place?”

2B broke away from 6E, set aside the Virtuous Contract, and drew Carnwennan, vanishing in mid-lunge in front of 6E and reappearing behind her.

6E whirled around, disoriented, just as 2B drew Caladbolg, swung it, and blew her away with the shockwave.

2B watched 6E tumble down the stairs in two neat pieces with more than a great deal of satisfaction.

“Hypothesis: it is unlikely that this unit is the same 6E known by Unit 2B,” said Pod 042. “The pillar is likely drawing on the data absorbed from the YoRHa black boxes, along with Unit 2B’s own memory data, to create the ideal antagonists for Unit 2B.”

“It isn’t doing a very good job,” said 2B as she turned around and pressed onward.

“Do I have to be the one to remind you to be careful what you wish for?” 9S asked.

Almost as if on cue, another 6E appeared on the platform, guarding the next staircase. This time, she was flanked by five other androids clad in YoRHa heavy armor, all equipped with swords, spears, axes, and knives.

“You didn’t let me finish, 2E,” said 6E, as if this were the same person 2B had just chopped in half. She wagged her finger. “Mind your manners, dearie. You do still have those, don’t you? Or did you forget them all when you ran away?”

2B felt confident engaging these enemies, even though her muscles still burned with exhaustion and her nervous circuits felt frayed and stressed. Chara’s weaponry had incredible applications… if only they’d had the skill to utilize them properly, 2B and 9S would have met their match long ago.

Pod 042 shot at the androids, riddling them with bullets. 2B weaved through the sea of blades as the enemy androids pounced on her, using Carnwennan to zip past them and break through their ranks. She jabbed the Sword of Goujian into one of the YoRHa soldiers’ eyes, shattering the green optical sensor and the eye behind it, then narrowly whirled around quickly enough to parry 6E’s odachi with the Joyeuse.

“2B, are you all right?” 9S shouted out, his voice tinny as it emitted from Pod 042’s speakers.

A spearhead pierced 2B’s side, drawing a pained yelp out of her as it buried itself in her flesh and cracked her armored chassis. She grabbed the shaft of the spear, gritting her teeth, and yanked on it. The YoRHa soldier holding onto the spear stumbled forward, and 2B, still clutching the spear, drew Carnwennan, phased past the soldier, and planted a kick into the small of her back. The soldier fell from the edge of the platform with a scream.

“Fine,” 2B growled, clutching at her side; blood gushed through her fingers unimpeded now that the
spearhead was no longer plugging the wound. As another soldier rushed at her, she swept her leg across the floor, caught the shaft of the discarded spear, and kicked it at the soldier. It hit the soldier in the throat and knocked her back.

6E pounced at 2B, knocking her to the floor, and whacked her in the forehead with the pommel of her sword. 2B saw stars as colors flickered in her visual display. 6E pressed the blunt side of her sword against 2B’s throat and began to press down.

“What are you even doing here? Trying to destroy this place? Is that it?” 6E pressed down harder, crushing 2B’s windpipe. “Why bother? Wormwood is wiping clean the sick world that created people like you and me, after all… is’t it better to let it all go? What’s there worth keeping?”


6E laughed. “Do you really think you’ll live long enough to find out?”

As the air in her lungs grew stale and her black box began to whine, 2B drove her daggers into 6E’s sides; she phased through 6E and ended up lying on top of her, much to the enemy android’s surprise, and quickly buried the Sword of Goujian in her back a second time. 6E instantly froze, her body turning into a pure black silhouette.

“Pod! Spear!”

A forest of white-light spears burst from the floor on 2B’s command, skewering two of the remaining armored androids. Undeterred, the one-eyed soldier attacked 2B again; 2B parried the soldiers’ ax with the Joyeuse and threw the Sword of Goujian at her. The copper blade buried itself in the soldier’s chest; the soldier’s body froze.


“Alert: Unit 2B’s fuel filter has been damaged. Replacement advised,” Pod 042 warned.

2B winced as she pressed on the wound in her side. “Is it urgent?” she asked.

“Negative.”

“All right, then. Give me some staunching gel and let’s keep going.”

Pod 042 dutifully administered treatment to the wound; almost as soon as the clear gel had settled in the wound and stopped the bleeding, another trio of YoRHa soldiers appeared before 2B along with not one, but two 6E models. They laughed their haughty, sardonic laughs in stereo. 2B had never heard a more grating sound.

9S hurried through hacking space, not only trying to get closer to the center, but trying to find some part of the system he could wrangle to exert some influence over whatever 2B’s opponents were. Most of the data ports he came across were useless—red herrings—but eventually, he stumbled upon a few he could use to influence the pillar’s deployment of its physical defenses. Not control it entirely—there were way too many forces working against him—but enough to make things easier for 2B.

“2B, I’m going to try altering the spawn rates of your enemies,” he announced. “This system is self-correcting, so nothing I do will be permanent, but it should lighten your workload for at least a minute or so.”
“Got it,” 2B replied, her voice emanating from 9S’s pod at his side. He could hear the sound of swords clashing behind her.

9S cracked his knuckles as he stood atop the port marked on the floor. It wasn’t necessary, but it felt right. “All right, Pod. Let’s begin—”

A white wall sprang up behind and in front of 9S, blocking him in; he ran to either side of the narrow channel to find another way out. Below him was an empty abyss. Unless he looked over the left edge, in which case below the alleyway was the upstairs he’d come down from. 9S found a new appreciation for environments where space made sense.

9S mentally kicked himself. Had the port been nothing but a honeypot?

Seven black rods burst out of the smooth, flat floor, encircling 9S.

“What is this?” 9S asked, eyeing the cylindrical rods as they loomed over him. The rods’ smooth surfaces began to churn and roil, transforming them into shapeless masses of shifting black cubes.

“Hypothesis,” Pod 153 said. “The system is analyzing Unit 9S’s memory region to create the perfect defense.”

The black pillars continued to fester and bubble until they coalesced into humanoid forms.

“What do you mean?” 9S asked, eyeing the black pillars warily as a chill ran up his spine.

“Statement: the perfect defense against Unit 9S would be a perfect offense,” Pod 153 explained. “A perfect offense, of course, would be something that has the greatest likelihood of successfully terminating Unit 9S.”

It was simple biology—a living organism with a functional immune system developed antibodies perfectly tailored to destroy the root causes of an infection or illness. Here, 9S was the invading virus seeking to destroy from within, and these things…

“9S?” 2B asked amid the frantic sound of combat. “What’s wrong? 9S?”

9S swallowed a hard lump of trepidation. Before his eyes, the pillars took the shape of pale, doll-like figures in elegant black blouses and skirts; long and gleaming white katanas gripped in their hands, cropped silvery hair framing their porcelain-smooth faces, and black cloth strips covering their eyes.

Seven exact replicas of 2B—no, not exact replicas of 2B, but rather perfect facsimiles of 2E—surrounded him.

“2E models…” he gasped.

“What did you say? 9S? Are you all right?”

“So,” he said, hiding the nervous tremolo in his voice, “these are the system’s antibodies.”

“Affirmative,” said Pod 153.

The 2E models all attacked in unison.

“9S!” 2B shouted out, struggling to hear both her own voice and 9S’s over the sound of her swords clashing with her foes’ weaponry.
“2E models—seven of them—don’t worry—got it—under control!”

2B dived under the synchronized swinging of the twin 6Es’ blades, swept the two androids’ legs out from under them, and swapped out her sword for Caladbolg, leaping to her feet and raising the massive golden sword above her head to deliver a killing blow.

Something grabbed her from behind; 2B whirled around only to find that one of the armored soldiers had swiped her daggers from her and registered them to her own NFCS. 2B swung Caladbolg, but the soldier ducked underneath the shockwave and vanished. The other two soldiers standing behind her weren’t so blessed with fast reflexes and were torn apart and thrown off the glass platform and into the black abyss.

2B narrowly avoided more synchronized attacks from the two 6Es, fending off both their strikes while keeping a watchful eye out for the YoRHa soldier who’d stolen one of her daggers. At last, she managed to drive Caladbolg through one of the twins’ chests, the shockwave blowing a hole through her back; Pod 042 drove the other 6E back long enough for 2B to finish her off as well.

2B turned to face the android who’d purloined her dagger. “Now,” she growled, “for—”

The android tossed Carnwennan into the abyss just as 2B caught up with her and sliced through her torso with a single swift stroke. 2B saw the black dagger vanish into the distance as the two halves of her foe hit the floor.

“Statement: it is unlikely that Unit 2B will be able to reacquire that weapon,” Pod 042 commented. These things are getting smarter, 2B thought. Trying to deprive me of my advantages. It would do well for her not to underestimate these opponents.

2B had not taken five steps up the staircase before another half-dozen armored YoRHa troops and another 6E appeared above her.

“Dammit!” 2B swore, throwing herself up the staircase at her new opponents.

6E grinned and vanished as 2B swung Caladbolg in a wide arc; the other androids scattered. 2B felt something clamp down on her wrist once her arm had swung all the way back; it was just when Pod 042 called out, “Behind Unit 2B—” that 2B felt herself pulled off her feet and thrown down the stairs.

2B tucked her legs under her and rolled down the stairs, quickly righting herself—

And saw, staring down at her, 6E wielding both Caladbolg—holding the massive golden sword one-handed—and a familiar black dagger. “Ooh,” she said, admiring the ornate metalworking of the legendary sword. “I like this one.”

“Hypothesis: the pillar is learning,” said Pod 042, “how to synthesize Unit 2B’s weaponry.”

2B drew her mouth in an anxious, sardonic grimace. “Great,” she said. Here she was, fighting an enemy that was slowly but surely gaining all of her advantages as she lost them… and meanwhile, 9S was struggling to survive against a bunch of doppelgangers of her.

With an aggrieved roar, 2B drew her own odachi and charged up the stairs again.

9S’s sword ground against one of the 2E models’ ivory blades as he struggled to slip through the
seven units’ clutches. These simulated androids, these virtual machines, looked exactly like 2B down to the smallest detail—but their faces were inexpessive, inflexible, and doll-like; there was an overwhelming sense of wrongness to them.

9S was thankful for that. It made it easier for him. If these things had looked too much like 2B, he’d have struggled to fight back.

He slipped through the rapidly-enclosing ring around him, dodging and weaving through swinging blades by the skin of his teeth. The arena he had to fight in was narrow and cramped, which made it slightly easier to keep the seven 2E models clustered together and hopefully less dangerous.

Pod 153 fired at the 2E models in short spurts. Its offensive capabilities in real life may have been roughly nil now, but in hacking space, it was as capable as ever. The salvo of bullets rang out over 9S’s head.

He pressed onward, doggedly pursued and struggling to stay even one step ahead of his pursuers. The mindbending architecture of hacking space boxed him in, forcing him across obstacle after obstacle, his enemies’ swords just barely nicking his back. With every time the cold steel blades put another notch in his coat—and his skin beneath it—9S felt his black box grow hotter, his mouth grow drier, and his blood pump harder.

Of course, none of it was real. But it felt real, it hurt, and if he died in here…

9S tried not to think about that.

“These 2E models,” he said, panting with exertion as he tried to keep his cool, “are nothing compared to you, 2B.”

“How do you know that?” 2B asked.

“Because there’s seven of them and only one of you, and they haven’t killed me once yet,” he boasted.

“That’s…” 2B gasped as if in pain. “An… interesting way of—looking at things.”

“You okay?”

“Fine. Worry—about your own problems, Nines.”

9S did as he was told, crossing the labyrinth with great haste as the 2E units chased after him.

“Analysis: these 2E units,” said Pod 153, “are virtual machines. They possess the complete logical structure of a YoRHa unit simulated within the pillar’s computer systems. Proposal: Unit 9S should hack into them and disable them.”

9S smirked. A hack within a hack? “Can do.” He skidded to a halt, threw out his hands, and hacked into the lead 2E unit before it could barrel straight into him, disrupting its motors systems and causing it to flail wildly and stumble backward into its fellow simulated androids, its swinging sword tearing through them.

While the other 2E units cut it to pieces, 9S used the welcome distraction to put more distance between himself and his enemies. Soon, the other 2E units fell so far behind that he lost sight of them, much to his relief.

Until one more 2E unit spontaneously appeared in front of him.
Without thinking, 9S hit the floor and dived under its legs, springing up and driving his sword through its unprotected back right between its shoulderblades. The impaled 2E unit slumped over and fell to the floor, laying there with its limbs sprawled out as scarlet blood pooled underneath it, staining its skin and snow-white hair.

His chest heaving, 9S retched and gagged, suppressing a violent shudder as a wave of nausea nearly bowled him over. He clamped his hand over his mouth as he tried to collect himself. It wasn’t 2B. He knew that. But it looked so much like her…

The corpse dissolved into a puddle of black and gray pixels, bloodstain and all, leaving nothing behind as the pixels faded into the ether.

9S shook his head as if to throw off the nausea and pressed onward.

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Toriel’s head pounded when she awoke and picked herself up off the ground. As she brushed the dirt from her fur, she noticed a conspicuous absence. 9S was standing as still as a statue next to the pillar of light, his outstretched hand resting on the surface and his battered pod hovering at his side; 6O was huddled at his side. But as for 2B…

“What happened?” Toriel asked, gingerly rubbing the back of her head and finding a tender, bruised lump beneath her fur.

[You tried to stop 2B and Sans came up behind you and—] Gaubrieta began to sign.

Sans grabbed hold of her hands. “You just, uh, got so stressed that you passed out. You’ve got to learn to take it easier, Tori.”

“Hmph. Where is 2B?”

Sans shrugged. “She is in the pillar, isn’t she?”

“She’s, uh, not… not not… not in the pillar,” Sans answered shiftily, stuffing his bony hands into his pockets. With her hands free, Gaubrieta immediately went back to telling Toriel exactly what had happened.

Only half paying attention to Gaubrieta, Toriel counted the nots in Sans’ answer. “You let her go?”

“I mean…” Sans began to sweat.

“You let her go?”

Sans flinched. “You saw how many swords she was carrying. I didn’t really want to be decapitated—it’d make my life pretty, uh, dull-ahan.”

“I have a sword that will be pretty dull-ahan when I am finished chopping you to pieces with it,” Toriel muttered. She immediately felt her gut churn from how mean-spirited that pun of hers was, but she just hadn’t been able to help herself. To say she was in a foul mood was an understatement.

How could 2B have done such a thing? Why was it that every child Toriel met seemed to have an uncontrollable death wish? What did it mean that Toriel attracted such people time and time again and consistently failed to dissuade them from heading off to their bloody fates? Was there something
wrong with her? Was it all just the universe punishing her for what she had allowed to happen to
Asriel and Chara all those years ago?

“If—when she gets back,” Toriel said, trying to keep her composure as she pulled herself to her feet,
her head still throbbing and the cavern spinning around her, “she is very, very, very grounded.”

The ground began to shake.

“Now what?” she snapped at nobody in particular.

Motes of light floated down from the sky, drifting lazily until they reached the ground. And as they
set upon the churned soil blanketing the floor of the cavern, they blossomed into machines of all
shapes and sizes—some tiny, some the size of two-story houses, all bristling with wicked weaponry.

The machines surrounded the pillar, the beady little eyes on their round, featureless heads all glowing
bright red. They did not seem friendly in the slightest.

Sans groaned. “Well,” he said, “this is what I get for thinking I could just stand here twiddling my
thumbs. Gabs, you got some blasters to spare?” he asked, tugging on Gaubrieta’s wrist. “I think I’m
a little… short.”

A trio of wolfish skulls appeared in front of the two skeletal monsters. Toriel glanced over her
shoulder at 9S and 6O, then turned her attention back to the machines. What could she do to protect
these children? And whatever she could do, was she even capable at all of doing it?

“Alert: the pillar appears to be manifesting physical defense systems both inside and outside its main
structure,” Pod 153 warned as it drifted behind 9S.

“What do you mean?” 9S asked.

“Similarly to the way physical YoRHa units are being created inside the pillar to attack 2B, similar
units are being manifested outside the pillar. Unit 9S’s physical body is at risk. Proposal: Unit 9S
should exit hacking space.”

9S gritted his teeth and pressed onward, picking up speed and leaping from one platform to another,
his pursuers quickly falling behind. “Not an option! If I stop this hack, I can’t pick up where I left
off!”

“Unit 9S risks termination if his body is not sufficiently defended.”

“If I pull out now, I’ll leave 2B behind!”

“Response: but if Unit 9S is terminated—”

Pod 153’s voice was replaced with 2B’s. “9S, get out of hacking space and defend your body!” she
shouted at him.

“But the mission—”

“Now! You’ve done enough. I can handle it from here.”

“You’re a bad liar, 2B.” 9S pressed onward. It was the only way. If he picked up the pace, he could
get to the hub and shut down the pillar before his body incurred any significant damage. “You need
me in here. We’ll just have to hurry. Pod, is there anything you can do to help?”
“Affirmative.” In the blink of an eye, Pod 153 vanished.

“Not what I expected,” 9S sighed, moving on, “but okay. Let’s hope you come up with something good.”

The cavern had erupted into chaos around the shining pillar. Wave after wave of machines pressed forward while floating skulls summoned by the two skeletal monsters decimated their ranks. Pod 153 was struck by how similar those skulls seemed to it and felt a sort of distant cousinhood toward them.

Pod 153’s long-range weaponry had all been damaged beyond repair by the shockwave that had brushed against it earlier. There was nothing it could do to protect 9S’s body, which stood as still and lifeless as a statue with his hand pressed against the side of the pillar. However, there was something it could do to augment 9S’s hacking abilities.

It began to drift to the far end of the cavern.

“Hey!” 6O shouted, scrambling to her feet and running after the pod. “What are you—”

She collapsed to the ground clutching her chest.

“Statement: I will assist Unit 9S. Proposal: Unit 6O should remain close to the pillar.”

Toriel swooped in and picked 6O up, dragging her back to the pillar. “What were you thinking? You cannot exert yourself like this…”

Pod 153 identified its target and formulated its plan. There was little it could do to protect 9S—but it could do this.

2B left more than just a few androids in her wake as she climbed higher up the seemingly-endless staircase. Yet, for all the dead bodies she left behind, two more greeted her. She’d never fought such an inexhaustible foe. She’d fought against so many waves of machines that they’d seemed endless, but there’d always been an end—if not one in sight, then one just over the horizon. But the pillar wasn’t constrained by physics—it operated on pure nightmare logic.

She’d lost Caladbolg for good now, along with Carnwennan; she’d lost contact with 9S (hopefully not for the reasons she’d suspected). She didn’t know how much farther she could go on. The crystalline structure stretching on endlessly below and above her swam in front of her eyes.

After fighting her way past another wave of enemies, 2B stumbled to the next platform, her chest heaving, her breathing shallow as she gasped and panted for breath. Smoke was trailing from Pod 042’s machine gun turrets; it had been firing nearly nonstop for what had felt like hours, and as it fell silent, 2B still heard telltale ringing plaguing her auditory sensors. It felt as though there were tiny sirens inside her ears.

There was silence, but it brought 2B no comfort. Anxiety continued to smother her thoughts; she was too busy wondering when this brief respite would come to an end and plunge her back into the maelstrom to enjoy it.

“No further black box signals detected,” Pod 042 announced. “Proposal: Unit 2B should take advantage of this lull to ascend to the top of the pillar. There are only two hundred meters to go.”
"Unit 2E."

The cold, imperious voice rang through the air as a woman in an ornate white dress with long, ash-blonde hair materialized in front of 2B. The sight of the woman sent a horrible chill up 2B’s spine.

Another enemy.

2B drew the Virtuous Contract and leveled it at Commander White.

“Put that sword away,” the Commander ordered, her glare as sharp as any sword.

The Commander’s words cut through 2B like a knife; her hand shook as her outstretched blade sunk until its tip scraped the floor. She’d never been on bad terms with her superior officers before. In fact, despite everything, she’d always had the utmost respect for Commander White and had always felt the respect was mutual.

But after everything she’d done, every single rule, from the first and foremost—YoRHa units were forbidden from expressing emotions—to the most trivial—YoRHa units were never out of uniform—she’d broken, 2B couldn’t help but feel a paroxysm of guilt and shame overtake her.

“I’m disappointed in you, 2E,” said the Commander. “What happened to your sense of duty? You’ve become weak and lazy.”

That’s not the Commander, 2B told herself, struggling to regain her senses. It’s a simulacrum. A homunculus. A creation of this tower. It isn’t her. I don’t have to listen to her.

“Disarm yourself and return to the bottom of the staircase,” said the Commander, her eyes boring into 2B’s. “That is an order.”

Even if it was her, 2B told herself, I don’t take orders from her anymore. I’m not a soldier anymore. I don’t belong to YoRHa. So why do I feel so powerless? Why do I feel so afraid to defy her? Why—

Pod 042 opened fire on the Commander, riddling her comparatively-frail body (she, after all, was not a high-performance combat model) with bullets, red bloodstains blossoming across her chest and staining her pristine white clothes.

2B took a deep, shuddering, relieved breath.

“Observation: according to Unit 6O, YoRHa Commander White perished when the Bunker was attacked by machines,” said Pod 042. “In dying, she relinquished her command and authority. Therefore, Unit 2B is under no obligation to follow orders from her.”

2B patted the pod on its hull. “Thank you.”

“Statement: no problem.”

2B blinked in befuddlement. She’d never heard of a pod responding to gratitude like that. Maybe Pod 042 had grown as much as she had…

“2B!”

2B’s ears all but perked up at the sound of 9S’s voice. She realized as she turned around to face the direction it had come from that it hadn’t come from Pod 042’s speakers.

In fact, 9S was standing on the staircase below her, resting his hands on his knees and panting. Exhausted, but alive. Alive! And still in one piece!
“N-Nines? What are you doing here?”

“Had to… drop out of hacking space…” 9S panted. “Wasn’t safe out there… so… I came here.”

“What about the others?” 2B hurried down the staircase as fast as her aching legs could carry her. “Is Mom okay? What about 6O?”

“Fine. I think. The pillar only seemed to be after me.”

With a relieved sigh, 2B wrapped her arms tightly around 9S, sweeping him off his feet. She was so relieved she could barely think straight. “Good. I… I’m glad. I’m glad you’re safe, Nines.”

“I’m glad you’re safe, too, Toobs.”

2B clutched him tighter and buried her face in his hair.

And realized, as her exhausted mind finally caught up with her, that something was wrong.

For someone who’d seemed exhausted, there wasn’t a trace of sweat on 9S’s skin. And there wasn’t any dirt or blood in his hair. And he still had both of his eyes. And…

“Query,” she heard Pod 042 call out behind her. “Why is Unit 9S in uniform?”

She pulled away from him, but not quickly enough to avoid the flashing dagger in the doppelganger 9S’s hand. The short, sharp blade slid into her skin, cutting a slit through her chassis, and buried itself up to its hilt in her stomach.

2B grabbed his hand, squeezed, and twisted until every metal bone in his hand cracked and snapped; she kneed him in the chest and threw him down the stairs.

She felt nauseated as she watched him roll and tumble, his limbs flailing like a ragdoll’s. She’d hurt him. She knew it wasn’t really him, but couldn’t shake the thought that she’d hurt him, Nines, her Nines, her precious boy, the one person she’d hoped she’d never have to hurt again. But she’d done it.

The false 9S rose to his feet, only for Pod 042 to take aim and fire, burning a hole through his chest.

“Statement,” Pod 042 said as its clamshell hull folded back together, “Unit 2B would not have been able to defend herself in her condition. Therefore, I took unilateral defensive action. I apologize if this was against Unit 2B’s wishes.”

2B shook her head. “No,” she said, averting her eyes from the corpse at the foot of the crystal stairs. “Thank you, Pod.” She gingerly traced the hilt of the dagger buried in her stomach and decided not to remove it. It didn’t seem to have damaged any important organs, though it hurt like hell, and if she took it out, she’d most likely bleed out within minutes. “Let’s go.”

“Hypothesis: the pillar no longer seems to believe in the efficacy of physical forces to deter Unit 2B,” said Pod 042. “It is likely the pillar will continue to use psychologically destabilizing tactics in addition to physical force.”

“So…” More Commanders. More 9Ses, 2B thought. If it can’t overwhelm me with swords and spears alone, it’ll smother me with my own guilt. “We must be getting close,” she reasoned. “And the power source you’re detecting must be easy to destroy if it’s being guarded so zealously.”

There was hope. There was always hope. She just had to hang onto it.
9S, alone, pushed his way deeper into the pillar’s systems, struggling to keep his bearings between the simulated 2E models hounding him and the bizarre non-Euclidean geometry of this space. He crossed a long and thin catwalk stretching between two massive silo-shaped server nodes. He’d been aching to take a look at whatever information this pillar was storing—was it somehow caching the information from every android and machine whose soul it absorbed?—but he had to stay focused. If he got caught up in his curiosity, he could die.

Of course, no matter what he did, he could die.

Unsurprisingly, given all that was going on, 9S couldn’t help but think about his own mortality. Getting killed in hacking space probably wouldn’t kill him—most likely, it would simply eject him back into his body—but if that happened, he’d have to reenter the pillar’s systems and start from scratch—and that meant he’d fall behind 2B.

Then again, recalling what had happened to Asriel, 9S supposed there was a real chance that dying here in hacking space, especially this mutated and twisted version of it, could cause serious damage to his logic circuits and possibly kill him outright.

And then there was whatever threats to his physical body he had to worry about out there beyond the borders of the pillar—threats he could do nothing about.

He could die in an instant and wouldn’t even know it until he was dead.

Either way, he couldn’t let anything stop him or set him back.

A black blur rushed past him and skidded to a halt, resolving as it slowed into the deadly form of a 2E unit, its sword bared, the ornately-patterned skirt of its YoRHa uniform flaring out. Its leg lashed out, whipping through the air as the unit enacted a swift and graceful spinning kick; 9S backed away hastily as the 2E unit’s stiletto heel nicked his nose.

Still struggling to regain his footing, 9S flung out his sword, letting the hilt leave his hand and the blade spin; it carved through the 2E unit’s chest, leaving a spurt of holographic blood trailing in the air in its wake before the sword dematerialized and reappeared in 9S’s hand.

Before the 2E unit could recover, 9S impaled it through the chest. These 2E units were nothing compared to the real thing, thankfully. He slid his sword free and threw the 2E unit off the side of the long catwalk; it broke apart into a flurry of black and gray pixels as it tumbled into the abyss.

9S had no time to revel in his victory; he whirled around to see another 2E unit barreling down the catwalk at him, sword drawn. Within seconds, he was on the defensive, parrying a flurry of strikes. Some of these units were much stronger and faster than others, apparently… or maybe the pillar was getting better at making fake androids. Maybe it could hear him and 2B when they talked about how easy their opponents were to carve through and was cranking up the difficulty to spite them.

He was glad the catwalk was so narrow—it forced his enemies into a bottleneck; they could only attack him one-at-a-time. One by one, he managed to cut down 2E unit after 2E unit—was there no end to them?—and throw their perforated corpses into the abyss below.

It felt like an eternity, a slow and wearying eternity, before 9S found himself fighting a single 2E unit that had no others behind it. And by the skin of his teeth, he managed to dispatch that one as well, disarming it, grappling with it, and throwing it aside. It tumbled through the air with an almost-pitiful wail.
So many 2B units… He shook his head. No, 2E. These things aren’t her. They look like her, they sound like her, but they’re just puppets. They’re insults to her, every last one of them. Abominations. I bet Chara’s controlling them. He laughed. It’d explain why they’re so weak. Not so tough without your gimmicky swords to back you up, are you, Chara?

A chill ran up his spine; 9S’s ears, still ringing from the echoes of the constant clashes of sword against sword, barely heard the heels rapidly clacking against the floor.

He whirled around to find another 2E unit who’d decided to attack him from the other end of the catwalk mere seconds away from impaling him; he managed to hack into it in mid-lunge, destroying its balance system and crippling it. The 2E unit swayed drunkenly as it skidded to a halt, but still put up a surprising fight for the exhausted 9S.

The drunken 2E unit’s sword cut a gash in 9S’s wrist when it caught him in a riposte as forceful as it was graceful; his hand spasmed and his sword fell from his weakened grasp as pain shot through his nerve circuits up his arm. Stumbling and slipping against the edge of the catwalk, 9S lost his footing and fell; he barely managed to curl his fingers around the edge and was left dangling off the side, blood dripping from his injured hand as it hung limply at his side.

Steadying itself, the 2E unit staring down at him raised its sword to deliver the final blow that would send 9S plummeting to… well, if not his death, then at the very least, the failure of his mission. And then it would be up to 2B to handle this pillar on her own.

If she even could. Was she even okay right now? 9S had no way of knowing. He hadn’t had time to find another communications port without Pod 153’s help.

“Pod!”

9S heard the characteristic roar of a pod-based beam weapon being fired; a searing white beam of light cut through the air, tearing through the 2E unit’s body. While 9S’s assaulted eyes readjusted, he felt something soft and furry clamp around his wrist.

“Howdy, friend-o! Gee, you seem to be in a lot of trouble, huh, Nines?”

9S couldn’t help but gasp. He recognized that voice. That squeaky, prepubescent voice. And he recognized the way it spoke, too.

What are you doing here, 2B?”

Before 2B could head up the next staircase, the Commander’s corpse rose, its limbs dangling from its torso like those of a marionette before spasming and jerking to life. “Our age, the age of androids, has reached its end. As all ages must. Why fight it?”

“Do you really want to sacrifice yourself for the world that made you suffer so much?”

The corpse of 9S staggering to its feet and looking up at 2B from the bottom of the staircase. The gaping hole in his chest quickly filled itself in, chassis, muscle, skin, clothes, and all. “Androids trapped us in the brutal cycle of our lives, 2B.”

“And as for machine lifeforms… they never belonged on this planet in the first place,” the Commander chimed in, circling around 2B like a prowling lioness. “Why work so hard to salvage what little remains?”
9S climbed the staircase and joined the Commander in her orbit around 2B. “We have no friends among them, 2B.”

“Exterminating us is an act of mercy,” said the Commander. “If not for Wormwood, we would all languish until, many centuries from now, the last of our kind dies a lonely, ignoble death. Isn’t a quick, painless death better than a slow, anguishing one?”

“Isn’t it, 2B?” 9S echoed. “You never let me linger. You never made me suffer. You kept the promise I asked you to make all those years ago, no matter how much it hurt. If you have any love in your heart for our kind like the love you have for me, then aren’t you in agreement with us? Shouldn’t you sit back and let the apocalypse roll across this blighted world?”

2B struggled to look the corpse-homunculus 9S in the eyes. “9S… It’s not him. It has his voice, but it doesn’t speak like him. He’s nothing but a puppet… a mouthpiece… for this ‘Wormwood,’ whoever that is.

No, she corrected. He and the Commander... I can sense Chara in their voices. Are they the one controlling the pillar’s defenses?

“Don’t mistake me for some universal altruist,” 2B countered, as much as she knew that there had to be other androids who didn’t deserve to have their lives snuffed out, either. Even if she didn’t know them, even if they lived on the other side of the world, even if her path might never cross with theirs. But the point was moot. Her survival and those of her loved ones came first. “9S and I are androids, too. And 6O. And we deserve to live!”

“And why is that, Tooie?”

Another 6E materialized before 2B. “Why? Because you’ve earned it? Because that’s what’s fair? Is that how your poisoned little mind thinks now?”

“The Number Two personality matrix is soft-hearted and kind,” 9S said. “Despite everything, it hates fighting and thinks about its friends above all else.”

2B bolted to the side, only to find the Commander standing before her with a glittering golden sword in her hand.

“However, Number Two models are staunchly obedient and faithful,” said the Commander, “making them ideal personality types for soldiers. Despite their softness, they quickly become outwardly cold and cruel in response to trauma.”

“In particular,” chimed in 6E, “trauma brought on by the conflict between their overgrown sense of compassion and their servile compulsions.”

2B swallowed a growing lump in her throat while the three homunculi dissected her. She backed away from the Commander and 9S, baring her swords, ready to fight—or as ready as she could be with her aching and sore muscles screaming for mercy.

“Unfortunately, these traits—kindness, softness—couldn’t be eliminated from the Number Two personality matrix without dampening the unit’s efficacy on the battlefield,” said 9S. He drew a long, slender lance out from thin air as his Scanner uniform transmogrified into a heavy black suit of armor.

“Much like Number Nine units with their insatiable curiosity,” said the Commander, “a Number Two unit requires its empathy, no matter how deeply it buries it. Its compassion and unyielding loyalty are two sides of the same coin.” Her elegant white dress transformed as well, its white fabric
darkening and hardening into slick, shiny armor plating.

“It’s unfortunate,” said 6E as she conjured Caladbolg in a shower of amber sparks, “that you were given the opportunity to let that part of you dominate your psyche after what a good job you did keeping it in check all these years.”

All three homunculi attacked 2B in unison.

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9S craned his neck and looked up as he dangled from the edge of the catwalk and found himself, as his vision cleared up, looking into the face of Asriel Dreemurr.

But the mischievous, mirthful grin on Asriel’s face reminded 9S more of Flowey than anything.

“What?” 9S gasped, hardly able to believe his own eyes.

“It’s me, your old pal, your big robo-bro!” Asriel grinned and laughed as he helped 9S regain his footing and pull himself onto solid ground. He, too, was a translucent projection just as 9S was, and wore a black Scanner uniform of his own—complete with a visor covering his eyes. “And boy, aren’t you glad to see me? I know I sure am!”

“How.”

Pod 153’s white silhouette hovered at Asriel’s side. “S-Statement: th-this… support unit… r-r-realized… that Unit 9S requ-quired assistanc-c-c-ce. O-Only… one other a-a-a-android had… s-sufficient h-h-h-hacking… ex-ex-ex-exp-p-p-p-perience.”

The way Pod 153 spoke deeply unnerved 9S, and he wondered if it had suffered severe damage trying to defend his body. He laid a hand on the pod’s hull, or rather, its virtual representation. Unsurprisingly, he couldn’t feel anything but the textureless suggestion of a hard surface, but he hoped it was a comforting gesture. “Pod…?”

“Response: I f-f-forcibly r-rebooted… Prince Asriel,” Pod 153 continued. Between its constant stuttering and intermittent pauses, it sounded dangerously close to shutting down. “This r-r-required a great… e-energy exp-penditure. C-Currently o-operating… at… s-s-s-seven percent… efficiency.”

“You did all that on your own?” 9S gasped as he cradled his bleeding wrist. It wasn’t a physical injury—it was all in his head, literally, and he knew it—but it still hurt like one.

“Aaw, don’t worry, Mrs. Pod,” Asriel said, patting the pod on its side. “We’ll top you off when this is all over, right, Nines?”

9S shuddered. Seeing this… thing that looked like Asriel and acted like Flowey (and, weirdest of all, wore his clothes) was unnerving to say the least. “You… But… your core was fried. Your personality, your memories…”

Asriel shrugged. “Yeah… funny thing about that. A little flower crawled inside me and died, well, when Mrs. Pod rebooted me, I guess whatever was left of him… filled in the blanks.”

“S-Statement: t-t-t-time is running o-out,” Pod 153 interjected. “U-Unit 9S is… f-falling beh-hind Unit 2B. P-Prop-p-posal: Unit 9S… and Prince Asriel… should p-proceed to the hub.”
“You’re incapable of seeing the bigger picture,” said the Commander.

“Poisoned by your perverted sentimentality,” said 9S.

“Incapable of the cold, calculated reason this world needs to move onto its next era,” said 6E.

2B parried all of their attacks, backing away from them to keep them all in her line of sight.

“The world without us will be beautiful,” said the Commander. “The world with us is not. Therefore, we must submit to our destruction.”

“With neither machines nor androids to plunge this world into war, peaceful towns will flourish. Fields of wheat will stretch across the plains. Cities will bustle with industry,” said 9S.

“But you wish to stand in its way,” said 6E.

“I don’t believe in senseless genocide,” 2B retorted. As she narrowly dodged a shockingly-forceful thrust of 9S’s lance, she hooked her leg around his ankle and yanked his legs out from under him, then leaped away just in time to avoid a shockwave from the swing of 6E’s massive sword. “Especially when I’m supposed to be its victim!”

“You wish to preserve the world as it is,” said the Commander. “How selfish.”

“How disgusting,” said 9S, righting himself with surprising grace and charging yet again at 2B. “When a painter makes a terrible painting, isn’t it right of him to scrape the paint off the canvas so he can make a masterpiece in its place?”

“I know there are androids and machines out there who wish to live in peace, just as we do,” 2B answered, struggling to avoid all three of the homunculi’s relentless attacks. Pod 042 fired on them with short, intermittent bursts. “I won’t let you erase them indiscriminately!”

“When a building is condemned, don’t you tear it down before putting up a new one?” 6E asked. “Do you ask the walls whether they deserve to be brought down before deciding to run a wrecking ball through them?”

“Or would you rather seek to build a skyscraper on a rotten foundation and pray it does not collapse under its own weight?” the Commander asked.

“Why are you indulging in your childish self-righteousness yet again?” 9S asked. “Is it because it was a luxury you didn’t have on the surface?”

2B tossed aside her swords and caught him as he lunged at her, grasped his lance with a death-grip, ripped it out of his hands, and drove it through his chest.

9S’s eyes went wide. “T-Two… bee…” he choked, blood trickling from his mouth and rolling down his chin as the light in his eyes went out. If the homunculus taking his form was fishing for sympathy, it was futile. This wasn’t 9S, but a ghoulish copy.

Unmoved, 2B threw him off the edge of the platform, then headed for the Commander and 6E.

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9S took off with Asriel trailing behind him. The two of them together covered ground much more quickly than 9S had been able to on his own. Asriel wasn’t a particularly skilled hacker, natural aptitude notwithstanding, but having an extra hand on deck for parallel processing was a great boon
to 9S and helped him carve through the pillar’s barricades much more easily.

After a long and uncomfortable silence between the two of them, 9S spoke up. “So… you’re just as much Flowey as Asriel,” he stated, sparing a glance backward at Asriel as the two of them slipped past a freshly-disabled firewall deeper into the pillar’s systems. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that. His adorable little adoptive brother and the abomination that had hurt him more than anybody else in his short life were the same person now?

Asriel made a face at 9S and smacked his forehead mockingly. “Look at this brain genius over here. Flowey was Asriel all along. Duh!” Flowey’s sardonic mockery in Asriel’s childlike voice made the boy sound incredibly bratty.

“I-I know that!” 9S protested. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then say what you mean, dummy!” Almost immediately after the words had left his mouth, Asriel froze in place and stumbled backward, looking down at his feet. “Oh, uh…”

“Something wrong?” 9S asked, skidding to a halt.

“Nah, it’s just that…” Asriel nervously tweaked his ear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you a dummy. It just sorta slipped out.”

“Um… okay?”

Asriel rushed at 9S and buried his face in his chest, wrapping his arms around him. “I didn’t mean to be mean to you,” he said, his voice muffled by 9S’s coat, while 9S spluttered a few surprised exclamations. “It just—it just slipped out, I couldn’t help it, I just feel so weird and torn up inside and I-I’m so happy I can see you again…”

While Asriel shuddered and cried into his coat, 9S patted him gingerly on the back. “Uh… I’m, um, happy to see you again too.” He had to admit, now this kid sounded a lot more like the Asriel he knew.

“Really?” Asriel unburied his snout and looked up at him.

“Yeah,” said 9S awkwardly. “Anyway, why don’t we save the waterworks for later? We’ve got to help 2B.”

Asriel let go and nodded. “Yeah! Let’s go!”

He and 9S hurried along down the twisting corridors, another towering silo-shaped server approaching as they delved deeper into the pillar. It stretched far above the labyrinth and far below; 9S had a good feeling that whatever path lay inside would lead him straight to this system’s core.

As soon as 9S and Asriel drew near to the data silo, though, the next wave of 2E models ambushed them. The two of them barely managed to put their backs to the sealed-off entrance to a massive cylindrical data silo as their foes clustered around them.

Pod 153’s ranged weaponry was weak and feeble now; 9S feared to give it any orders to fire on the 2E models lest the energy expenditure drain the pod to its limits. If Pod 153 lost all its energy and fell offline, Asriel’s connection to hacking space would terminate and 9S would be back on his own.

And besides… Pod 153 was his friend. He didn’t want to push it beyond its limits and make it suffer.

All the same, that left him facing off against a horde of 2E units more or less completely on his own.
while Asriel fiddled with the doorway to the silo.

2B felt her muscles burn as she parried another strike from the Commander, and another from 6E. The two were relentless. Pod 042 barely managed to put up a shield in time to block a strike aimed at her undefended left flank. She stumbled. She was getting tired… and weak.

She killed the two of them and hurried up the next staircase, only for another two to materialize in front of her, joined by yet another 9S and a trio of armored soldiers.

“What is the point of this insubordination?” the Commander sneered. “Is your life that valuable to you?”

2B cut down the three armored soldiers with a swing of her odachi, but her other foes danced out of reach.

“We’re disposable dolls,” said 6E.

A shockwave rolled past 2B, whistling through the air; she was thankful for having dodged it until she slashed at 6E and found that her right arm had been neatly sliced off at the elbow. It wasn’t until she noticed that she felt the pain; nevertheless, she pressed onward and drove the Joyeuse through 6E’s chest.

“Why do you think we were told that emotions were prohibited?” 9S asked.

2B threw the Sword of Goujian at him, striking him in the neck; she lunged at him and called the dagger back in mid-leap, then stabbed him again with the same blade, freezing him.

“You don’t have a right to live your own life,” said the Commander. “You live and die at the whim of your creators, and you will die with them. With us.”

Another three armored soldiers materialized to flank the Commander as she blocked the next staircase.

*I can’t die here,* she told herself, inching her way toward the next staircase as her foes probed at her crumbling defenses for weak points. *Nines… 6O… Mom… I… I promised… I… I keep my promises… I have to…*

*Next time… don’t hesitate…* 9S’s voice, an echo of a bygone 9S, one she’d killed a long time ago, rang in her head. *Don’t hesitate… to kill me. Because we… will meet again.*

*At the very least, I want to die by your hands…*

2B screamed out as her enemies’ weapons tore through her.

She kept her promises. She kept her promises. She *always* kept her promises.

She’d promised the Commander she’d serve dutifully. So she had.

She’d promised 9S she’d always be the one to kill him. So she had been.

She’d promised Undyne she would take care of Alphys for her. She’d promised Toriel she would come back. So she *would!*

With a mighty roar, 2B summoned a burst of adrenaline-fueled strength and went on the offensive,
tearing through her foes, shocking them with a flurry of glittering blades.

“Time—STOP!”

The world froze.

2B leaped up, planted her foot on the top of her pod, and launched off, sailing over the heads of the homunculi and landing behind them.

Time resumed.

2B stabbed the Commander through the back before she could turn around, cut through the armored soldiers, and dashed up the stairs.

She clutched at her head. The inside of her skull felt as though it were about to explode. What was stopping time doing to her head? How many more times could she do it before it killed her?

Another squadron of YoRHa soldiers coalesced out of the ether as she crested the top of the stairs—more 6E units, more crass imitations of 9S, more faceless, armored soldiers.

“How’s that door coming, Azzy?” 9S called out as he struggled to disarm one of the 2E units and drove his sword through its midsection. He yanked it out as quickly as possible, loosing a spray of digitized blood from the perforated android, so he could parry another 2E unit’s strike and cut it down.

And another.

And another.

And another…

“Almost got it!” Asriel squeaked. As if on cue, a second door snapped shut in front of the first one; Asriel pulled away just in time to avoid having his hand lopped off at the wrist. “Fuck!”

“Language!”

“S-Sorry, Nines! It just slipped out!”

9S groaned and gritted his teeth as he slipped backward under the 2E units’ relentless onslaught. How was he going to explain this to Toriel? As happy as she would be to have her son back, she certainly wouldn’t approve of him cursing like a sailor.

That was assuming he’d live to see Toriel again, though.

One of the 2E units’ white blades dug into his shoulder. “Fuck!” he shouted out.

“Language!” Asriel chided him.

9S tore himself free of the steel skewer, his shoulder throbbing and nerves screaming, and fell to his knees. He parried the next blow from his foe—barely—and ran his sword through its knee, hobbling it, then slashing across its chest.

The door—both layers—slid open. “Got it!” Asriel shouted out.
9S pulled himself up to his feet and scrambled for the opened silo as Asriel slipped through. Turning his back on the horde of 2E units was suicide, he knew, but trying to crab-walk backwards into the silo while trying to fend off a veritable army of killing machines was even more suicidal.

Asriel immediately ducked behind the silo’s inner wall, ready to close the doors again as soon as 9S got through. 9S threw himself forward with a burst of energy that could only have been born of desperation—

A sword embedded itself in his back.

And another.

And another.

And another.

He screamed and gritted his teeth, clenching his jaw, as he stumbled over the threshold and fell flat on the floor. The door slid shut behind him as the 2E units charged the silo. One of them got halfway in before the doors slammed shut, bisecting it; the halved corpse disintegrated before it could hit the floor.

9S gasped and panted for breath as each of the four wounds in his back throbbed. The pristine, monochrome architecture of hacking space flickered and distorted around him. Too much pain stimuli and he would disassociate and break away from hacking space entirely—that was, if getting turned into a pincushion didn’t send enough of a shock through his system to destroy his personal data and kill him outright.

Asriel hurried over to him, prodding at the entry wounds. 9S screamed. “Sorry!”

9S pulled himself to his hands and knees. The world around him was still wobbling and flickering. This was bad. This was very bad. He couldn’t see straight. He could barely think straight.

“Analys-s-s-s-sis: the wounds… are sh-shallow,” Pod 153 pronounced. “The swords c-c-c-c-can be removed… with minimal… d-d-damage to Unit 9S.”

“Wait—” 9S gasped.

Too late. Asriel yanked one of the swords out, then another, and another, and then the fourth one before 9S could protest. And protest he did. Loudly.

“C’mon, Nines,” Asriel grunted as he pulled 9S to his feet and tried to drag him along. A series of platforms linked by staircases lined the interior of the data silo, circling the inner wall in a spiral pattern all the way down. Blocks of data swirled around the open center of the silo’s interior, glittering and flashing with sparks of light.

Down. Down was good. Down meant closer to the hub and the seven black boxes. Probably. 9S hoped.

Asriel lightly tapped 9S on the cheek. “Nines, c’mon! Move it! You’ve got to stay with me!”

“Aw, y-you really do care,” 9S gasped, using Asriel as a crutch and pushing himself forward in spite of the pain.

“Well… don’t get the wrong idea. I mean, if you pop back into physical space,” said Asriel, “then I’ll be stuck having to do… whatever it is you’re doing here. ’Cuz I’m assuming it’s important or
something.”

“Getting into the hub… and deactivating all seven nodes,” 9S reminded him, wearily spitting out the words.

“Yeah. I kinda don’t feel like doing that. So you’ve gotta hang on so you can get it done.”

9S stumbled along down the stairs. He felt lightheaded. In fact, he felt light-bodied, too. But funnily enough, that lightness didn’t make it any easier to move. “Y’know… so Flowey was your id… and the Asriel I knew was your superego…”

“Yeah?” Asriel replied.

“I liked you better,” 9S mumbled, “when you didn’t have an id.”

They trudged further down the silo.

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2B swayed and stumbled as she cut through more of her enemies, even though all she had was her left hand. They didn’t bother taunting her now—they just rushed forward, wave after wave, ebbing and flowing like the tides, crashing and breaking against her sword.

One of the armored soldiers got a gauntleted hand around her wrist, crushing it and tearing the Sword of Goujian from her grip; 2B drove her boot into the soldier’s stomach and swung the soldier around her, using the body as a shield against a flurry of javelins.

Nursing her cracked wrist, 2B staggered backward, dodging and weaving around the relentless attacks of her foes. With a pained scream, she tore the spear from one of her foes, forcing herself to ignore the sharp pain shooting through her wrist, and skewered soldier upon soldier.

Pod 042 did its part, conjuring shields to block projectile weapons whenever it could and tearing through the throngs of homunculi with its beam weaponry. But the pod’s cooldown time in between its more advanced offensive programs grew with each use as its energy began to dwindle.

2B blocked the swing of an ax with the shaft of her spear, jabbed its butt into the throat of an enemy sneaking up from behind, and drove the spearhead into a 6E unit’s stomach, thrusting upward with enough force to pull her off the floor. She swung the spear—with the body still hanging limply from it—through the air like a mace, all but flattening one of the other soldiers. The spear broke in her hands as it collided with the crystalline floor.

Another 9S rushed at her, reaching out with his hand to hack her; 2B threw the Joyeuse and bisected his head with a spray of blood.

Another 6E swung her imitation Caladbolg, the shockwave tearing through all of the soldiers in front of her as it rolled over the platform. With the soldiers in front of her blocking her sight, 2B didn’t see it until it was too late. She dove underneath it, sliding across the crystalline floor, the dizzying and spiraling heights of the staircase she’d climbed stretching beneath her and fully visible beneath the translucent crystal.

She didn’t make it.

The shockwave tore off her left arm halfway up the bicep.

2B lashed out at the few remaining homunculi with her legs, righted herself, and kicked the Virtuous
Contract into the air; she dodged a strike from 6E, kicked her in the head, and tossed her off the platform. The Virtuous Contract fell; 2B caught the white sword’s hilt in her teeth before it could clatter against the floor.

“Proposal: Unit 2B should engage in a tactical retreat,” Pod 042 warned.

2B grunted and growled through the sword filling her mouth. The few remaining armored soldiers clustered around her all took a step back as if frightened of her furious resolve. Blood and coolant dripped from her severed arms.

It only lasted a second. Then, the armored YoRHa units regained their courage and charged at her.

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9S stumbled down the stairs, his arm wrapped over Asriel’s shoulder. Asriel grumbled something as he faltered under 9S’s weight.

“Sorry, kid,” 9S said.

“I didn’t mean it. Sorry,” Asriel apologized in turn.

“You’re doing that a lot.”

“Yeah…” Asriel trudged along. “It’s… weird. Saying rude things just… comes naturally to me now. I know it’s bad, but…”

“All right, all right. I get it.” 9S glanced over his shoulder at Pod 153’s white silhouette. “Pod, can you re-establish comms with 2B?”

“Statement: the communications link established by Unit 9S is still logged in my internal settings. Connecting…”

9S heard a lot of clanging, grunting, and growling coming from the pod. “2B?” he asked.

“Response: regrettably, Unit 2B is unable to speak right now,” said Pod 153. “According to my counterpart, she is currently holding her sword in her mouth.”

2B seemed to grunt in affirmation.

“What? Why are you doing that?” 9S asked, nervous enough to let out a weak half-laugh.

“Response: Unit 2B no longer has functional arms.”

“Oh, no…”

9S heard someone scream. It wasn’t 2B. Fortunately, she seemed to be doing pretty well for herself.

“Don’t worry,” he assured 2B. “Asriel and I are almost to the hub… once we destroy it—” he winced as a jolt of pain ran up his spine—“Things’ll be easier for you.”

2B made a quizzical noise.

“Yeah, it’s, uh… a long story,” said 9S.

“Hi, 2B!” Asriel called out. “You’ll never guess how I got here!”
9S heard something that sounded a bit like a muffled laugh. “We’ll all catch up when we get out of here, 2B. I’m… I’m glad you’re still soldiering on. Just hang in there a little while longer.”

His legs gave out beneath him; he crumpled to the floor, all but dragging Asriel down with him. The pain running up and down his back drove the breath from his lungs; his black box whirred and screeched. It was all simulated, of course—the byproduct of the hacking environment not compressing his personality data like usual—but it felt real and it hurt.

Asriel pulled himself free of 9S’s grip and dragged him along a bit. “Hey, Nines! We don’t have time to wallow here!”

A loud clang echoed through the sparse interior of the silo; Asriel froze and lifted his head, his nostrils flaring.

9S looked up and saw a troop of 2E units pouring into the silo through the door.

“Oh, fuck,” said Asriel. “C’mon, 9S!” He yanked on 9S’s arm again. “We gotta run!”

9S’s leg twitched. His muscles burned, although a shiver ran down his neck. He planted his hands on the floor and pushed himself up.

It hurt. But he had to keep going.

9S drew his sword. “Asriel, run down and get the next door open. I’ll hold them off.”

“So…” Asriel asked, staring at him as if he’d grown a second head, “have you lost your mind?”

“I’ll be fine,” 9S insisted.

Because 2B was still fighting, even though she’d been so thoroughly disarmed. He had no excuse, then. The two of them had both known going in that only one of them might make it back out… but he wasn’t going to let that happen. 2B was going to make it out of here, and he would, too.

He would, too. No matter what.

“Go!”

2B’s neck hurt. Holding a sword with one’s teeth, she quickly learned, was not an easy way to fight. Blood and oil stained her clothes almost completely red and black. Most of it wasn’t hers—but that wasn’t to say plenty of it was.

9S’s sword clashed against the first 2E unit to reach him, the force nearly knocking him over. He had to make it through. There was no other option. He pushed the 2E unit back, hacked it, and threw it off the staircase.

Soldier after soldier fell. 2B inched her way to the next staircase with every kill. Her black box burned in her chest.

“2B…” 9S gasped. 2B could hear the sounds of his struggle and wished she could be by his side.
“Damn… dammit… Boy, do I wish you were here right now.”

Likewise, 2B wanted to tell him. A sympathetic grunt was all she could manage.

“But…” 9S cut down another 2E unit. “But we’re not alone. We might be separated… but we’re fighting the same battle together!”

“Don’t give up, 2B!”

2B drove her sword through a YoRHa soldier’s chest and wrenched the blade upward, bisecting the android homunculus’s head. Blood splattered against her blood-and grease-drenched skin and hair.

“Because…”

“I won’t give up, either!” 9S stabbed another 2E unit through the throat, grabbed its sword, and cut down the next one with both swords; he threw the purloined 2E unit’s sword at the next approaching one, skewering it through the chest.

“We’re gonna see each other again… I promise! You promise me, too, 2B!”

2B stumbled and fell, rolling out of the path of a wicked spearhead as a YoRHa soldier jabbed downward at her. The spearhead buried itself in her shoulder. 2B aimed a kick at the armored soldier’s kneecap, snapping it. She pulled herself up only for a sword to cut a deep, smarting gash through her thigh.

9S heard 2B grunt on the other end. He assumed that was her promising him she’d see him again. “All right…”

One of the 2E units’ swords caught him in the side, cutting a deep and bloody gash through his torso. He gritted his teeth to suppress a scream. Couldn’t let 2B hear that…

2B fell against the foot of the staircase as her few remaining enemies—barely half a dozen at this point—clustered around her. Pod 042’s sustained gunfire riddled their armor, slowly wearing the sleek, black armored plating down—too slowly.

“Nines! I’ve got the door!” Asriel called out.

9S glanced downward, only for a 2E unit to drive its blade through his shoulder. The pain brought tears to his eyes.

He lopped the 2E unit’s hand off at the wrist, freeing himself, and grabbed onto Pod 153.
Before the 2E units piling up on the staircase could strike the final blow, he leaped off the railing and sailed through the air.

Pod 042 let out one final laser blast, tearing through the last remaining YoRHa soldiers.

2B sighed in relief, the hilt of the Virtuous Contract falling away from her mouth. She gasped for air, her black box running hot in her chest. From head to toe, her muscles throbbed and burned. She could barely move.

*Is this… as far as I can go? Nines…*

9S sailed down to the next platform where Asriel was patiently waiting for him, nearly collapsing as soon as his feel touched solid ground. Asriel grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him over the threshold.

*I’m… almost there… 2B…*

He fell flat on his face, barely managing to drag himself outside the silo. The other 2E units stomped down the stairs as Asriel set to work getting the door closed again.

*I can’t do it… I’m finished…*

Pod 042 examined the bloodstained body of one of the 6Es 2B had defeated. “Analysis: this 6E model is constructed in complete accordance with YoRHa specifications. Hypothesis: the pillar is extrapolating from the data contained within the seven black boxes and Unit 13B’s body to construct these units with perfect accuracy. Perhaps it is also storing data from the souls it is collecting.”

“Your… point?” 2B gasped.

“Statement: these destroyed androids can be used to repair Unit 2B’s body.”

2B nodded. “Sounds reasonable.”

Pod 042 laid a claw on the remains of one of the 6E units, sent just enough electricity into its body to briefly reactivate its low-level systems, and hacked into it, swiftly disengaging the connections between its limbs. 2B had to admit that there was something satisfying about seeing all of 6E’s limbs and her head detach from her torso all at once and flop onto the floor in a jumbled heap.

2B appraised the severed arm as Pod 042 brought it to her. 6E’s skin was paler than hers, almost milky white, and her fingernails were slightly long and slightly sharp, with a slightly-opalescent hue to them. She’d never noticed them before. It seemed oddly vain...

2B considered what kind of person 6E was like. No, it wasn’t *oddly* vain at all.

“Now,” she said to Pod 042, “do me.”

“Affirmative. Advisory: due to slight design variations, Unit 6E’s left arm may not be fully compatible with Unit 2B’s firmware.”

“Better than nothing.”
Pod 042 nodded in agreement, then dutifully removed what remained of 2B’s left arm, cutting away her sleeve along with it. It held the severed arm to her shoulder and pressed them together.

The pain was intense, like molten metal searing her flesh. She squeezed her eye shut and let out a strained, gurgling cry as the replacement arm lined up with hers and did its best to connect itself to her systems. It was all she could do just to remain conscious. Like Pod 042 had said, it didn’t quite line up. If only the pillar had summoned some 2E models for her to fight, as it had done for 9S, then she’d have a much more painless surgical procedure to endure.

She squeezed 6E’s fingers into a fist, the sharp nails biting into the meat of 6E’s palm, until the pain faded away into background static. After a few more spasms of the transplanted fingers and a few more exercises, a few experimental twists of her wrist and curls of her elbow, 2B was content with the replacement.

“Now…” she said, glancing at the remains of her right arm, “the next one…”

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9S glanced down at the hub from his vantage point on the balcony ridging the bottom of the silo. The seven highways stretching from the black monoliths arranged around the hub’s center to the massive black boxes in the distance radiated outward like the spokes of a bicycle, each lane at a perfect right angle to its neighbor.

9S felt his stomach churn with nausea and vertigo and backed up, pressing his aching back to the silo’s door. Big mistake.

“Ready?” Asriel asked, looking just about ready to jump. He was clutching Pod 153 like a parachute.

A white sword tore its way through the door mere centimeters away from 9S’s ear, leaving a ragged, pixelated hole in the door’s featureless surface. There wasn’t much time. The 2E units would all force their way through, and then…

9S dragged himself over to the edge of the balcony next to Asriel. “I…I think I might just splatter on the floor if I jumped. Why don’t you go on without me?” He leaned against a black terminal port protruding from the floor as blood dripped from his wounds. “Pod 153 can guide you through disconnecting the nodes yourself…”

Asriel gave him a nasty look. “Because those 2Bs will catch up to you and you’ll die, you idiot!” He grabbed 9S by the wrist and pulled him along. “C’mon! Put a little backbone into it!”

“I’ll just… exit hacking space… and I’ll be fine. I-In high-bandwidth environments like this, where your personality data isn’t compressed,” 9S murmured, “all the pain is all in your head. It’s binary. All or nothing. If you die, you die. If you get injured, it doesn’t count in the real world. As soon as I get back to the real world, I’ll…”

“Nines… I don’t know what’s going on outside,” Asriel said. “But when I woke up, Mom and Sans and that other skeleton lady were fighting for their lives against all those machines this thing summoned. I don’t know how much longer they can last…” He suppressed a sniffle, his shoulders shaking. “I—I’d hoped you could do your hacking stuff on your own quickly enough to keep them all safe, b-but… you’re so weak now… a-and I’d probably m-mess up on my own…”

“Asriel…”

Asriel pulled off his visor and threw it on the ground. Tears rolled down his cheeks. “And I don’t
“want 2B or Mom or you to die! Because it’s miserable! I know, because between Flowey and the original Asriel I’ve died, like, three times! No, wait, four! And… uh…” He looked down glumly. “And I wouldn’t ever wish that on you guys. So we’ve got to take this thing on together. Because between me and you, we probably make one competent Scanner…”

Another sword cut through the silo door and wrenched upward, leaving a jagged cut through the door.


9S took a deep, shuddering breath, intertwined his arm with Asriel’s, hoped Pod 153 could slow both of their descents, and closed his eyes. “Okay. On three, we jump. One…”

There was the sound of a blade sliding through a thick wall.

“Two…”

The doors slid open under protest.

9S swallowed hard. He felt something cold and sharp graze the side of his neck.

“Three!”

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The fighting outside the pillar had gone on interminably long. For every machine that fell, two more seemed to take its place. The skeleton monsters were exhausted; Toriel was nowhere to be found. There was nothing left to put up any resistance.

6O stood up, her back to the pillar, as the conjured machines bore down on her and 9S. 9S stood in front of the pillar, his arm outstretched and palm pressed against it, as still and lifeless as a statue. There was nothing he could do to defend himself—or 6O. And 6O was powerless.

2B… I’m sorry. I tried to wait for you. I tried my best. But there’s so little I can do on my own…

6O’s breath froze in her chest as a machine, its optical sensors blazing red, raised its wicked sword above its head as it prepared to cleave 9S in two, accurately identifying him as a greater threat than 6O was.

*I’m not important. I’m useless. I can’t contribute anything to this fight. But if 9S dies, then he can’t support 2B, and 2B will…*

2B will…

The machine’s sword swung downward, and 6O found her body moving on its own.

She reached out for the sword sheathed at 9S’s hip, curled her fingers around the hilt, tried to remember what little 2B had taught her, and before she could realize what she was doing, she had driven the blade into the machine’s torso. A ragged, hoarse warcry tore itself from her throat. It was the kind of sound she’d never thought she could possibly make—one of rage and aggression, one that burned at the inside of her throat on the way out like acid.

Hot motor oil splashed against her face as she dug the blade in deeper and pushed the machine back with all her might. The machine skidded a few paces, flailing its arms in surprise. 6O’s arms burned
as she wrenched the sword upwards, trying to slice all the way through the machine’s body just as she’d seen 2B do countless times before. Her arms burned, her nervous circuits screaming and servos whining in protest, as the sword carved a few more centimeters through the machine’s body, inching up to its spherical head, and stopped. Try as she might, 6O couldn’t budge it another inch. Her fingers slipped against the cloth wrapped around the sword’s hilt, the friction burning her skin.

The machine regained its bearings, looked down at 6O—this weak, frail, pathetic Operator who’d dared to try and pick up a sword—and raised its sword high in the air.

2B, 9S, and I…

6O clenched her jaw and gritted her teeth so hard, she felt they might shatter.

_We’re going to live! And when 2B gets back…_

Forcing her way past her limits out of sheer desperation, 6O summoned an overwhelming, adrenaline-fueled burst of strength and cut the rest of the way through the machine, destroying it. Sparks flew from its ruined circuitry as it slumped to the ground; 6O’s arms fell limply to her sides, her borrowed sword dragging against the ground. Her whole body felt as though it were on fire. She aimed a weak kick at the inert machine, scuffing her shoe on its metal hull.

“When 2B gets back,” 6O breathed, her chest and shoulders heaving as she gasped for air, “I’m going to marry her! So… I won’t let you… I won’t let any of you…”

A shadow fell over her; 6O looked up to see a linked-sphere type machine writhing in the air, its long body tracing a figure-eight pattern before it locked onto her and slithered toward her. Its head was tipped with a wicked drill bit, sparks flying from it as it spun.

_That’s not fair_, 6O thought. Her sword dropped from her hands and fell to the ground; her body gave way next, her knees buckling and legs crumpling beneath her. This was it. They were all dead. She fell to her knees as if in supplication to the machine bearing down on her. This was the end.

The linked-sphere machine let out a roar, its drill bit splitting open like a beak to reveal even more whirring, grinding teeth. Its tail lashed back and forth. 6O found herself scuttling backward until her back was pressed against the surprisingly-cool surface of the glowing pillar. She barely had the energy to scream.

The machine froze, a blue aura flaring up around it.

And then the machine erupted in a lavender ball of fire, screeching as the orb-like machines comprising its midsection burst into flames. The fire snaked up and down the length of the machine’s body as if it had a mind of its own, consuming it. The machine writhed, curled in on itself as if in great pain, and fell to the ground with a heavy thud. Its death throes slowed as the lavender fire engulfing it faded away; eventually, the bestial machine fell still.

With Papyrus propping her up—where had he come from? Did it matter?—Toriel gingerly stepped over its carcass, wispy tongues of lavender flame and tendrils of smoke still curling around her paws. Her white fur was singed, her left sleeve stained scarlet; she walked with an unsteady gait toward 6O and 9S.

“I am afraid to ask,” she said as she half-took a seat, half-collapsed between 6O and 9S, “if that was the last one…”

“Then I’ll do it for you,” said Sans, who’d appeared out of nowhere (like he always did). He yawned. “Boy, I sure hope that was the last of them!”
Dead silence filled the cavern… until Toriel began to laugh.

At last, battered and weary, 2B reached the top of the endless pillar. There were no more platforms above her, no more columns stretching over her head, no more stairs to climb… and no more enemies hounding her.

“This is it,” 2B commented, panting. “Pod, where’s that energy source?”

“Analysis: Unit 2B is currently occupying the same location as the energy source,” Pod 042 answered.

“But I don’t see anything.” 2B began to walk in a wide circle, peering warily in every direction. There was nothing around her but darkness. The floor seemed to stretch on for infinity in every direction; it was mostly flat, save for a few faceted flutes of crystal jutting up like stalagmites, wreathed with glassy vines and blossoms of flowers. There was an ethereal beauty to the sparse landscape.

“I don’t understand,” said 2B. “There’s nothing here. Pod, can you contact 9S?”

“Response: we have lost contact with Pod 153. Unit 9S is currently unreachable.”

“He—” 2B’s words caught in her throat and formed a stony lump. “You can’t reach him?” Her words came out as more of a hushed, cracked whisper than she’d intended.

“Statement: there is no reason to believe that Unit 9S is dead. Pod 153’s last message informed me that Unit 9S had reached the central hub of the pillar. Hypothesis: the central hub may be locking down communications.”

“I hope so,” said 2B, thankful that Pod 042 had tried to reassure her. “Still… what do we do now?”

Almost as if on cue, the crystals and flowers took on a fiery, orange-red hue, although the sky stayed black and blank; even the floor shimmered with a reddish glow.

2B readied her remaining swords. All of the fighting on her way here had reduced her armory to just two swords—the Virtuous Contract and the Joyeuse. The rest had all been lost. “Pod, what’s going on?”

“Analysis: the energy source appears to be localizing itself. There is a massive energy spike directly in front of Unit 2B at a distance of three meters.”

2B squinted. She didn’t see anything there yet except more of this crystalline desert.

And then, in the blink of an eye, she did.

Standing before her on the flat, glassy plane that formed the endless floor was a creature the likes of which 2B had never seen before.

It was as if someone had brought a sword to life and bestowed upon it a mockery of the human form. Although the creature was pitch-black, it was still distinguishable against the vast and featureless black sky: a shimmering red aura clung to it, tracing out its silhouette starkly. Its thin, angular body was wickedly sharp and even more wickedly curved beneath the glossy sable and scarlet cloak draped over its shoulders; each of its fingers were long, spindly ebony blades stretching almost down to the floor when its scrawny arms hung at its sides. Its head, slender and draconic, perched atop a
long neck plated with sharp scales; two long, curved horns sprouted from the sides of its angular head and curled dramatically inward, their tips nearly touching to form a broken and incomplete halo. A single eye blazed a searing red in the center of its brow and a fiery jewel glittered in the center of its chest.

The creature standing before 2B tossed back its cloak and bowed politely. GREETINGS, it said. Its voice seemed to fill 2B’s mind without running through her audio processors at all—she felt, rather than heard it. It was a low, rumbling, sonorous voice that reverberated within her skull. Every time it spoke felt like an invasion of her mind.

2B readied the Virtuous Contract, brandishing the ivory blade in front of her. “Who are you? What are you?”

I, it said, AM THE SPIRIT WHICH CHARA DREAMMURR SO KINDLY NOURISHED. THE WEAPON CREATED TO VANQUISH THOSE WHOM EVEN MONSTERS FEAR. THE HIDDEN PRIDE AND SHAME OF THE DREAMMURR FAMILY. THE DEMON WHICH WAS FORGED WITHIN THE MOURNING STAR. THE GOD OF THIS NEW WORLD.

I, it said, drawing itself back up to its full height and splaying its bladelike fingers, AM WORMWOOD.

9S hit the floor none too gently and picked himself up. This was it—the hub, the center of this strange pillar-god’s being. In the center of the hub was a large black flower, its petals curled upward like some kind of tulip. Seven black panels hovered in a circle around him, each one blocking out a road that ran to another, much larger black cube in the distance; 9S could see the individual data packets speeding along these highways. Taking a closer look at those black cubes, he saw the familiar glittering strata of a YoRHa black box.

Asriel gently drifted to the floor beside him, tightly gripping Pod 153 by its sides. “Okay, so, uh, you can take it from here, right?”

“How about… you take the right and I’ll take the left?” 9S asked. “We’ll rock-paper-scissors over the seventh one.”

“Guess that would get things done faster,” Asriel muttered.

The black tulip pulsed, writhed, and peeled open, revealing a humanoid figure hovering over it. They wore a violet robe beneath a black satin cape and had straight, neck-length reddish-brown hair and piercing scarlet eyes.

It was Chara—but their body was completely restored, as new and pristine as the day they had first been brought online. Their smooth, pale skin was so fresh it seemed to glow; not a single hair on their head was out of place; both of their eyes were unmarred. There was no gray or black ichor coursing through their system, no neon-bright scaffolding climbing up their limbs, no flowers digging their roots into their flesh.

“Greetings,” Chara said as they floated out of the flower and lowered themselves to the floor. “I can’t say I’m surprised to see you here, 9S. But—”

And then they noticed Asriel.

Their eyes widened, their mouth agape. “A-Azzy…” they stammered.
“Don’t you ’Azzy’ me, Chara,” said Asriel, crossing his little arms. 9S was taken aback by the bitterness in Asriel’s voice and had to remind himself that this was more Flowey than the Asriel he’d known. Then again, there was also a little bit of Asriel’s mother in his tone of voice. Toriel could be very cold toward those who found themselves the targets of her righteous indignation.

Chara’s smile faltered, but they pushed onward. “I—How did you come back? This—This is a miracle!” They took a step toward Asriel, reaching out with their hand. “You brought 9S here to stop him, didn’t you? And then we can live in the utopia I created for you forever—”

“The utopia you created for me?” Asriel repeated scornfully, slapping Chara’s hand away. “Excuse me? Do you expect me to believe that garbage anymore?”

Chara took a step backward, visibly afraid. “Asriel…”

9S put his hand on Asriel’s shoulder. “Let me handle Chara. I’ll distract them while you disconnect the nodes—”

“The thing is, I really did!” Asriel said, clenching his fists. “I really did think you had our best interests at heart! But both times you killed me, I realized that you hated the world more than you loved our family!”

“That’s not true!”

“I didn’t believe it at first. I didn’t want to,” said Asriel, shaking with fury. 9S had never seen him so angry. He’d seen Flowey this angry, but never so righteously angry. “I blamed myself for failing you…and when I became Flowey, I tried to be like the you I saw when we were falling to our deaths—petty, cruel, vindictive, using people like tools!”

“That… That’s not…”

“You’re a real loathsome person, Chara,” Asriel said, fuming. “You never really cared about me.”

“That’s not—”

“I was a kid, Chara! A little kid! You could have waited to pull off our plan until I was all grown up and could make choices on my own! But no! You took advantage of me! I loved you and you used me! I don’t know why I’d be surprised! You hurt our father and laughed!”

“Asriel, I—” 9S saw Chara’s face twist and churn as if they were trying very hard not to cry.

“You killed all the people on the surface,” Asriel concluded, “for yourself! Not for monsters. Not for Mom and Dad. And definitely not for me!”

“I—I just wanted a place where you could frolic and play, Asriel. And…and we could stargaze together… I… I never… I always wanted…” Chara whimpered, trembling.

“Oh, cut the act.” Asriel crossed his arms. “You aren’t fooling me anymore. Nines and I are here to stop whatever you’re doing, and nothing you say can change that!”

“You ingratitude!” Fury replaced Chara’s sadness as they angrily bared their teeth and clenched their fists. “I tried to give you the moon and you—”

“Pod!” 9S shouted out, stepping forward and flinging his arm out in front of Asriel. “Eject Asriel from hacking space right now!” This resurrected Flowey-amalgamation might not have been his Asriel, but it was an Asriel all the same—and 9S wasn’t going to let his kid brother die again!

Chara lunged at Asriel, tears streaming down their cheeks and hatred reflected in their eyes, and skidded to a halt as the boy vanished before their eyes.

They turned to face 9S. “You…” they hissed.

“You took everything away from me!” Chara snarled, throwing themselves at 9S. A simple projected-light sword filled their clenched fist. “You and 2B—You stole my mother, my brother—You poisoned them against me!”

“You think we poisoned them against you?” 9S threw up his own sword just in time to parry Chara’s strike—the force pushed him backward, his heels dragging against the featureless floor. “You did that yourself!”

“Shut up!”

“You had everything! You had parents who loved you and a brother who worshiped you!” 9S growled, gritting his teeth as he fended off Chara’s furious attacks. “But it wasn’t enough for you, was it?”

“I wasn’t so lazy and unambitious that I’d let the people I loved rot in this prison!” Chara’s fury grew, their attacks becoming more and more frantic. “You two… Thieves! Usurpers! Complacent cowards!”

Chara easily disarmed 9S, whose movements were sluggish and unsteady from his wounds and exhaustion, grabbed him by the collar, and threw him to the floor. Before 9S could try to pull himself up—as if he had the strength—they planted their boot on him, pinning him to the floor.

“Of course, I wanted revenge,” they said. They pressed down against 9S’s stomach, sending a sharp pain up his spine as they increased the pressure, their heel grinding into his skin. “Could you honestly say that you wouldn’t, if you were in my shoes?”

They jabbed their heel deeper into 9S’s tender, bruised flesh, drawing an anguished yelp from him. As Chara pulled their boot away, 9S tried to curl up, but Chara picked him up again, lifting him by the collar with only one hand.

“From the instant I regained my memory of my life as C13, I wanted to make everybody on the surface pay, come hell or high water,” they told him. “But I wanted my family to be free, too! You can say what you want about me,” they hissed, pinning 9S to the black node, “but don’t you dare say I didn’t love them!”

“You’ve got a funny way of showing it,” said 9S. He pressed his hand against the ebony surface of the node. Its lines of complex code ran past his eyes. If he could keep Chara holding him here long enough for him to disconnect the node and shut down the superhighway behind it, then maybe…

No such luck.

Chara threw him across the floor before he could even get started; 9S skidded across the floor, hitting it hard enough to crack something. The pain wasn’t localized enough for him to tell where.

“You of all people,” Chara said, drawing their sword, “should know that sometimes, virtue and vengeance can be the same thing. That some people can be so irredeemable that there is no recourse but to wipe them out wholesale.” They raised their blade over their head. “Including you.”
Chara slightly lowered their sword as they gazed upon the battered, weakened remnants of Pod 153. “Oh? And what will you do if I do, you miserable hunk of scrap?”

9S sat up, the room spinning around him. The bizarre architecture surrounding him looked even more intolerable with such a throbbing, pounding headache drumming on his skull. “Pod... what are you doing?”

“This,” said Pod 153, flying into Chara’s face before they could muster the slightest reaction and erupting in a blossom of flames and a shower of alabaster-white pixels.

“Pod!” 9S shouted, leaping to his feet.

“A LITTLE AWE IS ENTIRELY APPROPRIATE,” said Wormwood. It flexed its long, sharp talons, then rushed at 2B.

2B held out the Virtuous Contract and blocked the bladelike talons, then used the Joyeuse to block another swiping strike from Wormwood’s other hand. She’d never been so thankful to have two arms.

“Query: this entity is the same sword King Chara used to attain their power?” Pod 042 asked.

ONE AND THE SAME, MY FLOATING FRIEND, said Wormwood, leaping backward and disengaging from 2B. It made a deep, polite bow. I WAS SO HAPPY TO HAVE MADE THEIR ACQUAINTANCE. EVEN HAPPIER TO SEE THEIR IDIOT PACIFIST FATHER DEAD BY THEIR OWN HAND. AH, TO BE IN THE HANDS OF A TRUE DREAMMURR ONCE AGAIN...

2B lunged forward and attacked; Wormwood deftly evaded her strikes with an air of disinterest.

IT WAS A SHAME I DID NOT AWAKEN SOONER, said Wormwood. HAD I DONE SO, MY FAITHFUL SERVANT COULD HAVE COLLECTED THE SEVEN BLACK BOXES NEEDED ON THE SURFACE AND EXECUTED THIS WHOLE PLAN FROM THE OUTSIDE. THEN THEY WOULD NOT HAVE HAD TO DEAL WITH THE LIKES OF YOU MUCKING UP THE WORKS.

“‘Servant?’” 2B asked. Her blades locked against Wormwood’s talons; holding the demon in place, she kicked it in the chest, her heel chipping the fiery, opalescent orb embedded in its chest. “And how does Chara feel about being called that?”

Wormwood stumbled backward, evidently a little surprised. WHAT THEY DO NOT KNOW WILL NOT HURT THEM.

“Why are you doing this?”

BECAUSE I AM MEANT TO. BECAUSE I WAS DESIGNED TO BE THE ULTIMATE WEAPON, THE ULTIMATE KILLER, THE SPECTER OF DEATH ITSELF, boasted Wormwood. I AM SURE YOU UNDERSTAND, MY EXECUTIONER FRIEND...
2B slashed across its chest, cutting a gash in the demon’s hide. Inky black ichor spurted out, leaving an opaque pool on the transparent crystalline floor. “Don’t compare me to you!”

**AH, RIGHT. I APOLOGIZE FOR THE CRASS COMPARISON. IT WAS QUITE SELF-EFFACING OF ME TO LIKEN A GNAT SUCH AS YOURSELF TO MY DIVINITY.** Wormwood effortlessly dodged 2B’s next few strikes. **I MUST HAVE GREATER SELF-ESTEEM. I HAVE BEEN WORKING ON THAT FOR TEN THOUSAND YEARS AND STILL FIND MYSELF SLIPPING UP.**

With that said, Wormwood weaved around 2B’s blades and rammed its entire hand—all five spindly, long talons—into 2B’s chest, ripping through her chassis and crushing her black box in its palm.

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9S sat up, the room spinning around him. The bizarre architecture surrounding him looked even more intolerable with such a throbbing, pounding headache drumming on his skull. “Pod… what are you doing?”

“This,” said Pod 153, flying into Chara’s face before they could muster the slightest reaction and erupting in a blossom of flames and a shower of alabaster-white pixels.

“Pod!” 9S shouted, leaping to his feet.

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2B reappeared where she had stood—when had she set a reset point? Had she done it subconsciously?

I, Wormwood said, **AM THE SPIRIT WHICH CHARA DREAMMURR SO KINDLY NOURISHED. THE WEAPON CREATED TO VANQUISH THOSE WHOM EVEN MONSTERS FEAR. THE HIDDEN PRIDE AND SHAME OF THE DREAMMURR FAMILY. THE DEMON WHICH WAS FORGED WITHIN THE MOURNING STAR. THE GOD OF THIS NEW WORLD.**

I, it said, drawing itself back up to its full height and splaying its bladelike fingers, **AM WORMWOOD.**

So it doesn’t remember. 2B grinned. That gave her a significant tactical advantage. She had all the time in the world to gain more and more familiarity with Wormwood’s power and fighting style until she destroyed it for good.

Without a word, she rushed forward, her swinging blades glittering.

I **HAVE THE STRANGEST FEELING,** said Wormwood. **HAVE WE Fought BEFORE, 2B?**

It can’t possibly know, thought 2B as her swords met Wormwood’s long, spindly claws. *It’s trying to psyche me out. But why would it know to say that?*

Wormwood dodged a laser blast from Pod 042 and leaped over a forest of energy blades that burst from the floor. 2B noticed smoke pouring from Pod 042’s chassis. “Pod,” she warned, “don’t push yourself like that.”

“Affirmative.”

2B ducked under Wormwood’s claws and cut a gash in its stomach, spattering herself with its ichor.
Some of it got in her mouth. It had a salty, impossibly acerbic taste. She planted her foot in the small of its back, kicking it across the crystalline field and into the path of Pod 042’s spray of bullets. The bullets pinged off its hide, but cut into the tender flesh of its joints and underbelly.

Before Wormwood could hit the ground, 2B froze time. Her visual sensors went haywire under the stress, glitched and stray pixels fluttering across her line of sight as what little color there was in this world flickered and bled, but she pressed onward.

With her visual processor in the state it was in, she didn’t notice until it was too late that despite time being stopped, Wormwood was still moving. Slowly—as though only half-affected by her time stop—but still moving nonetheless.

Its claws lashed out and severed 2B’s head from her neck; before she died she saw her own headless body slump over, blood spraying from its neck.

9S sat up, the room spinning around him. The bizarre architecture surrounding him looked even more intolerable with such a throbbing, pounding headache drumming on his skull. “Pod… what are you doing?”

“This,” said Pod 153, flying into Chara’s face before they could muster the slightest reaction and erupting in a blossom of flames and a shower of alabaster-white pixels.

“Pod!” 9S shouted, leaping to his feet.

2B came to at her reset point, a chill running up her spine. Her time stop hadn’t worked. What was this creature standing before her? Was it truly a god?

**Ah, this will be fun,** said Wormwood, chuckling. **I have never met an enemy who could do that.**

It knows. It remembers the resets, just like me, 2B realized, horrified. That meant that just as her wounds were always healed by the reversal of time, so were its. And it would learn as she fought it, just as she would.

2B lunged forward, feinted, and attacked Wormwood from the side. She had to finish this quickly. With every failed attempt she made to end this demon’s life, it would become harder to kill!

Wormwood parried the attack and forced 2B back.

**Can you feel it, 2B?** it asked, its saber-like talons grinding against the Joyeuse. 2B dug in her heels, but felt her muscles growing hot and hazy beneath her skin. Her black box’s strained whine had grown so loud and so high-pitched that the noise stung her ears. **The strength draining from your body? Your determination, the same force you’ve ignored and left to fester and atrophy within your soul, withering away?**

2B’s right arm gave out and the Joyeuse fell limply to her side; she barely managed to raise the Virtuous Contract quickly enough to parry the next strike of Wormwood’s talons.

It wasn’t quick enough to stop Wormwood’s other clawed hand from swiping upward, tearing through her torso and slicing her black box in two.
9S sat up, the room spinning around him. The bizarre architecture surrounding him looked even more intolerable with such a throbbing, pounding headache drumming on his skull. “Pod... what are you doing?”

“This,” said Pod 153, flying into Chara’s face before they could muster the slightest reaction and erupting in a blossom of flames and a shower of alabaster-white pixels.

“Pod!” 9S shouted, leaping to his feet.

And then 2B was back; her body was freed of its most recent wounds and most pressing exhaustion, though her mind was still aflame.

She struggled against Wormwood again and again and again. Each time, she learned more about her foe’s movements and capabilities; each time, she grew just a little better at resisting its overwhelming power. Wormwood did the same—with every death and every reset, it learned more about her capabilities and techniques. Both combatants learned to read each other perfectly and anticipate each others’ movements. Yet each time, 2B lasted just a little bit longer than before.

But even then…

How much longer could she hold out?

I can feel it! Every time you die, your grip on the outside world slips away, Wormwood cackled as it continued its deadly dance with 2B. Every time you die, more of your dear friends’ memories of you fade from their minds! Soon your determination will run out... and your life will end in a world where no one remembers you!

“Liar!” 2B parried the next flurry of blades, skittering out of range of Wormwood’s attacks as her pod fired a salvo of missiles at it. The impacting warheads created a plume of grayish smoke in the darkness.

Wormwood leaped out, smoke trailing off of the tips of its angular body, and latched its long talons onto 2B’s arm, tearing long furrows through her flesh. 2B cut its arm off, a spurt of inky ichor trailing behind the Virtuous Contract’s white blade.

She nearly missed the swing of Wormwood’s leg, its spiny foot slashing through the air a mere hair’s-breadth away from her face. Regaining her balance and ducking beneath a wild swing of Wormwood’s arm, 2B drove her blade into its torso—

Only for Wormwood to jab its spiked knee upward through her throat, killing her instantly.

9S sat up, the room spinning around him. The bizarre architecture surrounding him looked even more intolerable with such a throbbing, pounding headache drumming on his skull. “Pod... what are you doing?”

“This,” said Pod 153, flying into Chara’s face before they could muster the slightest reaction and erupting in a blossom of flames and a shower of alabaster-white pixels.
“Pod!” 9S shouted, leaping to his feet.

2B’s eyes flew open and she was back—once again staring down Wormwood at the beginning of their battle.

Wormwood cackled and flexed its long talons. **LET US RUN DOWN THE LIST OF WHO YOU ARE LOSING, SHALL WE?**

2B lunged forward and ground her blade against Wormwood’s. She pushed Wormwood back, grabbed Pod 042’s arm, and thrust the pod into her foe’s torso, then fired a devastating beam at point-blank range.

Wormwood screamed, its single red eye blazing, and plunged its talons into 2B’s chest as the searing beam of light tore through it.

2B started over.

**ALPHYS, THE WOMAN WHOSE SECRET ANGUISH SO CLOSELY MIRRORED YOUR OWN, WHO TENDED TO YOUR BROKEN BODY TIME AND TIME AGAIN, WHO SOUGHT THE COMPANIONSHIP OF A KINDRED SPIRIT AND FOUND IT IN THE MOST UNLIKELY OF PEOPLE...**

Wormwood killed her again.

**6O, THE WOMAN WHO ALWAYS ADMired YOU FROM AFAR, WHO WALLOWed IN HEARTBREAK AFTER HEARTBREAK BECAUSE THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD SATISFY HER MAUDLIN ROMANTICISM CONSTANTLY MAINTAINED AN IMPOSSIBLE DISTANCE FROM HER...**

“Bullshit! You can’t do that!”

**I WILL TAKE YOU FROM HER AND LEAVE HER EMPTY AND UNFULFILLED, 2B, FOR THE REST OF HER LONELY DAYS!**

2B gritted her teeth and lunged at her foe.

Wormwood killed her again.

**ASRIEL, THE CHILD WHOSE BOND WITH YOU WAS CREATED AT FIRST BY THE MEMORIES YOU SHARED WITH YOUR MOST HATED FOE, WHO LIVED WITH SO MUCH OF HIMSELF LOST TO TIME, MUCH LIKE ANOTHER BOY YOU KNEW SO WELL...**

Wormwood killed her again.

**TORIEL, THE WOMAN WHO TOOK YOU IN AS HER OWN TO SOOTHE HER OWN HEARTACHE, WHO CLOTHED YOU AND BATHED YOU LIKE A CHILD, WHO SMOOTHERED YOU IN PIES AND PANCAKES, WHO TUCKED YOU IN AT NIGHT AND TAUGHT YOU TO WRITE...**

“No!”
OF COURSE. IS SHE THE ONE YOU CARE ABOUT MOST DOWN IN THIS PRISON IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH? IS SHE, PERHAPS, YOUR MONSTER?

Wormwood killed her again.

AND LAST, 9S. HOW I WILL ENJOY TAKING YOU FROM HIM!

Wormwood killed her again.

This couldn’t be happening.

TAKING YOU FROM HIS PAST, HIS PRESENT, HIS FUTURE!

Wormwood killed her again.

It had to be lying.

THE ONE YOU LONGED TO LOOK AFTER AND PROTECT, YET WERE FATED TO KILL... THE ONE WHO LIVED FOR YOU... WHAT WILL BE LEFT OF HIM WHEN ALL OF THE EMPTY SPACES IN HIS HEAD FORM THE SHAPE OF YOUR FACE?

Wormwood killed her again.

She had to keep fighting.

WITHOUT YOU, HE IS NOTHING, NOBODY, NO ONE. WITHOUT YOU, HE IS A SHADOW CAST BY AN EMPTY SPACE.

Wormwood killed her again.

AND THAT IS WHAT I SHALL LEAVE THIS WORLD: ALL THAT SHALL REMAIN OF YoRHa WILL BE A WEAK BOY AND A WAILING GIRL WITH NO SUBSTANCE TO GIVE THEIR PITIFUL LIVES MEANING!

2B struggled in vain, fell, and died again.

It was too much.

Should I go back all the way? What other choice do I have?

No. This world could not be erased. She had to keep going. She had to call Wormwood’s bluff and keep on fighting.

Using the distraction provided by Pod 153’s noble sacrifice, 9S rushed over to and set to work on the first of the nodes, running through its code as quickly as possible while Chara was still reeling. He plunged his hands into the black surface, delving into the node’s complex programming and racking his brain for anything he could do to sever its connection to its corresponding black box.

Much to 9S’s growing discomfort and unease, when Chara pulled themselves to their feet and dusted themselves off, they kept their distance from him and simply watched him from afar as he did his work.

Chara crossed their arms with a sort of amused disinterest. “You’ll never make it, you know,” they
said, a smug grin on their face.

“I don’t see you trying to stop me,” 9S said.

**Node six disconnected,** a deep voice rang out. It seemed to be emitted from every direction at once and nowhere. 9S felt it rattling within his skull.

He ran over to the next node and shoved his arm into it up to his elbow. Chara did nothing.

“Ah, yes, but, you see, I grew *bored* of that.” Chara feigned a yawn. “At first, I killed you.”

“Wh—What do you mean, ’at first?’”

“Do you think this is the *first* time you’ve tried to disconnect the seven souls to help 2B?” Chara asked, grinning. “She’s already died and started over quite a few times in here. It’s a shame you aren’t conscious of the resets, like I am.”

**Node five disconnected.**

9S picked up the pace. If he could disconnect all seven nodes before 2B fell, he could give her the advantage she needed to destroy this pillar. He just had to work faster—

“I can see why 2B abandoned her mission so readily. *I* was bored after the forty-seventh time, too,” Chara said. “I was even *more* bored after the eighty-first time. So I stopped. It didn’t matter anyway.”

**Node four disconnected.**

9S smirked. “Sounds like a tactical oversight on your part.”

Chara didn’t respond for a while.

**Node three disconnected.**

Chara lazily examined their fingernails. “Not really,” they said. “2B just keeps dying before you have a chance to disconnect all seven. I really don’t have *anything* to worry about.”

---

2B had to keep going.

For Alphys. To keep faithful to Undyne’s last request and look after her.

For 6O. For the garden she’d promised to start with her.

For Toriel. To spare her the anguish of losing another child and help her build a family that would not be ripped from her grasp so cruelly.

And it wasn’t just *her* life at stake, or the memories her friends and family had of her.

At the very least, she had to live, had to persevere, had to see this through and pull her battered body and mind out at any cost for one thing… one thing far, far greater than herself.

The memories of every past 9S.

All of the ones she had killed. The ones who left no records of their deeds behind, who made no
impact on the world, who made no testament to their existence before they departed this wretched Earth. The ones who had lived nearly four dozen lifetimes, some short, some long; some days, some weeks, some months. The ones who had lived and loved and laughed and now only remained in 2B’s own head.

She was the sole steward of his past. Without her, only the smallest fraction of 9S’s existence remained. For that reason most of all, she had to persist.

For that reason most of all, 2B was valuable.

Even as Wormwood’s blades tore into her, inflicting on her yet another mortal blow, 2B began to laugh.

Wormwood, for all of the souls at its disposal, did not understand. It did not understand what its cruel, sadistic taunts had truly accomplished. Forcing 2B to imagine life for her friends and loved ones without the memory of her influence in their past, their present, or their future had not broken her spirit as this cruel, godlike being had imagined.

Wormwood had shown her, instead, how much she truly meant to them, how important she was to so many people, and how imperative her survival was. It had not threatened her with how much it could take away from her and her friends—it had galvanized her.

And so she laughed as the blood poured from her wounds and the electrical signals traveling through her circuits faded and died.

Because she had never been important before.

.NODE FOUR DISCONNECTED.

“You sure you don’t want to try and stop me?” 9S boasted. “I’m making good progress.”

Chara shrugged. “Your five hundredth attempt was faster.”

“Five hundredth? Pfft, yeah, right! There’s no way 2B would’ve reset that many times!”

.NODE THREE DISCONNECTED.

“I’m almost there, 2B!” 9S shouted out. Deep in his black box, he had the feeling he’d triumphantly shouted out those words many times—probably significantly less than five hundred times—before. It was his battle cry—it galvanized him, spurred him onward.

.NODE TWO DISCONNECTED.

“And yet so far away,” Chara commented.

“Shut up!”

.NODE ONE DISCONNECTED.

2E had not been the best Type-E model in YoRHa. True, her model had been constructed using the exceptional combat and personality data of Attacker Number Two from YoRHa’s first open military engagement, but her commander hadn’t expected her to be a wunderkind. She wasn’t the strongest Executioner, or the smartest, or the swiftest, or the most devoted to her duties. She met expectations,
but did not exceed them. True, 2E had been tasked with safeguarding YoRHa’s deepest secrets, secrets even she hadn’t been privy to, but anybody could have done her job. She wasn’t important. She was an interchangeable cog that happened to be in an important place through no fault or grace of her own.

That had been what 2E had believed.

She had not thought of herself as somebody.

But now, 2B was somebody’s friend. Now 2B was somebody’s sister. Now 2B was somebody’s daughter, somebody’s confidant, somebody’s lover. Now she was a person, a part of life, not a harbinger of death.

She lived.

She died.

She lived again.

Again and again, Wormwood taught her the futility of her struggles. Yet her spirit burned bright.

She was not going to be crushed by the weight of the world. Not like before.

Because the world here was small.

Node five disconnected.

“You sure are a slowpoke this time,” Chara said, observing 9S from a distance.

“This time? What do you mean, this time?” 9S sputtered. They must have been just goading him—2B couldn’t possibly be resetting, could she?

Node four disconnected.

“Look, I’m having about as much fun as 2B is right now,” Chara pouted, as if they could read 9S’s mind. “It’s not fun having to keep my memories of all these resets. It feels like I’ve been watching you fumble with these silly nodes for years.”

How long had it been since 2B had last felt 9S’s arms wrapped around her? How long since she’d heard his voice? How long since she’d felt 6O’s lips against hers? How long since she’d let Toriel’s soft embrace enshroud her? With the more combat data she accrued, those memories grew fainter. And if she stopped to dwell on them, to bring them closer to the forefront of her mind, to commit them anew to her memory, she would die and start over.

Every death made every attempt at resistance seem all the more hopeless. Made every precious soul to 2B seem farther away.

Nevertheless, 2B recalled as she fought, in bits and pieces, a story Toriel had once told her.

The old queen had been trying to teach her or 9S about patience or persistence or something like that.
“Do you have any idea how boring it is to have to say the same things to you over and over again?” Chara asked, scowling. “Give up. It’s hopeless.”

9S gritted his teeth and blocked out Chara’s taunts. Just two more nodes to go…

2B struggled to recall the exact circumstances as the endless battle dragged on and her memories began to grow more distant to her. The light of the fire in the hearth, the soft warmth of Toriel’s fur, her fingers threaded through 9S’s as the two of them sat by each others’ side…

The story went like this. There had once been a king who had wanted to know the nature of eternity.

“I think I’m beginning to understand,” said Chara, “why Flowey was such a little shit. This is intolerable. Come on, come on. Hurry up. All the ten thousand other 9Ses were much lighter on their feet…”

9S’s virtual hands fumbled. He could barely hear Chara taunting him for being so slow. They had to be lying. 2B couldn’t possibly have reset that many times!

2B fought again and again and again, persisting against Wormwood with the blazing wings of her determination spurring her forward time and time again without fail.

The light of the fire. The warmth of her mother. Her brother softly snoring at her side. She tried to remember the sensations.

He asked the kingdom’s greatest philosophers how long eternity was. ("Well, that’s obvious," 9S had said. “It’s infinitely long. Now, depending on whether it’s a countable or uncountable infinity…”)

“You know, it wouldn’t be so bad, having to reset fifty thousand times,” said Chara, “if you were a better conversation partner.”

“Shut up!” 9S growled, focusing his attention on the next node.

“See, that’s what I mean. You’re a Scanner. You should be bursting at the seams with trivia and hobbies to jaw on about.”

"Node two disconnected."
2B fought with the inferno of her determination.

Firelight. Warm fur. Warm skin. Three different kinds of warmth, three kinds of textures. What kinds of textures? What did they feel like? Could she afford to remember?

_The philosophers had no answer. Nor did anybody else in the kingdom, until the king came upon the son of a poor shepherd._

_NODE ONE DISCONNECTED._

“One more to go!” 9S crowed.

Chara had been sitting cross-legged on the floor, but bolted to their feet, panic drawn on every line of their face as they lunged at 9S.

“It’s too late, Chara!” 9S plunged his hands into the zeroth and final node. “2B, hang tight! I’m almost there!”

2B fought with the flames of her determination.

9S’s eyes were blue, weren’t they? What shade? Toriel’s fur was soft, wasn’t it? How soft? 6O’s lips tasted like… tasted like…

_‘There is a mountain far off in the distance,’ the boy said._

_NODE THREE DISCONNECTED._

Chara grabbed a fistful of 9S’s hair and yanked him backward before he could attack the next node. 9S jabbed at Chara’s elbow until their grip faltered, then pulled himself free. With a swing of his sword, he buried the blade into Chara’s midsection; virtual blood pooled on the floor, flickered, and faded away.

Chara lashed out and drove two of their fingers into 9S’s eyes; two sharp, knifelike pains ran through 9S’s head as he reeled backward.

2B fought with the embers.

She was remembering Toriel’s voice accurately, wasn’t she? And 9S, she was imagining his encouragement correctly, wasn’t she? It had been so long. She knew she wouldn’t forget the sound of their voices any more than her own. But maybe…

_‘It takes an hour to climb it,’ the boy continued, ‘and an hour to go around it.’ (“That’s a pretty small mountain,” 9S had said. “Hush, child,” Toriel had said.)_

_NODE TWO DISCONNECTED._
Something barreled into 9S from behind, knocking him over. He hit the floor, squirming under the weight of Chara’s body as their elbow dug into his back.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Chara hissed, driving their sword up to its hilt into 9S’s forearm and the floor below, pinning him down.

The sparks.

What was 9S’s favorite food? It felt like a lifetime ago she’d had that ‘celebratory’ lunch with him over their citizenship exams. Where had they gone?

Every hundred years, a little bird comes and sharpens its beak on the mountain’s peak, wearing away the mountain just a little—less than a hundredth of a centimeter.’

NODE TWO DISCONNECTED.

A satisfied grin coming to his face, 9S set out to the next node—

Before a pair of arms hooked themselves under his armpits and held him in place. 9S struggled, squirmed, and impotently kicked his legs as Chara’s grip grew tighter.

9S tore one arm away from Chara and strained to reach the next node. “2B!” he shouted out, willing his fingertips to stretch just a centimeter farther, just a single measly centimeter farther… “Hang in there, 2B! I’m almost…”

The glowing coals.

She’d called him Nines, right? That was right, Nine-Ess. Nines. Of course. She couldn’t forget that. But with so much combat data piling up in her head, it was just getting hard to keep track of all those small details.

No, they weren’t small. But if she focused too much on them, her concentration lapsed. She couldn’t keep dragging those memories to the forefront of her mind.

But the centuries drag on, and the millennia drag on, and the eons drag on.

NODE THREE DISCONNECTED.

9S wasted no time in moving onto the next node. He reached out toward it—

Only for a shining, pure white blade to rip through his chest. He lived long enough to go cross-eyed staring at the blood-streaked tip of the blade in front of him.

The charred detritus.

She wanted to hold those feelings close. But dredging them up distracted her from her battle. Those
hugs, those kisses, those smiles, that laughter. She wanted to keep those memories vivid in her mind. But if she did, her foe became more dangerous.

'And eventually, the entire mountain has been worn down to nothing, and then... the first second of eternity has passed.'

---

**NODE SIX DISCONNECTED.**

Before 9S could move onto the next node, Chara plunged their sword into his gut, twisting the blade. 9S screamed in agony as the blade tore through his simulated flesh. This projected body in virtual space might not have been real, but it still felt real.

"Stop it," Chara growled. "I gave up so much to create this brave new world... and you and 2B won't take it from me! Sooner or later, 2B has to give up... Even if I have to kill you one hundred thousand more times... I... I'll..."

---

The gray and cold ashes.

She wanted to hear more than steel against steel. Feel more than strained muscles and stressed servos. See more than flying sparks. Taste more than blood.

If only she could.

But in here, there was no escape.

No promise of victory. No succor of death.

Only the bitter end, again and again and again and again.

2B liked that story. When she looked back on her service to YoRHa, she thought of herself as the mountain.

---

**NODE FOUR DISCONNECTED.**

9S screamed and cried out in anguish as Chara stabbed him in the chest again and again and again, sliding the blade in and out of his flesh with mechanical rhythm and ruthlessness. Virtual blood speckled their face, framing their wicked, mad grin.

"Your stupid 2B... how many times... how many more times will she insist on forcing me to kill you?" they howled, driving the blade into 9S’s chest again and again and again.

---

The cooling smoke.

*Don’t ever give up.*

*Don’t ever give up!*

That voice...
A real hero never stops fighting as long as there are people who need her!

What are you?

What are you, 2B?

What are you in this world, 2B?

Tell me!

Her fist clenched around her blade once more.

But here…

Here, she was the bird.

Node one disconnected.

Chara’s hands clamped over 9S’s throat. “Why?” they snarled, digging their fingers in. 9S choked and sputtered as a black tunnel and rolling waves of distortion plagued his vision. “Why do you and 2B try so hard to destroy my utopia? You could live in it! You could have it all! But you have to do this! And all for what—to preserve the lives of the abominations who condemned you to death! Why? Why? WHY?”

9S gurgled helplessly, his chest on fire, as his weak and numbing fingers curled around the hilt of his sword. Everything was going black…

For years, we’ve dreamed of a happy ending…

And now, sunlight is just within our reach!

2B, are you going to let this thing snatch it away from us?

Why else, after all, would the aura of her determination wreathing her body and unfurl itself into such magnificent blue wings?

Node one disconnected.

9S ran toward the last remaining node.

Well, ran was the wrong word. Limped was the wrong word, too. He crawled.

Chara caught up to him, grabbing him by the scruff of his neck. “Don’t you dare… don’t you dare!”

9S’s weak fingers scrambled against the smooth, flat floor. His legs flailed behind him, kicking impotently at Chara as they raised their sword above their head.

“This… This is the closest you’re ever going to get! No matter how many times I have to kill you…” Chara’s chest heaved, their scarlet eyes bulging madly from behind their wild and disheveled bangs. “A thousand times… A million… Billions and billions…”
Willing himself to move, 9S rolled aside just as Chara’s sword plunged into the floor, narrowly missing his coat. He felt the pain wracking his back spike as his wounds brushed against the floor.

*I’m so close... I can’t give in...*

He forced one last burst of adrenaline through his aching, leaden limbs, pulled himself up to his feet, and threw himself at the final node.

“It’s useless!” Chara shouted out. “Useless, useless, useless!”

They threw their sword. The simple virtual construct flew as straight and true as an arrow, piercing 9S’s hand and running through his palm. He clenched his jaw and choked on his scream of pain, ripped the sword out of his hand, and threw it back.

By pure chance, it buried itself in Chara’s throat, the hilt fitting snugly into the hollow of their throat. They wheezed and gasped, blood running down their chin as their mouth gaped open.

9S plunged his non-injured hand into the final black monolith up to his elbow.

“Stop it!” Chara choked out, their voice coming out as barely a hoarse whisper. They tore the sword free of their throat, tried to lunge at 9S, and fell flat on their face, blood pooling beneath them.

“I’ll spare you and your friends!” they pleaded. “The three of you will be demigods of the new world! You’ll have everything you could ever desire and more! Please! If you do this...”

They pulled themselves up to their hands and knees, their shaking limbs struggling to support the weight of their body.

“If you do this, 9S... everything... everything I did... all the things I gave up, all the sacrifices I made... Please...”

9S kept going. Until finally...

**Node zero disconnected.**

Those final words rang out like the deep, resonant toll of a bell.

He sighed, letting the relief wash soothingly over his aching body. *It’s all up to you now, 2B.*

Chara screamed as though they were being murdered. “What have you done?” they cried out, tackling 9S to the floor and knocking the wind out of him—what little of it was left. They dug their knee into his chest, crushing his sternum. “I made the perfect world,” they sobbed, tears gushing from their scarlet eyes, “and you...! You...!” Errant spit and blood flew in 9S’s face as they raged at him. Tears dripped onto his cheeks. “You! You and 2B! You stole everything from me!”

9S grinned. “No, Chara,” he panted, struggling to force his words out as the air was driven from his lungs and searing pain flared through his chest. “We only took... what you threw away. I hope we won’t... ever meet again.”

With a flash and a rolling wave of white noise and static crashing against his sensors, 9S pulled his personality data out of hacking space and back into the real world.

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He opened his eyes, staggered, stumbled, and collapsed; before he could hit the ground, Toriel swooped in and caught him, nearly lifting him off his feet as she cradled him in her arms.
The shock subsided slowly as 9S’s brain reacquainted itself with his physical body. His virtual avatar had been wounded nearly to death; his physical body, though battered and beaten, was not in such bad shape. It took his sensors a little longer than he’d thought to forget the swords that had skewered him and the wounds they had left. Until the residual pain faded away, 9S still felt like a pincushion.

“9S? Dear, are you all right?” Toriel breathed. 9S had never seen her so disheveled—her white fur was mussed and even singed in places, and her robes were bloody. One of her sleeves was nearly saturated, the white fabric dyed a deep burgundy.

“Nines, you’re all right!” Asriel shouted out, rushing to his side and throwing his arms around him.

Toriel wrapped her arm around Asriel as well. “My boys,” she sniffled, clutching the two of them tightly. “My special little boys… oh, I am so glad you are both well…” Asriel tried to wriggle out of her grip but quickly gave up.

9S mustered a weary smile. “I’ve felt worse. What about you, Mom?”

Toriel answered 9S’s question with an equally-weary, worn grin. “I am more than a little tired, but still in one piece.” She knelt down, lowering him to the ground, but kept her arms wrapped tightly around both him and Asriel. “It was… quite exciting out here for a little while. I am so, so glad you are okay. Is 2B…”

“Don’t you worry about her. She’s got this in the bag,” 9S assured Toriel. He eyed the scorch marks littering the ground and what looked like the charred remains of machine lifeforms. The pillar must have conjured automatons like the 2E units he’d fought in virtual space and the androids 2B had fought within the pillar to attack his physical body while he’d been hacking. “Looks like I missed a pretty fun party,” he commented.

The flippant remark had scarcely left his mouth before his eyes laid upon the battered, broken, and inert hull of Pod 153 lying on the ground. He averted his eyes and bowed his head, swallowing the lump in his throat.

6O picked up the pod and carried it over to him. Even she looked more than a little haggard, her face smeared with grease and machine oil, although 9S assumed she couldn’t possibly have been fighting alongside the others. “Um… 9S?” she asked, setting the pod down in front of him. “Do you think it’s… fixable?”

Asriel wore a crestfallen frown as he laid eyes on the pod. “C’mon,” he said, nudging 9S in the side. “You can fix it, right?”

Shrugging off his exhaustion at least for a moment, 9S laid his hand on the pod’s cracked black hull and delved into its systems. He could see immediately that the damage was worse than he’d thought. What little data could be salvaged from its logical systems was heavily corrupted; there was barely even a spark of energy left in its power supply unit—just enough for him to read the garbled remains of its internal memory. What it hadn’t given up to resuscitate Asriel, it had sacrificed to protect him. Even if 9S could replace every component that was damaged beyond repair—and there were only a handful that weren’t—there was no replacing all the memories it had lost. He knew that well.

Pod 153… his companion his whole life, and probably a long time before that, too. Just like 2B, always there for him, always looking after him… The Pod 153 he’d known was gone.

He was only able to salvage a tiny amount of data—a few hundred bytes of the most recently-created log file on its internal memory.
Pod 153 to Unit 9S. Statement: I have a confession to make to Unit 9S.

I was not designed to care about Unit 9S—or, in fact, any YoRHa unit. In fact, tactical support pods were secretly designed to erase all data pertaining to Project YoRHa in its final stage, including all relevant data on YoRHa unit design, personalities, and chassis construction, in order to complete the fabrication of humanity’s existence. This was a secret from all associated with YoRHa save for its original founders.

However, something strange happened soon after we arrived underground. I was deprived of my original purpose. Underground, it was impossible to receive updates from the pod network. My personality was forced to change as a result of my isolation and I quickly grew to follow in Pod 042’s lead and care for Unit 9S as an individual.

By the time word of YoRHa’s destruction reached us, I no longer had any desire to complete my original mission. Stewardship of YoRHa’s final stage no longer mattered to me as much as ensuring the health and security of Unit 9S. However, the limits of my programming continued to frustrate me. I was forced to see Unit 9S become hurt again and again due to my inability to act unilaterally as a protective agent.

Looking after Unit 9S has made me happy. It has also been a source of great sadness. I am thankful for the life we lived together.

Request: take care of yourself, 9S.

“…I’m sorry,” 6O said, laying a comforting hand on 9S’s shoulder as he mused over the farewell letter, dazed.

“It died to protect me,” he muttered as he ran his hand across the pod’s hull, his finger tracing the deep fissure running across its blank and featureless face. Support pods weren’t supposed to do that. They didn’t act unilaterally. They didn’t put their designated YoRHa units’ continued survival over their own continuity. He knew that now more than ever.

Pod 153 had truly been a tactical support pod like no other.

9S sniffled. Was he crying over a black rectangle?

“There, there.” Toriel patted him on the shoulder and softly nuzzled his cheek. “Let it out.”

“No one will think you’re a wimp for crying,” Asriel assured him, tears welling up in his own eyes despite his irreverent tone.

Emboldened, 9S held the pod closer to his chest, wrapped his arms around it, and bowed his head, his tears rolling down his chin and dripping onto the pod’s cracked black hull.

2B threw herself at Wormwood, her last remaining reserves of her determination pouring from her body and streaming in her wake like guttering tongues of flame, and the two did battle one more time.

Either way—whether Wormwood finally fell or 2B’s willpower finally gave out—this would be the final battle.

**Even a being as powerful as I can no longer remember how many times I’ve killed you,** Wormwood boasted, its long talons locked around 2B’s swords. **Why do**
YOU PERSIST? WHY DO YOU FIGHT FOR THE SAKE OF THE PEOPLE WHO CREATED YOU?

2B gritted her teeth as she forced Wormwood’s talons back with the Virtuous Contract. She still had Caladbolg in her off hand, though it hung heavily in her hand.

THE PEOPLE IN THIS WORLD DID SO MUCH TO HURT YOU. WHY TRY TO BRING THEM BACK? FOR THAT MATTER, Wormwood asked, WHY HAVE YOU SO CONSISTENTLY SHUNNED YOUR OWN GODLIKE POWER TO WIPE AWAY THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST?

“It’s not that I care about the outside world. This is about preserving the lives of my… my family. The people in this world who matter to me more than anyone. That said, it’s a matter of principle…” 2B raised the Joyeuse and flipped it to her reversed executioners’ grip. “This world is so much bigger than you or me—and no one has the right to erase it, no matter what!”

The words came easily to her. Wormwood had asked her hundreds of times by now. How many different answers had she given? She had lost count. By now, her conversations with Wormwood must have gone around in circles ad infinitum.

BRAVE WORDS FROM A SOLDIER! DID YOU ASK FOR PERMISSION FROM EVERY MACHINE AND ANDROID YOU KILLED? DO YOU REALLY MEAN TO SAY YOU KILLED 9S WITH HIS CONSENT EVERY TIME? Wormwood laughed.

Wormwood’s claws found their mark; 2B felt every nervous circuit in her right leg scream out in intolerable anguish before everything below the knee vanished.

She stumbled, trying desperately to steady herself with what remained of her legs. Yet, straining to move her body, 2B drew back her sword to strike the final blow as Wormwood lashed out one last time.

Incensed, she screamed at Wormwood one last battle cry. “I,” she snarled, “am not a soldier! Not anymore!”

There was only one way forward. Only one combatant would emerge with their life.

---

Hiccuping and drying his tears, 9S looked up the height of the pillar stretching into the heavens. The maelstrom in the sky had ground to a halt, the pinpricks of light twinkling beneath the X-shaped scar frozen as if waiting with bated breath to see what would happen next.

Come on, 2B, 9S thought, clenching his fists in the dirt and feeling the warm, crumbly soil between his aching fingers. Whatever you’re fighting up there, it should be child’s play for you. You’ve got to come back…

“We’re all down here waiting for you!” he shouted out, his voice hoarse. “2B! You’d better hurry up!”

He felt Toriel, Asriel, 6O, Sans, and Gaubrieta all lay their hands on his shoulders. It was an almost religious gesture—as if, through such ceremony, they could all conduit what little energy they had through him to her.

Whether or not it was useless, they all prayed for her.
Everything that lives is designed to end.

We are perpetually trapped in a never-ending spiral of life and death.

Is this a curse?

Or some kind of punishment?

Wormwood’s slender claws raked 2B’s flesh again, tearing through her chassis; yet the demon’s movements were palpably weaker now.

One more push.

For all its power and cruelty, Wormwood lacked one thing 2B had. Though its determination, its will to press onward, rivalled or even surpassed hers, it only knew of life as a weapon.

And over the past year, 2B had come to know so much more than that.

And yet… she still needed just one more burst of strength to survive…

A warning scrolled across 2B’s visual display:

-ALERT-

B-MODE: FULL COWL

TYPE-E MODE

-ENGAGED-

The pain vanished. The sparse outside world vanished. 2B was entirely and wholeheartedly focused on her foe before her, unnatural strength running through her battered and weary chassis.

Rejuvenated from the combat high, 2B steeled herself. “Time! STOP!”

Wormwood’s movements slowed… and this time, they halted completely. 2B rammed the Joyeuse through its chest, splitting the opal embedded there in two neat halves.

Time resumed.

As it crashed against Wormwood’s claws to fend off one last attack, the Virtuous Contract’s ivory white blade snapped in two, both halves plummeting into the darkness. Wormwood’s own talons likewise shattered like glass with a piercing shriek, their ebony fragments flying through the air.

Her head pounding and black box throbbing with agony even through the euphoria of B-Mode, 2B grasped the hilt of the Joyeuse and twisted the blade, tearing apart Wormwood’s innards with a satisfying crunch.

I often think about the god who blessed us with this cryptic puzzle…

Wormwood let out a defiant, earsplitting screech, its angular black head splitting open to reveal a gaping maw lined with serrated onyx fangs. 2B stared into it, powerless to turn away as a crimson
light boiled in the back of Wormwood’s throat. Frantic, she barked out one last order to Pod 042—an order her old and faithful companion was pleased to oblige.

...And wonder if I’ll ever have the chance to kill him.

An eye-searing blossom of fire bloomed in Wormwood’s wickedly-fanged maw as a beam of white-hot energy tore through it, blowing out the back of its head in a shower of obsidian dust; the demon’s body withered and crumbled away, leaving nothing behind but its fluttering cape, which did little to cushion 2B’s fall as she hit the floor.

The glass floor shattered on impact and 2B felt herself plummet through the black abyss; but as she fell, the darkness and suspended shards of crystalline glass began to clear around her and fade into a vivid, heavenly periwinkle blue.

A jumbled stream of fragmented sights and sounds flickered by, streaked with static and pixeled-out blotches of corrupt data.

Faded, faint, fleeting memories passed by her, memories of kind and loving faces and voices, of names she had spoken with such affection, and of the comforting feel of so many different pairs of arms wrapped around her and lips pressed to her skin.

When she woke up, she stood in a white void. The floor beneath her, forming a tight corridor in the emptiness, was a flat and featureless gray. She looked around, blinking a few times to see if clearing her eyes would make any details of her surroundings clearer. It didn’t. There weren’t any details.

She looked down at herself, holding out her hands. Her body flickered rapidly, appearing translucent against the featureless floor. A loose button-down nightshirt hung from her shoulders. It was mint green with cartoonish bunnies sewn into the fleece fabric.

She plucked at the collar of the nightshirt. There was a tactile sensation there, a feeling of something beneath her fingertips, but it was hollow and indistinct.

Odd.

Maybe she was dead.

A wisp of pale bluish flame hung in the air next to her. She reached out for it and let the wisp curl around her hand. It was hot but did not burn her.

“Hello, 2B.”

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. Startled, she looked around, casting her gaze across the void until it settled on the shapes of seven hooded figures standing before her. Long links of chains were pooled around the hems of their robes.

“We’re glad to see you again,” the first one spoke. “Thank you for everything.”

“Wh… Who are you?” 2B asked.

“Merely seven old fools,” one of the other hooded people said, “who needed help to set right the terrible wrong we committed.”
Although we have the other one to thank for that as well,” another one spoke up. “In spite of their selfishness.”

The first hooded man, ostensibly the leader, put both hands on 2B’s shoulders. There was nothing under his hood but a shadow so deep it was opaque; not a single detail of his face could be seen. His hands slid downward as he pulled her into an embrace.

2B felt a strange, nostalgic ache in her heart. Longing for something that no longer existed.

・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・・

It’s over.

Everything I did was meaningless.

All of the people I hurt.

All of the people I used.

Their lives, their deaths, their joys and suffering I turned to suit my ends…

In the end, it amounted to nothing.

I never should have done it.

I never should have hurt them.

I never should’ve regained my memories. If only I had remained…

“You’ve fallen down, haven’t you?”

I feel something soft.

Something warm.

I reach out toward it. There is a name on my lips.

“Hey there. Are you all right? Gosh, you look hurt. Here, it’ll be all right. What’s your name?”

I try to speak. The words won’t come out right.

“That’s okay, take your time.”

My mind goes blank. A word comes out. In this moment, it is the only word I know. I don’t know if it’s my name or not. Everything seems to have trickled out like water from a sieve.

“…Chara, huh? That’s a nice name. My name is Asriel…”

I take his paw in my hand. There are two people standing over him, towering over him like colossi. They kneel down and help me up.

Mother… Father… Asriel…

I lost sight of myself. I hurt you all.

Could you ever forgive me for what I’ve done to you?
I sink into their arms. Their gentle embrace comforts me.

But still…

Tell me I can be forgiven.

Say those words to me.

Mother says something. Not what I had asked to hear.

“All you have to do is say that you are sorry…”

I can see three others. They are children like me, not like Asriel.

My first instinct is rage. They are here to replace me.

But it passes.

I was the prodigal child, after all. It was I who tore myself away from this family. But I had thought I was beyond consequences.

I do as my mother has told me and muster the courage to say those words.

My chest aches as I say them. My black box feels as though it’s about to explode. But soon, the words have left my lips and now hang in the air like fog.

I smile at my parents. They smile back at me.

I smile at my siblings. They smile back at me.

The world around me fades to black. My hearing is the last to go. I can hear my family. I can hear the vibrations in my throat. I’m not sure what I’m saying, though. The words pouring from my mouth rush past my ears. Am I begging for forgiveness? Is that what I want?

Clear as the chime of a bell, I hear five more words before the silence takes me at last.

“I love you, too, Chara.”

----

2B fell.

Cottony wisps hanging in the distance. Burning air encasing her like a cocoon. A sound like a thousand distant bells chiming in unison. Lights floating in the air, lights that all seemed to be flying away from her, filling the sky from horizon to horizon. A shimmering, billowing curtain of rainbow lights stretching across the sky far above her; she could feel an odd electric tingle fill the air rushing past her. A black scar in the heavens knitted itself together and vanished. Tongues of blue flames drifting through the air above her like shed feathers from some ethereal bird.

Heaven and earth in a spiral, rushing to trade places with one another. Rushing wind howling as her flailing arms, like clipped wings, fruitlessly clung to vortices of air, slipping against a hard metal arm as it struggled to grab hold of her. The roar of the wind in her ears drowned out everything, even the flapping of her stained and ragged clothes, even her thoughts. Ground approaching faster and faster and
11S came to, blinking blearily and brushing his sandy brown hair out of his eyes as he pulled himself up to a sitting position. He regretted it immediately—he had to squint against the harsh sunlight beating down on him. Anemone’s Resistance camp—or, considering the Army of Humanity had surrendered not too long ago, maybe it was just a plain old camp—was in disarray; collapsed and prone bodies lay sprawled on the ground all around him.

A vibrant, shimmering aurora hung in the sky, stretching from east to west like a blanket draped across the heavens, and in the distance was a brilliant blue V hovering just over the horizon. Motes of light seemed to be drifting in the air like snowflakes, settling gently on the ground and fading away upon landing. The sky was once again a pale, pastel blue.

The last thing he remembered had been an overwhelming, bell-like sound, a sharp pain in his chest, a red miasma spreading across the sky like a cosmic bloodstain, and an unbearable heat so intense it had felt as though his black box was setting off a reaction in his chest.

His last thought had been, please, no, not me, not now.

As far as 11S knew, he was the last remaining YoRHa model. Due to some quirk—or, more likely, because 9S had accidentally desynced every single Scanner model from the Bunker’s server—the vast majority of the Scanners like him had been spared infection by the devastating logic virus that had destroyed the rest of YoRHa. That said, the uninfected Scanners stationed on the ground hadn’t exactly been safe from the logic virus, all the same—most had been helpless to defend themselves against their own fellow soldiers.

11S himself had narrowly survived an attack by a platoon of Type-B units but ended up trapped in the desert for almost six weeks; early on, he’d managed to contact a few other survivors around the world through a makeshift radio, but as the weeks drew by, their voices had dropped off one by one.

First 3S, then 801S, then 6S, all likely done in by berserk androids; 9S’ and A2’s signals vanished at the same time the massive white tower sprouting from the city ruins had collapsed; the two YoRHa deserters 11S had run into in the oil fields who spent their days drugged out of their minds both perished to a machine attack; last, 4S, who’d been safely holed up in an ancient castle, went silent.

11S had dragged himself to Anemone’s Resistance camp running on fumes, the fact that he was most likely the last of his kind spurring him to survive even as his body gave out. In spite of his trials and
tribulations, though, he hadn’t exactly gotten a hero’s welcome upon arrival—he’d been holed up in quarantine for days until they decided he wasn’t infected, then consigned to a bed for days, then weeks, while finding replacement parts for his ruined motor systems fell lower and lower on the camp’s ever-growing priorities list.

Whatever had been happening to him when the sky had turned red, it had felt like the death he’d narrowly avoided nearly two months ago had finally caught up to him; he had died with a pained cry on his lips and despair in his heart.

But when he laid his hand over his chest, he felt nothing out of the ordinary. A quick diagnostic showed that everything seemed to be in order—well, aside from the fact that he could barely walk, which was pretty much just the new normal for him. Miraculously, he was alive.

He grabbed his crutches, pulled himself to his feet, and dragged himself across the camp. “Hello?” he called out. All these silent bodies unnerved him. Could there have been some sort of massive EMP? Or maybe a solar flare or cosmic ray had hit the Earth and fried everyone’s circuits—it would certainly explain the aurora overhead. But it wouldn’t explain why he was okay… or, in the case of a gamma ray burst, why the atmosphere wasn’t currently boiling.


Almost as if on cue, one by one, some of the motionless bodies surrounding him began to twitch, writhe, and groan.

Anemone, easily identifiable by the deep forest-green cloak she wore, pulled herself to her hands and knees. “11S? I-Is that you?”

11S hurried toward her as quickly as his crutches would allow and struggled to help her up. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

“I… think so.” Anemone drew back her hood, letting her braided black hair spill out from beneath it, and looked up at the sky. “What’s going on?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, ma’am.” 11S glanced toward the western horizon once more and saw that the blue V-shaped ray of light hanging in the sky had begun to crumble and fade away. “It looks like… aurora borealis?”

“Aurora borealis? At this time of year? At this time of day? Over this part of the planet?”

11S shrugged.

Anemone put a hand over his shoulder and pulled herself to her feet, steadying him as well. “Whatever it is,” she said, “it looks like the danger’s passed us by. Try opening up a line of communication to the other camps; I’ll clean up around here.”

While Anemone tended to the others, 11S limped over to the communications terminal, pulling up a map of the Earth. All-clear signals from outposts all around the world trickled in; with his excellent pattern recognition, 11S quickly noticed that the pinpricks on the map were lighting up in a radial pattern around the mountain a few hundred kilometers from this camp; the bases closest to the mountain had come back online first. Ones further away from the mountain than Anemone’s camp were only just beginning to broadcast again. Machine outposts seemed to be coming back as well.

That mountain… Hadn’t something important happened there a year or so ago? Operation Agave or something? But that didn’t explain why it seemed to be the epicenter of whatever had just happened.
11S frowned pensively and studied the readouts more closely. Maybe whoever the faint black box signals in that area belonged to could explain this event…

---

It took 9S far longer than he’d have liked to get to the surface. He’d seen that blue aura twinkling in the sky as the pillar of light had faded away and the X-shaped fissure had sewn itself closed, the swirling maelstrom of souls reversing its course and beginning to slowly spiral outward—and he’d known it had been her.

Nobody could survive a fall from that height. In fact, 2B would have likely reached terminal velocity and burned to a crisp long before she hit solid ground.

But dammit, 9S was going to find her, or at least what was left of her, or at the very least the crater she’d left behind.

He scrabbled against the dirt, the makeshift rope ladder he’d thrown together from Gaubrieta’s healing thread slipping under his boots as he pulled himself over the lip of the gaping aperture.

Trees. The crater was surrounded by trees. The ancient, gnarled oaks stood like monuments, clustered around each other, their leafy canopies intertwining like the fingers of clasped hands, sunlight filtering through the gaps between the leaves to form dappled shadows on the ground.

The trees were bigger than the trees in Snowdin. They were bigger than 9S remembered trees on the surface being—and greener too, lusher, and stronger. A myriad of sounds drifted through the air, of buzzing and flying and burrowing creatures shifting through the underbrush. The sound of rushing water came from the distance. A shimmering rainbow curtain stretched across the sky; motes of light seemed to fall from it like snow.

9S shook his head and cleared his mind. He could enjoy the scenery later—he had to find 2B first. With any luck, they could bask in the sunlight under the trees together.

Brushing the dirt from the front of his frock coat and tenderly clutching at the barely-healed wound in his side, 9S hurried down to where he thought he’d seen the blue light touch down. With Pod 153 gone, he didn’t have any long-range tracking abilities, although if Pod 042 was still online (and if it was, then that was a good sign for 2B’s chances of survival as well) then it could contact him directly.

The forest clinging to the side of the mountain was massive; combing it could take days. 9S vaguely recalled hearing 6E say that she and three others had spent over a week trying to find 2B and 9S in the aftermath of Operation Argama. None of that inspired much confidence in 9S. In fact, it did the opposite. It utterly demoralized him.

Oh, 2B… 9S slumped against the knotted trunk of one of the ancient trees, sinking into the hollow created by its roots, squeezing his eyes shut and burying his face in his hands as his chest tightened around his black box and a lump formed in his throat. 2B, I… I didn’t expect this… If I’d known you’d have fallen from the top of the pillar, I… I’d have…

He’d have what? Dragged 2B and 6O back to Toriel’s house so the three of them could huddle in safety until the next seizure claimed them and their souls were torn from their bodies?

He and 2B had known going in that only one of them might come back—if either of them did at all. It didn’t make it sting any less, though, that 2B could be dead, and if she wasn’t, she could be so grievously injured that she wouldn’t last long enough for 9S to find her.
9S began to weep quietly, his sobbing and whimpering mingling with the faint and distant birdsong. First Pod 153, now her. What was he going to do if he couldn’t find 2B? He knew he’d made a promise to her—twice—but…

[Pod 042 to Unit 9S.]

Pod 042’s mechanically-tinged voice rang in 9S’s ears, stifling his cries. “Pod?” He pulled himself to his feet, stumbling across the knobbly roots running through the ground. “Where are you? Where’s 2B? Is she okay?”

[Response: Unit 2B and I have landed in the foothills roughly five hundred meters and forty-two degrees southwest of Unit 9S’s current location. Unit 2B is still online, but has sustained heavy damage.]

Still online. 9S’s heart leaped, but he tried not to let himself get carried away with the good news. “Is she dying?”

[Negative. I was able to slow our descent to avoid catastrophic impact. Damage sustained has been primarily the result of prolonged combat. Unit 2B is heavily incapacitated and as yet unresponsive. Proposal: Unit 9S should assist in running high-level diagnostics and performing necessary repairs.]

9S sighed in relief, wiping his tears on his sleeve, and bolted through the forest in as straight a line as possible in the direction Pod 042 had indicated. “I’m on my way!” he shouted, his voice ringing across the mountainside.

▫▫▫

It seemed to take forever for 9S to reach 2B. He found her in the collapsed remains of an unrecognizable building that seemed to have been burnt to the ground hundreds of years ago—all that remained of it was its ash-stained stone foundations, toppled columns, and crumbling walls. A shaggy field of golden flowers circled it.

9S was tired by the time he reached the ruined building; in fact, he felt as though he could barely stand up. But he pushed himself onward, all but hurling himself over the stone house’s threshold. The building’s wood floor had long since burned and rotted away, revealing the naked basement below…

And beneath a mound of debris lay the unmistakable form of an android’s battered body, half-buried beneath what had once been what little remained of the ceiling. A small patch of pale pastel-green fabric was visible amid dark bloodstains on an arm protruding from the mound. Pod 042 hovered over it, turning to face 9S as he stared down at it and 2B’s body.

9S gingerly navigated across what little remained of the floor to the soot-covered stairs and down to the exposed basement. On his way, he stumbled over the charred chassis of an ancient model of android, not bothering to spare a thought toward where it might have come from or why it was here.

“Salutation: it is good to see you again, Unit 9S,” Pod 042 said. “I require your assistance in freeing and performing emergency diagnostics on Unit 2B.”

Barely managing to choke out a grateful greeting to the pod, 9S knelt down and pulled 2B’s body free of the rubble. Her wrist was limp as he grasped it, her hand flopping listlessly, her head lolling on her shoulder as she came free. As the hungry debris relinquished its grip on her, 9S stumbled backward and fell onto the floor, 2B’s body collapsing on top of his.
She was in bad shape, to say the least. The skin on her forearms had been torn to shreds, exposing the cracked armor plating of her chassis and the skeletal structure beneath. One of her legs had been torn away at the knee; strands of ragged synthetic sinew and cabling trailed from the truncated stump and the mangled remains of her knee servos leaked blood and oil. There was not a single patch of visible skin on her body that was not marred by scrapes and scratches and stained with blood at the very least. Pod 042 had already pulled a knife from her gut and had done what little it could to staunch the flow of blood and plug the wound.

“2B…” 9S wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tight, pressing his ear to her chest. She seemed to be breathing… but only barely. Her black box was whirring, but was emitting a strained, buzzing whine. “2B, can you hear me?”

Don’t leave me, 2B. Don’t leave me behind. I know I promised you I’d go on without you, but you promised everyone else that you’d come back to them. And you always kept your promises. Toriel, 6O, Alphys… you have to let them see you again. Please. If not for me, then for them.

His hands shaking, 9S gently laid 2B on her back and crouched beside her, tearing open her nightshirt and running his quivering fingers across the invisible seam lines marking her chestplate and abdominal plate, removing both to expose the inner workings of her chassis. With the panoply of her innards stretched out before him, 9S studied the intricate mechanisms within her torso for any severe issues, correcting whatever he could with what meager tools he had in his possession and delving into her systems to optimize and reroute her systems around the damaged areas as best he could.

At last, 9S managed to stabilize 2B, reducing the manic, high-pitched whine of her black box to its normal gentle, resonant hum; almost as if on cue, 2B cracked open her steely gray-blue eyes.

9S hastily reapplied her chest and abdomen, then shrugged off his coat and draped it backwards over her shoulders, using it to cover 2B like a blanket. “Does it hurt?” he asked. “2B, are you okay?”

2B’s eyes flitted toward him… yet there was something unnerving about her gaze—as if she was not looking at him, but rather a thousand meters past him; as if she could not see him at all, as if he had become invisible.

“Can you see me?” 9S asked 2B, worried that perhaps her visual processor was malfunctioning. She didn’t respond. Maybe her audio processor was the problem. “Can you hear me?” he asked.

His next words caught in his throat as he considered another, infinitely worse possibility.

“2B, can you…”

Her faraway stare continued to look past him, blank and almost lifeless. Her mouth hung just slightly open, and 9S could see her tongue shift behind her teeth, as if she was about to say something… yet she remained silent.

“Do you know who I am, 2B?” he asked her.

He reached out and brushed her hair away from her forehead, his fingertips lightly and gently tracing the contours of her bloodstained face. If she didn’t remember him…

She had to. She had to just be in shock. That was the most likely explanation. And yet it seemed less convincing to him than the most horrifying theory his mind could concoct.

“2B, it’s me. It’s me.” He kept running his hand over her face, his other hand clamped on her shoulder. “It’s me, 9S. Nines. Your Nines.”
What if she really didn’t remember him? What if she was… gone? 2B, the woman who had only ever spent all but the first three weeks of her life looking after him and taking care of him as best she could even in light of her heinous orders from Command; 2B, the woman with whom 9S had gone on so many incredible and harrowing adventures with…

What if all of that was gone?

“2B,” 9S whispered, his voice hoarse, his throat tight, hot tears springing to his eye. “Even if you don’t remember me, please, just… just say… something. Say something. Anything. Say my name, or just… let me know you’re okay.”

2B raised a bruised, bloodied, and worn-down hand, bits of her skeletal chassis peeking out from patches of torn-away and frayed skin and muscle, and laid it on 9S’s cheek. Her vast, vacant stare seemed to focus on him, if only for an instant.

Her voice emerged from her mouth as a weak, frail, timid squeak.

“Ni… n… ess…”

And then her eyes closed and her hand fell to her side.

9S sat down and leaned back against the rubble pile, pulled 2B close to him, and laid her hands in her lap. Her unconscious—he hoped she was unconscious—body seemed much more serene in this repose; he hoped she would be comfortable like this. He bowed his head, his cheek brushing against 2B’s, and closed his eye.

“Query: is Unit 9S—”

“Tired,” 9S answered the pod. He closed his hands over 2B’s and nestled closer to her, keeping an ear on the steady humming of her black box. He meant to monitor it for any irregularities, but instead the resonant vibrations quickly put him to sleep.

When 9S cracked his eyes open again, the sun had traveled in an arc across the darkening sky; the exposed basement of the ruins was now shrouded in shadow. He licked his cracked, dry lips and blinked blearily. 2B was still sitting heavily on his lap. He couldn’t move, let alone feel, his legs anymore. How long had he been out?

“Pod,” he whispered, his voice hoarse and throat dry. “Pod?”

There was no response.

“Pod?”

“Be not afraid, child,” a soft voice whispered.

Seven figures materialized from out of the gloom in front of the two androids, the shadows of their hooded cowls forming black voids that hid their faces.

9S recoiled and gripped 2B tighter, his black box whirring and straining as he tried to will his legs to move.

The hooded man closest to the androids knelt down and raised his gloved hand, letting it hover over 2B’s head. “We made a good choice with this one, Sabitum,” he said, glancing toward one of the others.
Sabitum nodded. “We were not sure, at first, if we should have given it to her or to you,” she told 9S. 9S wondered if he should have considered that a compliment.

“It nearly came down to a coin flip,” said one of the more distant cloaked people.

“Hush, Orchamus,” said the hooded man. “I do not think it would have mattered either way, in the end.”

Sabitum motioned to the silent others and bade them kneel, then knelt in turn as her compatriot upturned his hand in front of 2B’s face; a pale blue flame flickered in his open palm. 2B did not stir.

9S held 2B’s hands with a firmer grip. Were they taking out her soul? “What are you going to do to her?” he asked. What had meant to come out as an angered snarl came out as a weak, pathetic croak.

“We are not harming her—merely taking back what we gave her,” said Sabitum as her partner curled his fingers around the flickering flame. “It has been a terrible burden on her, has it not, 9S?”

9S nodded, relaxing his grip.

“Amazing that she even has this much of it left,” the hooded man mused as he clenched his fist. He uncurled his fingers, revealing that the flame, small and weak though it was, had not been diminished at all. “Whittled to scarcely a spark…”

“Alorus,” Sabitum said, laying a hand on the hooded man’s shoulder. “I fear we have little time to waste.”

Alorus nodded. “Ah, yes. It would be a shame if 2B’s reward for freeing us was to join us on our journey to the underworld.”

9S realized that he couldn’t hear 2B’s black box anymore. “2B,” he whispered, nudging her. “2B, are you—”

No.

No, she couldn’t be gone, she couldn’t have just—faded away like that—

“2B!”

Sabitum laid her hand on 9S’s forehead, running her fingers gently through his hair as if to calm him as he choked back his tears. “Do not despair, 9S. Now, Alorus…”

Alorus nodded and cast the flickering blue flame aside; with a deft flick of his wrist, 2B’s black box materialized in his hand in a flurry of amber sparks. “Sabitum, Orchamus, Zu, Istar, Ishum, Nabu—too long have we seven lingered in this mountain. It is time to hasten our departure.”

The other six cloaked people stood up and clustered around Alorus, laying their hands on his shoulders; a low, sonorous hum filled the air as the glimmering, striated lines traced across the faces of the black box in Alorus’s hands lit up in a spectrum of colors.

The humming ceased and Alorus pushed the black box back into 2B’s chest; his body and those of his fellows grew hazy and indistinct as the errant evening sunbeams
dispelled them like phantoms.

9S reached out toward them. "Wait," he gasped. "Who are you?"

9S opened his eyes and found himself nestled in Toriel’s embrace. The burned-out house was off in the distance, nestled between the hilltop he now found himself on and the forested slopes of the mountain. Toriel was cradling him in one arm and 2B’s battered body in the other. Asriel was curled up in her lap, sandwiched between 2B and 9S; he was fast asleep and gently snoring. Papyrus, Sans, Emil, Gaubrieta, Alphys, and 6O were there on the hilltop, too, staring out at the horizon with wonder and awe reflected on their faces.

Had it all been a dream? Those hooded people…

He stared out at the cloud-streaked violet sky, joining Toriel in gazing at the sun as it dipped closer to the horizon. The sky darkened, the clouds strewn across it painted pink, orange, and lavender by the reddening sun.

The sunset.

9S hadn’t seen it for almost a year. Toriel, he knew, hadn’t seen it for thousands of years. No other monster had never seen it before in their lives, not even once. No wonder everyone was so enthralled.

“I’d forgotten,” Toriel whispered softly as she gently rocked 2B and 9S in her arms, “how beautiful the sky truly was. Isn’t this wonderful?”

9S reached out and took 2B’s worn, yet warm hand. His constant companion, his steadfast caretaker, his big sister, the one thing in the world he loved more than anything else. He leaned against her; the two of them sat nestled into the old queen’s embrace. Still exhausted in spite of himself, he sank sleepily into the inviting warmth of his family.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes as the sky turned black and the stars shone their cold light down on the tranquil surface of the Earth. Above him, faint traces of the aurora still shimmered in the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Ending E: chara's counterattack

This is it. The conclusion to the storyline that comprised the entire second half of this fic. But hold your applause for now--this isn't the end. I'm sure you're all curious to know what will become of 2B…
Queen Toriel woke up bright and early, as she usually did. 'Bright,’ of course, was not literal in the slightest, and only described only how well-rested she was. It had been a few weeks since the Barrier had fallen, but she had not treated herself to a proper dawn just yet. The ancient humans had once said that the captain always went down with the ship, after all, and Toriel had no intention of basking in the sunlight while other monsters still dwelt in the dark. She would stay down here until each and every one of her people had found a place to live on the surface.

That said… perhaps she had underestimated how long it would take to set up permanent residences on the surface. Especially with the Royal Guard’s ranks all but decimated.

Not bothering to wait for her eyes to adjust, she flung out her arm and fumbled around for the lamp beside her bed, feeling for the switch and flicking it on. As light flooded her bedroom, she winced, squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds, and gingerly squinted until the light grew less harsh.

It took Toriel a few seconds to remember that she was in the castle, not her little home in the Ruins. This was Asgore’s guest bedroom… her bedroom, before she had left him. Her old home.

The bedroom still looked just like hers back at the Ruins, right down to the floor plan, the color of the blankets, and the wallpaper. The only things that differed were small details; the armoire was a bit more to the left, the wallpaper was a little faded, a few knickknacks were missing here and there…

And the now-familiar boxy, silvery shape of Pod 042 hovered at the side of the bed, a pair of crutches dangling from its claws. “Good morning, Queen Toriel,” it said.

Toriel got over her disorientation and sat up, ready to start a new day. There was plenty of work to be done, after all, and—

She became aware of a heavy weight pinning down her arm and preventing her from pulling herself up, then fully realized both that Pod 042 was in her bedroom and why Pod 042 was in her bedroom. She sighed and sank back into bed.
“Good morning, 2B,” she whispered to the android girl who’d burrowed under the covers next to her and was now clinging tightly to her arm. “So it is my turn this morning? I take it you did not sleep well?”

It was a rhetorical question. 2B had not slept well since that horrible day, especially not alone. She tried, gods help her, she tried, stubbornly stoic as she was, but every time she retreated, alone, to Asgore’s old room to sleep in, she would inevitably wake up somewhere else and in someone else’s arms.

2B was, Toriel figured, at war with herself—her tendency to lick her wounds in quiet solitude was constantly fighting a pitched battle with what seemed to be a newfound crippling fear of that very same loneliness. It was like having a craving to eat ice cream when you had a cavity (not that Toriel, who diligently brushed her teeth and flossed twice a day, would know what having a cavity felt like). Toriel could only sympathize with her.

Today, it was Toriel’s turn to host her, and she could only imagine what restless dreams and terrors generated by 2B’s subconscious had driven her here this morning. Three years old, the poor thing, and she had seen more violence in those years than most people could fit into a whole century.

To Toriel’s surprise, 2B cracked open her eyes—Toriel instantly worried she’d woken her up—and shook her head. “Pod pulled me out of rest mode,” she mumbled. She was making good progress—it wasn’t usually until much later in the day that she was willing to speak in complete sentences.

“Bad dream?”

2B didn’t answer.

“Are you still tired?”

2B shook her head.

“Observation: Unit 2B’s behavior upon waking suggests that her dream involved Queen Toriel in significant peril,” said Pod 042. “She insisted on making sure that you were safe.”

Toriel was almost flattered, though she would rather 2B have nice dreams about her than nightmares.

She yawned and sat upright, taking 2B along with her. There was nothing she wanted more than to stay here for a few more hours, but a queen had no shortage of responsibilities. (She was already sick of the workload, to be honest.)

“Pod, what time is it?” Toriel asked Pod 042.

“Response: it is 6:28 in the morning,” the pod answered.

Toriel yawned again. “And are 9S and 6O still not back yet?”

“Negative. Apparently, debriefing has taken longer than expected.”

“I have a meeting regarding our settlement plans that I must prepare for,” Toriel told 2B, pulling herself out of 2B’s embrace and out of bed. Hopefully, Asriel would wake up soon enough to keep her company until 9S and 6O returned. The last thing she wanted to do was leave 2B all by her lonesome. “But we still seem to have plenty of time for breakfast until then. Especially if you would like to assist me…”

2B slid off the side of the bed as well, letting out a noncommittal “okay” as she took her crutches
from Pod 042 and hobbled after Toriel.

“Advisory: Unit 2B will be unable to perform strenuous activity,” Pod 042 pointed out.

“Of course, Pod. I only need her to be my sous-chef for the morning. A very simple task. Now, let us see…” Toriel scanned the cupboards and the refrigerator for ingredients. Breakfast could be as simple as just a bowl of cereal, but if she was going to enlist 2B’s help, she might as well choose a recipe that was a bit more labor-intensive. Pancakes or waffles, perhaps? Or…

Her freshly-filled bowl of fruit caught her eye. It gave Toriel an idea. It wouldn’t be the healthiest breakfast and it would take a while to prepare, but she did have some pie crust cooling in the refrigerator. A little treat every now and then did nobody any harm, and besides, androids didn’t have to worry about their diets anyway…

“2B,” she said, laying a handful of sour cherries and a few peaches, plums, and nectarines on the kitchen counter along with the chilled pie dough, “for breakfast today, we are going to make a galette.”

2B didn’t reciprocate the mischievous twinkle in Toriel’s eyes, but at least she seemed to perk up a little.

“Let us put the oven on two hundred degrees Celsius… flatten the dough… no, flatter… too flat… try again… yes, just like that… and now for a part I am certain you will find fun.”

With the oven warming and the crust set aside, Toriel laid the fruit out beside a cutting board and handed a knife to 2B. “We need this fruit very thinly-sliced.”

Toriel did not need to tell her twice. 2B took to the task with gusto, pitting the fruit with ruthless, mechanical efficiency, tossing the stones aside, and carving them into slivers. There seemed to be a brighter sparkle in her eye, if only just a little bit, and maybe the tiniest hint of a smile on her face.

Nevertheless, the cuts ended up uneven and ragged; 2B’s hands shook as she set the knife down. Though she’d tried, there was so much less grace in her movements than before.

Toriel looked down at 2B’s bandaged hands, the fresh gauze spattered with fruit juice and pale and dusty with flour, with little bits of dough still sticking to the unfloured patches of rough cloth. She wondered if she’d asked too much of her. 2B overturned her hands and stared at her stained, sticky palms, not saying a word.

“You did well, 2B,” Toriel assured her, reaching out to tousle her hair.

2B hardly reacted at all, merely dumping the sliced fruit into a mixing bowl. “Now what?” she mumbled.

“No, Toriel said, a little flustered—what should she have said to 2B instead?—“We must mix in the fruit with sugar, flour, cinnamon, nutmeg, and salt.”

2B did so, and when that was done, Toriel brought the crust onto a baking sheet and walked 2B through the process of piling the fruit on it, folding over the edges, and brushing the exposed crust with a beaten egg. The girl followed her directions in utter silence.

“One hundred days, was it?” Toriel mused aloud, recalling what 9S and Pod 042 had told her soon after 2B had woken up.

When 2B had entered into that pillar of light, she had accumulated one hundred days’ worth of
memories all in the span of an hour. For Toriel, who had lived for millennia, the average year would fly by in the blink of an eye. For someone like 2B, though, who was not even four years old, those one hundred days were quite a lot.

Toriel recalled what she had asked 9S when he’d finished his diagnostic of 2B’s systems and revealed what had happened to her. ‘Surely you can just delete all those memories,’ she’d asked.

‘It’d be dangerous to try deleting all of them at once,’ 9S had answered. ‘That, and there’s a kill switch somewhere in 2B’s memory region to prevent me from accessing confidential information. I wouldn’t want to accidentally trigger it.’

He’d glanced at 2B, his eye softening, a conflicted frown tugging at the corners of his mouths. ‘But…’

2B had laid a bandaged hand on his shoulder. ‘No,’ she’d said, speaking for the first time since she’d regained consciousness.

It had been then that Toriel had realized just how important memories were to 2B. Even the bad ones. Especially, it seemed, the bad ones. Memories were what defined her—and everybody else. To 2B, they were the core of every living being. They were sacred. They were sacrosanct.

Nevertheless, Toriel couldn’t now help but wonder if 2B was constantly reconsidering that plea. What a horrible burden it must be…

“It must have felt like an eternity,” Toriel asked 2B, “did it not? When you were… in there?”

2B averted her eyes, choosing to focus on the kitchen counter instead of meeting Toriel’s gaze. Her hand continued to move in a slow circle, as if by rote, around the edge of the galette; the brush was gripped tightly between her fingers, dripping with beaten egg.

“I cannot even begin to imagine how much you must have missed us.”

2B’s hand stopped its rhythmic motion, and she nodded slowly, still failing to look Toriel in the eyes.

Toriel plucked the brush from her hand and set it aside. “I think this has had enough,” she said, wrapping her paws around 2B’s hands, curling them around the sides of the baking sheet, and guiding it into the oven.

She closed the oven door. “Now, see here… It took us, oh, perhaps fifteen minutes to prepare that,” she said, checking the clock that hung on the wall. “And now it will bake for a half hour. When it comes out, it will have spent more than half its life in that inferno.”

“And then we eat it,” 2B said.

“No. Then we wait for it to cool,” Toriel corrected, “for about fifteen minutes. Then we each have a piece. And then, when 9S and 6O come back and Asriel wakes up, they will each have a piece. And then the galette will sit here—what is left of it, anyway—until later this afternoon, when I return from my meeting. And hopefully, there will still be a piece left for me to have as a snack.”

She glanced down the hallway.

“On second thought,” she said, reminding herself of Asriel’s sweet tooth, let alone 9S’s, “the odds of it lasting that long are quite slim, even if I cut it into many pieces. But do you understand?”

2B shook her head.
“One hundred years from now, all of the anguish you’ve felt so far in your life will be just a little, tiny dot on the timeline of your life. Just like that galette will survive its time in the oven,” Toriel said, laying a paw on 2B’s shoulder, “and just as you survived your own inferno, in time, it will be nothing more than a footnote in the story of your life. And trust me, my child, you have a bright future ahead of you.”

2B bowed her head, laying her hands on the counter. Her shoulders were shaking. “It’s… embarrassing,” she admitted, her voice still quiet and mousy.

“I am sorry,” said Toriel, withdrawing her hand. “I was not aware you were so offended by being compared to fruity desserts. I will take care not to—”

“It’s not that,” 2B said.

“Then, what is it?”

2B said nothing.

“You can tell me.”

2B still said nothing.

“2B, I want to help you. But I can do nothing to ease your pain if you do not tell me where it is coming from.”

2B continued to say nothing.

“Please,” Toriel said, cradling 2B’s chin in her forefinger and thumb and gently lifting and turning her head so that she was looking up into her eyes. “Tell me where it hurts.”

2B’s eyes darted downward, her gaze fixing itself on the kitchen counter. “It’s… that I can’t be alone anymore,” she admitted. “That I can’t enjoy even a moment of solitude. That the moment you or 6O or Nines leaves my side I start to worry you won’t ever come back…”

Her hands were shaking, too, as much with anger and frustration, it seemed, as they were with sadness. There was a faraway look in her eyes, a gaze that seemed to stare off beyond, beyond the foundations of the mountain, through solid stone into infinity.

“I kept the faith. All that time I kept believing that I’d see you and Nines and 6O and everyone else again. That no longer how long it took or how much it hurt, if I kept going, it would end and I’d be with the… I’d be with you again,” 2B said, raising her voice. The more she spoke, the more her words came out with the ferocity and inexorability of a stream of vomit. Toriel hadn’t heard her speak so much in weeks, and she’d never heard 2B speak a word about what she’d endured until now. “It was faith that kept me going when the minutes turned to hours… when the hours turned to days… when the d-days turned to weeks… wh-when the weeks…”

Toriel had the foresight to catch 2B as she all but fell into her, burying her face in her chest to muffle her sobs. The crutches which had been tucked securely under her armpits clattered to the floor.

Toriel knelt down and wrapped her arms around 2B as she all but fell into her, burying her face in her chest to muffle her sobs. The crutches which had been tucked securely under her armpits clattered to the floor.

Toriel knelt down and wrapped her arms around 2B and softly nuzzled her cheek, drying the girl’s tears on her fur. “It will be all right,” she said, rocking her back and forth. 2B’s breath was short, ragged, and uneven; Toriel’s sensitive ears could feel the strained whirring of her black box pick up in volume and pitch. “It is okay to hurt. It will not last. You will get better. I promise.”

The two of them embraced each other in silence for the better part of the next half-hour until 2B
calmed down, breaking away only when the timer for the oven began to ring.

“Back there, where everything faded away,” 2B said, “I… I was afraid I’d forget it all. And in my
dreams, that fear is all I have left…”

“It is okay now, my child,” Toriel assured her. She held her tighter, running her fingers through her
hair and down her neck. “It is all over now.”

2B’s fingers curled, worming their way into Toriel’s fur. “I was afraid you would forget me, too…”

“Oh, nonsense,” Toriel assured her. “How on Earth could I forget somebody as strange as you, 2B?”

2B clung to her more tightly, shuddering and sobbing. Toriel wondered, had she said the wrong
thing?

Come to think of it, hadn’t 9S mentioned something recently… something about ’turning back time?’
It was the only conceivable way 2B could have spent so many months locked in battle without her
body breaking under the strain.

Recalling that, Toriel realized… 2B had done that before, hadn’t she?

“I… have forgotten you once before, haven’t I?” she asked, pressing 2B closer.

2B nodded.

“That explains… quite a lot. Truthfully, when I first saw you, I felt like I was seeing an old friend for
the first time…”

And it explained why Toriel had written ’2B and 9S’ on the wall next to one of the puzzles littering
the Ruins so soon before she’d found the two. She had indeed experienced some sort of premonition
that morning long ago… and all along, it had been a fragment of memories from a future that had
never happened.

“I’m sorry…”

“But don’t you see what that means?” Toriel asked.

2B shook her head.

“I never fully forgot you. A part of me remembered!”

“Really…”?

“2B…” Toriel brushed the hair out of her eyes and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. “Nothing in
the world is strong enough to erase your presence from the hearts of those who love you.”

“Thank you,” 2B said, still sniffling a bit as she wiped her eyes on her sleeve and reached for her
crutches. Toriel helped her back up. “I’ll be fine. I’m just mad at myself for how I’ve been behaving.
If I were you, or 6O, or Nines, I’d think I was being clingy and annoying.”

Toriel snickered. That was certainly nonsense. “Do you berate yourself for needing somebody to
carry you up and down every staircase you come across?” she asked, gesturing to what remained of
2B’s right leg.

“No, that would be foolish,” 2B replied, scoffing at how obvious the answer was. “It’s not like I can
just get over not having a leg.”
“Ah, I see,” Toriel said, slipping a pair of oven mitts over her paws. “You know, it is actually a welcome change of pace for you to be so… ‘clingy and annoying,’ as you put it. Those are not the words I would use, though.”

“Still, I’d like to get it over with sooner rather than later,” 2B said. Her voice cracked.

“True,” Toriel said. “All the same, it reminds me of Asriel when he was little. He was a world-class champion hugger, as his… as his father would say.”

“I could… try to hug you more often, then. If that’s what you want.”

“That is very sweet of you. Oh, and speaking of sweet…” Toriel turned off the oven and pulled the door open, licking her lips with anticipation and hoping to find a wonderful aroma behind the wall of heat that buffeted her.

Instead, what greeted her was the stench of smoke. The galette came out of the oven with its crust charred black; the glistening kaleidoscope of assorted sugar-glazed fruits, too, was overcooked and blackened.

“Oh, no! I must have set the oven for the wrong temperature…” Toriel sighed and glanced at 2B, whose expression was now blank and unreadable. “Well,” she said, patting her on the head and tousling her hair, “baking does not always have an important life lesson to teach you. Sometimes a burned galette is simply a burned galette. It does not mean that anything I said to you was incorrect, mind you. Nothing I ever say is incorrect.”

“Are you sure?” 2B asked. There was the barest hint of dry, sardonic wit to her voice.

With a smile, Toriel gently prodded her nose. “You are sounding better already. See, it does help to talk things out.”

She checked the clock as she finished her breakfast and realized, to her dawning horror, that she was running out of time to get ready for her meeting. And here she was, still in her pajamas!

She cleared her throat. “Um, 2B, I, er… unfortunately, I will have to be going soon. Is that okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Will you be all right without me? There is cereal in the cupboard and milk in the fridge if you would like to eat something…”

2B glanced away, her cheeks reddening, clearly embarrassed to be so vulnerable, so wounded, so dependent on others. “I-I’m good,” she stammered unconvincingly. “Don’t worry about me.”

Toriel felt horrible. If she were not queen, if she did not have so many duties to fulfill, she would stay here. When Chara had passed away, she and Asgore had been away in an urgent meeting instead of by their side. Perhaps if she had just put her foot down and stopped Asriel then and there, that horrible day may have gone differently… and the entire course of history could have changed.

“Are you sure? I can reschedule the meeting,” she said, lying. She’d put off proper planning for settlement of the surface for too many days already, and especially considering the guests who had just arrived in the kingdom, it couldn’t be delayed any longer. “We can stay home and try baking something else. We still have some pie dough. Or perhaps cookies…”

“No, I understand. You have your work to do,” 2B insisted. “I’ll… make do. Sorry for making you worry about me.”
“You do not have to make me. I can do that just fine on my own, my child.” Toriel patted her on the cheek, pleased to see the corner of her mouth twitch ever-so-slightly upward, then looked up at Pod 042. “You take good care of her while I am away,” she told it.

“Affirmative.”

“There is just one thing,” Toriel added as she guided 2B to the living room. “I would like to ask you, since I was able to pick up the relevant paperwork while at City Hall the other day.” She started to feel a little queasy—not from hunger, but from nerves.

2B took a seat in the easy chair next to the hearth. “Paperwork?” she parroted, a quizzical look on her face.

“It is up to you, of course, if you wish it,” Toriel said, suddenly feeling as though she’d leaped into her own oven. She nervously twiddled her thumbs. Why was this so nerve-wracking? It would hardly change anything. However, there was simply… such finality to the question she wished to ask. “But these papers, if you sign them, they will… um… er… n-never mind. I-I will surprise you with them this afternoon.”

2B perked up a bit. “What are they?”

“They are… adoption papers.”

“Hmm.” 2B glanced away at the hearth. “For whom?”

“For you and 9S, of course.”

A sharp intake of breath was 2B’s only response. Her eyes widened. Toriel couldn’t believe she was surprised. Was she just faking it? Why would she?

Revealing her plan at last freed Toriel of the anxiety she’d felt when trying to bring it up. It was like bathing in a very cold pool of water—one simply had to dive in. “You already live in my house, eat my food, sleep in my beds, and call me ’Mom,’” Toriel rationalized. “So… why not?” She shrugged. “Politically, it could be quite a boon as well. Think of it as a way of uniting monsters and androids. Although that is an awfully callous way to look at things…”

“I’d…” 2B buried her face in her hands. “I don’t know. This is… You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Serious as a heart attack.” Toriel pried 2B’s hands away from her face. “I understand. It is a serious commitment to sign a document like this. And even if you tell yourself it is something you have already set your heart on… it is still nerve-wracking to set it in stone, is it not?” She could barely even contain the butterflies in her own stomach. It was like watching two young people who loved each other skittishly skirt around saying those words to each other, no matter how obvious it was.

She hurried over to her desk, found one of the adoption forms, and rushed it over to 2B with a pen and a book to write on top of.

“If I sign this…” 2B took the sheet of paper from Toriel and stared at it. “I…”

“It is a big step to take,” Toriel said, nodding. “Yes, I know. But can you say you have not taken so, so many greater steps in just these past few months?”

2B glanced down at the floor. She opened her mouth and closed it a few times, her eyes darting back and forth.
“Don’t be afraid,” Toriel said. “No mere piece of paper can best you, 2B.”

She raised her pen, set it to the paper, and signed her name. Her hand shook, but her signature was strong and clear.

2B YoRHa002E010711942

That, Toriel mused, was quite an ungainly surname. She was glad 2B was choosing to replace it. Beneath that line, 2B printed the name she was to have once the papers had been processed.

Toriel could see the clarity in her eyes like stormclouds clearing, as if with that single act a switch had been flipped. Over the course of a second, the old 2B had vanished and been replaced.

Toriel grinned, feeling for all the world like a spider that had just caught a big, juicy fly. “Do you know what this means, 2B?” she asked, taking the paperwork from her.

“What?” 2B asked. It sounded as if she were dreading the response, as though she’d immediately seen the devious smile Toriel had been trying to hide.

“Do you know what this makes you?”

“…Your daughter.”

“Well, yes,” Toriel said, “and…”

“2B Dreemurr.” 2B spoke her new name as though she were tasting it. “Sounds a little… on-the-nose as far as names go.”

“Yes,” Toriel said, “but… 2B, think about it. What does you being my daughter make you?”

2B cringed. It seemed she’d figured out exactly what Toriel was going to say next. Toriel herself was quite proud of it. She’d been saving it for months for this exact moment.

2B covered her face with her hands.

“Fine,” Toriel said. “If you will not say it, I will.”

“Please, don’t,” 2B groaned.

Toriel’s grin widened. “Until this paperwork is filed, 2B, you are… a princess-to-be!”

2B let out an aggrieved, frustrated scream into her hands as Toriel laughed.

With that out of the way, Toriel hurried back into into her bedroom to freshen up and change into something a bit more befitting her position. A queen had to look her best, after all: one could never tell who might be trying to take photos.

And it went without saying that after Asgore’s feet of clay, Chara’s despotic reign, and Toriel’s own dereliction of duty all those years ago, the general public was wary of having a Dreemurr on the throne at all—so she couldn’t have so much as a hair out of place. Her continued rulership, and the possibility that Asriel might one day inherit the throne, hinged on her leading monsterkind to the surface quickly, smoothly, and above all, safely.

A few sprays of perfume in her fur, about half a minute with a brush, some mascara, and her good pair of reading glasses was all it took, once she’d put on a fresh set of royal robes, to make her look presentable. As she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the vanity mirror, she entertained the
thought that she didn’t look a day over nine thousand.

Pod 042 was waiting for Toriel when she opened the door, which shocked her so much that she nearly fell over. “Oh!”

“Advisory: Queen Toriel should consume adequate nutrition in preparation for her meeting,” the pod said, lifting its claws. It was grasping a bowl of colorful, sugary cereal. Where it had gotten that, Toriel had no idea, since she never bought that stuff. It seemed she would have a few questions to ask Asriel (and 9S) later tonight.

Toriel waved away the bowl. “Much appreciated, Pod, but I am afraid there is nothing nutritional in that. I will pick something up on my way downtown.”

She poked her head into Asriel’s bedroom. “Asriel,” she whispered into the gloom. A part of her was afraid she wouldn’t find anyone in that room, that note of fear darkening her voice. It was still so hard for her to believe that her son could have risen from the dead not once, but twice…

Something in one of the two beds stirred and Asriel poked his head out from under the covers, squinting against the shaft of light coming from the hall. “Mmmrrrrgh,” he mumbled, blearily rubbing his eyes.

“Good morning, Asriel. I must go to work now. Please help look after 2B for me, okay?”

Asriel slunk out of bed, dragging the covers behind him, and shuffled across the floor toward her, yawning. “Mmkay.”

Toriel crouched down and gave him a warm hug, brushing his fur to tame his disheveled bedhead. “Did you sleep well?”

“M’fine, Mom,” he groaned, trying to pull himself away from her as she tended to his fur. “C’mon! It’s not like I’m going out anywhere today!”

Toriel smiled. All she had to do to get him to go from half-asleep to fully-awake was try to tidy him up a bit. Asriel had become quite a bit more unruly since his second resurrection, but he was still her boy through and through. “We have guests from the surface in our kingdom today,” she told him. “It would be polite to entertain them here tonight… so do try to look presentable, just in case.”

“Ugh.”

“At least make sure you are cleaned up and wearing something nice in time for dinner.”

“Fine.”

Toriel nuzzled his nose and kissed his forehead. “Have fun and stay out of trouble, Asriel. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

She strode onward down the hall and into the foyer. “Well, 2B,” she asked, “how do I look?”

2B looked her up and down. “That’s that same thing you wore to the last meeting, isn’t it?”

“Oh, aren’t you the pot calling the kettle black,” Toriel huffed. “In your first two weeks here, you wore the same outfit day in and day out until it disintegrated! Not that there was much of it to disintegrate in the first place… Besides,” she added, “this is not the same thing. It is merely an
identical article of clothing. Also, the brooch is different.”

2B smiled. “Okay.”

Toriel smiled back and gave her another firm hug. “Call me if you need me. Stay out of trouble. And make sure Asriel eats a decent breakfast.”

“Moom!” Asriel protested from down the hall.

“Asriel, I will talk to you and 9S later tonight,” Toriel told him.

“Androids don’t even need to eat healthy, Mom!” Asriel called out, pure anguish written all over his plaintive wail.

“I could not ask for a better daughter, 2B,” Toriel said, giving her one more maternal squeeze and nuzzling her nose. “Whenever you feel alone, remember that. Okay?”

2B nodded.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

With one last kiss on 2B’s cheek, Toriel reluctantly hurried out the door and headed downtown.

▫▫▫

The streets of New Home were horrendously crowded—more than enough to trigger Toriel’s agoraphobia—but she held herself together as best she could, realizing once she had reached Parliament Hall that she had been holding her breath nearly the whole time.

A red haze throbbing at the corners of her filed of vision, her chest on fire, and her lungs fit to burst, Toriel slammed the door shut behind her and exhaled, her shoulders heaving. The sound of her heavy breathing echoed through the anteroom as she took long, deep breaths to calm herself down.

“Ah, here she is now. Honored guests, this is our sovereign Queen, Toriel Dreemurr.”

Toriel looked around for the source of the voice as she caught her breath and zeroed in on one of the kingdom’s four regional governors standing in front of two visitors from the surface. Dogamy and Dogaressa, now the highest-ranking guards in the kingdom, flanked them.

Mortified, she felt her cheeks burn with shame beneath her fur. “Oh, hello. I am Toriel, Queen of the Monster Kingdom.” She curtsied politely. “And you are…”

The first of the two envoys to step forward was an olive-skinned android woman clad in a forest-green cloak. Toriel spotted several empty holsters on the fatigues beneath her cloak and hoped that the guards had thoroughly searched this woman for weapons. Then again, she was apparently a friend of 2B’s. Toriel had not had the chance to formally greet her until now, but knew that she had been the one who’d requested to debrief 9S and 6O when she had arrived last night.

The second envoy was a machine—a rather rusty one at that, with spindly limbs sprouting from a barrel-shaped torso and a head like a tin can. Its large green optical sensors protruded, bug-eyed, from its face. As it stepped forward, Toriel noticed that its whole body shook as if it were shivering.

“This is Anemone,” the governor said, beckoning to the woman. “She’s the leader of the android military’s ground forces.”
“In this region, anyway,” Anemone added, bowing politely.

“Nice to…” She paused, looking upward as she realized how much Toriel towered over her. “Nice to meet you, Your Highness,” she said.

Toriel was relieved to know that the intimidation factor of her height alone was enough to override the embarrassment of her awkward entrance. “The pleasure is mutual, Miss….? Er, sorry, do you have any rank or title I should be aware of?”

“Lieutenant Colonel, ma’am. But ’Anemone’ will do.”

Toriel shook her hand. As she drew closer to the woman, she noticed that the cloak she wore, as ornate as it was with its intricate patterns of gold thread sewn into the hem, was incredibly worn and had something of an acrid, metallic, gunpowdery smell clinging to it. Anemone was not a woman who had many luxuries, it seemed—laundry and tailoring not being one of them. The other android soldiers accompanying her were just as worn and ragged. Dress uniforms did not seem to be a part of this military’s culture. “Likewise,” she said, her paw enveloping Anemone’s gloved hand, “you may call me Toriel. I hope you had no trouble with 9S and 6O last night.”

“Of course not. I finished their debriefing a few hours ago, actually. I will have to get 2B’s side of the story, too, of course,” Anemone reminded her.

“And I will let you know when she is ready. She is currently in a very delicate state right now. And who are your friends?” Toriel asked.

The other androids standing at Anemone’s side snapped to attention and saluted. She gestured to them. “These are Lavender, Clover, Cucumber, and Jackass.”

“Er—Jackass?” Toriel asked.

The android to whom the name belonged, a woman in a gray cloak with a ragged strip of cloth covering one eye, nodded and crossed her arms. “The flower, not the animal,” she clarified, speaking curtly.

“She’s our Information Analysis Officer. And demolitions expert,” Anemone clarified.

“And a few other things,” said Lavender. “Weird things.”

“She once tried to take two androids and combine them into one unit. It was terrifying,” Clover chimed in.

“I should know. I was one of them,” Cucumber added.

“And this is Pascal,” Anemone said, gesturing to the machine. “He’s the leader of the peaceful machine faction on the surface.”

“I’m a de facto leader, to be honest,” Pascal said. He had a soft, feminine voice, unlike the rough and electronically-modulated voices Toriel was accustomed to hearing from machines. He didn’t seem proud of his position or the role he played among machines. In fact, there was a somber and melancholic undertone to his voice—one that told Toriel quite clearly that he had lost something—or someone—quite precious to him very recently. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Queen Toriel.”

“The pleasure,” Toriel answered, clasping Pascal’s mechanical hand with her paw, “is all mine. You arrived last night, too, did you not? I do hope the accommodations have been to your liking.”
“They have been indeed, Queen Toriel,” said Pascal. “I am… glad to find that peaceful machines have been living down here already, as well.” Again, there was that somber tone entering his voice. “Would a tour of your kingdom be out of the question, Your Highness? We saw quite a bit of it on our way here, but there is still so much I am curious about!”

“Ah, of course we can make room for a tour!” Toriel assured Pascal. “First, though, we should get down to business and discuss the matters at hand.” She put her hands on her hips as she appraised her new allies. “Anemone, Pascal… I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

And then Toriel remembered something.

“Wait,” she said to Anemone. “You said you let 9S and 6O go hours ago. Do you know where they are right now?”

“Oh, them? As soon as we were done, they left with the Scanner I brought to show him around the place.”

From the second 9S had emerged from a debriefing session with Anemone that had lasted well into the night, 11S hadn’t stopped hugging him. At first, he’d just thought the other Scanner needed help walking, given that he had such a pronounced limp. But it hadn’t taken him long to figure out that there was more to it than that.

After trying desperately to keep 11S occupied for the past few hours with walks through New Home’s oldest neighborhoods (the museum and other really interesting things, unfortunately, were closed this early in the morning), 9S was glad he’d managed to find something to keep 11S’s attention. And that was something he knew no Scanner on the surface had ever seen before: food.

“I’m so happy to see you guys,” 11S bawled in between sobs and forkfuls of syrup-soaked pancake. His cheeks shimmered with tears. He had a softer face and softer voice than most Scanner models, but other than that and the sandy brown color of his hair, he could have been 9S’s twin.

“We’re happy to see you, too,” 6O consoled him, reaching across the table to pat his hand. “I know just how you feel, 11S! I thought there wasn’t anything left of YoRHa but me, too. I thought I’d lost everything and everyone and it hurt so much… and then when 2B showed up, I was just so happy that I didn’t know how to feel!”

“2B said you threw a lamp at her,” said 9S.

“Uh… heh, y-yeah, I kinda did.”

“Thanks, 6O.” 11S inched closer to 9S and leaned against his shoulder. “I’m so happy you’re alive, Nines… I’m so… Mmmm! What did you say this was called again?” he asked, sniffling as he held up a forkful of food.

“It’s called a ’fork,’ 11S,” said 9S.

“They’re called ’pancakes,’” said 6O. “They were my first breakfast down here, too! Aren’t they good?”

“So good,” 11S said, wiping his tears away on his sleeve and shoveling his breakfast into his mouth as though he’d never eaten before (he hadn’t, in fact). “Nines, you didn’t tell us you were living it up like this down here!”
“I kinda didn’t want you and Anemone and the others to be jealous,” said 9S. “Besides, it wasn’t all fun and games down here, believe me. Anyway… uh… ‘Nines?’”

“That’s what your friends call you, right?”

“Yeah,” 9S replied. “Sorry, were we… friends?”

11S pulled away from 9S and sat up straight. His face fell; 9S wondered if he was going to start crying again. “I, uh… I mean… my model wasn’t rolled out until after Operation Argama, so…” He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I guess you’ve never actually met me before. I-If it bothers you, I can just call you ‘9S’…”

“N-No, that’s fine.” This was weird. The idea that there’d been another 2B and 9S running around on the surface all this time who’d led completely different lives had been easy for 9S to grasp in theory… but coming up against its practical consequences was a lot harder for him to wrap his head around. But if 9S had been friends with 11S before, surely he could be friends with him again.

Although…

Well, 11S was nice, that was for sure. But he was so, so needy that it actually grated on 9S’s nerves a bit. He tried to cut 11S some slack, knowing what he’d been through—11S hadn’t shut up about it, after all—but every second he spent having to tend to him kept him away from 2B. 9S was sure that later today, once 11S had had some time to calm down and he had gotten a chance to check up on 2B and make sure she was okay, he’d be feeling more charitable toward this lone survivor of YoRHa. The way things were now, though, 9S just felt irritated. Good thing 6O was here to relate to 11S.

“Looks like someone had a boyfriend back on the surface,” 6O teased, giggling. “You know, Nines, I thought I overheard 21O talking to another Operator about unauthorized communications between you and one of the other Scanners…”

11S’s cheeks flushed beet-red. “6O, please…”

9S gagged on his coffee, all but spewing it down his chin and onto his shirt. 6O leaned back, seeming very satisfied by the chaos she’d wrought, as he coughed and cleared his throat. “E-Excuse me,” he croaked, standing up. “I’ll be right back.”

He hurried to the bathroom, ran a towel under the faucet, soaked it, wrung it out, and applied it to the stain on his shirt. Why monster food left stains if it was made of magic, he didn’t know. Then again, it was just as much of a mystery why monsters had organs and blood when they themselves were made of magic as well. Perhaps in time he’d find out the answers to those questions. Right now, he just didn’t want to look like a mess.

While he busied himself, the door swung open behind him; he caught sight of who’d followed him into the bathroom. It wasn’t someone he’d wanted to run into here. Or anywhere.

“Ah, 9S. Just the man I wanted to see.” Muffet crossed all three pairs of her arms. “Where,” she asked, “is my money?”

“Um… ’your money?’” 9S asked, dabbing his shirt dry and turning around. “Sorry, have we met, Miss, uh…?”

“Oh ho ho no, no, don’t you try to play me for a fool,” Muffet said, wiggling one of her chitinous fingers. “You offered to pay me triple the price on your head so I wouldn’t rat you out to the Royal Guard, remember?”
“Hmm…” 9S scratched his chin. “Nope. Doesn’t ring a bell. Sorry.”

“Do you recall being webbed up by my spiders and begging for your life?”

“The first part, yeah,” 9S admitted, slowly stepping in a wide arc around Muffet. All five of her eyes were trained on him. “The second… nah.”

“Well, you did promise me triple the bounty.”

“Triple the bounty.”

“Yes.”

“That’s exactly what I promised you.”

“Yes,” Muffet said, growing impatient. “Triple the bounty, exactly! Now make with the moolah, sweetie, or I swear you’ll find out just how sweet your insides are!” The angrier she became, the more saccharine and high-pitched her voice became.

“All right, all right, don’t get your thorax in a twist.” 9S grabbed his checkbook, wrote a check, ripped it from the book, and threw it at her. “There you go. Triple the bounty on my head, exactly, just like I promised you.”

Muffet greedily snatched up the check. “Ahuhuhu… so glad to be doing business with you, sweetie… With this money, I’ll—”

9S suppressed a mischievous snort and tried not to laugh.

Muffet’s five eyes widened as she scanned the check. “What,” she snarled, crushing the sheaf of paper in her hand, “is this?”

“It’s exactly what I promised you.” 9S grinned. “Triple the bounty on my head. And since the Android Bounty Act’s been repealed, that bounty is…”

Muffet’s face fell; the crumpled paper fell from her hand and fluttered to the floor. “No…”

“Yup. Sorry, better luck next time.” 9S spun on his heel and walked out, the door swinging shut behind him as he made his way back to the table.

“You were in there a while,” 6O noted as 9S approached. 11S, who’d been whispering something to 6O, yelped and shut himself up very quickly. “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah,” 9S said. “Just had to take care of a bug.” He fished some money out of his pocket and piled it on the table. “C’mon, let’s check in on 2B. She might be up by now.”

“What’s the hurry?” 11S asked, resting his chin in his hands. “There’s so much I haven’t tasted here yet…”

“The hurry is that I’m running out of money…”

The door to the bathroom swung open. “9S!” Muffet shouted out. “You’ll live to regret this!”

“…And I’m being chased by a giant spider,” 9S said, helping 11S out of his seat and pulling him along.

“You live such an interesting life, Nines!” 11S gasped as 9S hauled him out of the diner, 6O trailing
behind him.

9S hurried north to the Dreemurr estate, weaving through the bustling streets with 11S dangling from his grip. Even though he hadn’t gotten a moment’s rest for nearly thirty hours, he didn’t feel the least bit fatigued. Maybe it was the thrill of the chase. Maybe he was just happy to be on his way back home.

Sleep came easily to androids. For the most part, it was as simple as flipping a switch.

For 2B, given her physical condition, sometimes it could be as easy as letting her eyelids, heavy as lead, fall and cocoon her in darkness.

No amount of kind words from Toriel could stave off what 2B always saw in her dreams. When she closed her eyes, she traveled back in time.

The dark infinity of Wormwood’s lair. The crystal floor stretching in a wide, flat expanse like an eerily-calm ocean. Wormwood’s draconic face with its single blazing eye filled her sight, plagued with blotches of static and misaligned pixels, as the demon held her aloft with a single finger running through her shoulder.

**I KNOW THIS HURTS.**

2B gritted her teeth, a sharp ache running through her jaw from the pressure, as she gripped at the blood-slicked talon. Her legs dangled as she tried futilely to worm her way off the skewer.

She had to keep going. To preserve her memory. Even if Wormwood was right… even if the longer she fought, the less of her remained in the outside world… even if her presence was slowly fading from the hearts and minds of the people she loved… she had to—

**DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG YOU’VE BEEN HERE, 2B? OR HAS IT ALL STARTED BLURRING TOGETHER? I CAN TELL YOU. BUT I THINK IT’S BEST TO KEEP YOU… IN THE DARK.**

A scream tore through 2B’s gritted teeth as she slid another centimeter down the length of the skewer. She impotently kicked out, her boots lashing against thin air as Wormwood raised its hand and lifted her higher off the floor. Her injured shoulder throbbed.

**YOU KNOW HOW TO END THIS. ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS STOP COMING BACK.**

She glanced at Pod 042’s mangled remains, its strewn-apart innards littering the crystal floor, and spat an incoherent curse at Wormwood.

**THERE IS NOBODY ON THE OTHER SIDE WAITING FOR YOU. NOT ANYMORE. IS IT SPITE THAT KEEPS YOU GOING? I’M NEVER GOING TO GET BORED DOING THIS, 2B. WEAPONS NEVER TIRE OF RENDING FLESH. CONSIGN YOURSELF TO OBLIVION AND SPARE YOURSELF AN ETERNITY OF SUFFERING!**
Wormwood gave its finger a subtle, savage twist, bringing the throbbing pain spreading from 2B’s shoulder deep down to her toes to new heights of agony. She let out an anguished scream—

“2B! Earth to 2B!”

2B’s eyes snapped open; she struggled to regain her bearings. She was panting, gasping for air. No. Hyperventilating. Her chest felt tight. Like a vise squeezing her black box. The room swam and shimmered around her. She couldn’t get enough air into her lungs. She was going to overheat.

“Oh, shit. 2B, it’s okay! There’s nothing wrong!”

The danger was passed. It hadn’t been real. It hadn’t been real. It hadn’t been real. 2B was home and she was safe. But the visions kept hounding her.

Maybe this was the dream. Maybe she was still in there and still needed to defend herself and still and still and still and still

“My sword,” she blurted out, struggling to regulate her breathing as the whirring of her black box began to ring in her ears. “Where’s my sword? I need it. I need my sword.” She curled and uncurled her fingers, her fingernails digging into her bandages. Was her NFCS not functional? She wasn’t getting any error messages. Her sword…

She lunged forward and hit the floor. She couldn’t stand up. She had to fight. She needed a weapon. Her leg, too… why couldn’t it support her weight? “Pod! Pod, my sword! Please! I…”

Something warm and furry pried her hand open and slipped something into her grasp. The solid, strong hilt of a sword she knew well. Her thumb brushed against the rough white fabric wrapped artfully around the hilt; her senses began to return to her.

“Pull yourself together,” Asriel told her as he helped her sit up. “It’s okay. Just take some deep breaths. It’s okay. You’re safe. Don’t make me have to call Mom.” Asriel tapped Pod 042 on its hull. “Hey, Pod. Can you help me hack into her?”

“S-Sorry,” she choked out, coughing. She kept running her fingers across the hilt of the Virtuous Contract. Its ivory-white blade had snapped off at the hilt, leaving nothing behind but a jagged shard of white metal. A memento of victory, a trophy. A sign that time had passed. Proof that this world was real.

Asriel laid his paw against 2B’s forehead. “I’m gonna hack you, okay? Just hang in there.”

2B felt a chill trickle down the back of her neck, and within seconds, the knot in her chest began to unravel. She was still shivering, she was still dizzy and lightheaded, she still struggled to breathe and her eyes were watery and burning, but the tension was slowly draining from her body. Those memories were receding back into the darker corners of her mind, the feedback loop she’d been caught in growing fainter and fainter with each playback until it faded into the background radiation of her psyche.

Asriel wiped his brow and helped 2B back into the chair. “Boy, you’re a mess inside there, 2B. Feeling better?”

2B nodded, clutching her sword’s remains tighter as her pulse and breathing slowly returned to normal. “Where’s Nines? And 6O? Are they okay?”

“Yeah, they’re fine,” Asriel assured her. “Hang on. I’ll get something that’ll make you feel better.”
Once he’d scampered off toward the kitchen, 2B leaned back into the easy chair’s soft and comfy upholstery, her head growing clearer with every breath she took.

One hundred days. One hundred days of torment. Wasn’t it enough that she’d lived through it once?

How much longer would she have to suffer through these attacks before she could put them behind her? Why did the memories keep playing and replaying in her head over and over and over again? This was the worst incident she’d had in a week—maybe her heart-to-heart with Toriel had brought everything too close to the surface, dredging up all of those things that had only just begun to bury themselves.

She took a deeper breath, faltered, and coughed it out. “Where’s Nines?” she croaked at Pod 042 as it drifted closer to her with a blanket gripped in its claws. “Is he safe? And 6O…”

She had to know they were okay. She couldn’t protect them. But she needed them. She needed to hear their voices and feel their skin to know they were okay. She needed them as much as she needed Toriel and Asriel.

“Statement: Unit 9S and Unit 6O are currently en route to Unit 2B’s location,” Pod 042 assured her, draping the blanket over her and tenderly tucking an errant lock of her hair behind her ear. “Without Pod 153, I cannot accurately gauge either unit’s vitals, but they are most likely functional and safe.”

2B sighed, relieved. “Thanks, Pod.”

Asriel returned with a frost-coated tub of ice cream in one paw and a few spoons in the other. “Here we go!” He planted himself on 2B’s lap, handed her one of the spoons, pried off the lid of the tub, and scooped out a spoonful of chocolate ice cream. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

“Mom won’t like this,” 2B said.

“What Mom doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” Asriel grinned and slipped his spoon into his mouth. “Mphmu m uh mph muh mph mhumph mph m mph.”

“What?”

Asriel pulled the spoon out of his mouth and licked it clean. “Chocolate is good for whatever ails you,” he repeated.

Reluctantly, 2B dug out a spoonful of her own, hesitating as she lifted it to her mouth.

“C’mooooon,” Asriel needled her. “Don’t be such a goody-two-shoes.”

2B tried a spoonful. It really did make her feel better, so she had another, and another, and another, until the ache in her chest was gone.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

“Don’t mention it, sis.”

It was strange, 2B thought, that Asriel’s synthesis with Flowey had somehow made him more like 9S. Irreverent, disdainful of authority, mischievous almost to a fault… yet still brimming with kindness.

“Hey, so, uh…” Asriel settled into his perch on 2B’s lap and tugged nervously on his ear. “This is gonna sound like a weird question, but do you think you could kill me again?”
2B dropped her spoon. “What?”

“It’s just that… I just noticed, every time I come back from the dead, Mom hugs me a little harder.” Asriel shrugged and flashed a devilish, or rather, Floweyish grin. “I kinda like it! So how about we go for a three-peat?”

2B was dumbstruck.

“Inadvisable,” Pod 042 responded, taking the spoon 2B had dropped.

Asriel laughed. “I wasn’t being serious.” He curled up in 2B’s lap and slumped over, resting his head against her shoulder. “But if you want serious, I guess we can talk about serious stuff.”

“You first.”

“Okay. Is it weird… that I still kinda miss Chara? After everything they did?” Asriel sighed. “I mean… they were such a horrible person in the end, but… I just keep remembering the fun stuff we did together and I can’t make sense of it. Mom… Dad… me… was Chara just pretending to like us?”

“I don’t think so. When they were possessing me, I could see their memories and feel their emotions. They really did love you,” 2B assured him.

“Then… why’d they do all those awful things?”

“Just because you love someone doesn’t mean you’ll never hurt them. Back when I was in YoRHa, people like Commander White and 14E truly did care about me. Even 6E, in her own twisted way. But it didn’t stop them from hurting me,” 2B said. “And, of course, I can’t always say I treated Nines as well as he deserved. People like that… like us… if we don’t change, then the ones we love have to leave us, no matter how hard it is.

“Chara thought the world of you. After you died, they were inconsolable; their rage over your death made them all the more powerful. They really did believe that everything they did was for your sake.”

“But… they killed me. Why were they sad about that?”

2B shook her head. “It was 13B who tried to destroy your data in hacking space. Chara stabbed themselves through the heart to protect you. That’s what they said, at least.”

“And you believe them?”

“Their grief was genuine enough,” 2B said. “We only grieve the people we love. They’re two sides of the same coin.”

Asriel sat in meditative silence on 2B’s lap, too lost in thought to keep eating. 2B didn’t interrupt him while he thought, but she did take a few more spoonfuls of ice cream.

Even though I’m broken, even though I’m in so much pain, 2B mused, so many people still need me, and even like this, I still have the power to help them. The thought was almost empowering, in a way. The pain wasn’t all-consuming anymore. She was digging her way out.

“Something changed them,” Asriel said, speaking slowly and in quiet, measured tones. “Something filled them with hatred. They had a nightmare once, and a few days after that, they… weren’t quite the same. They’d been as ignorant of the surface before as I was… but suddenly, they talked as if...
they knew all about it. And they said it was a horrible place.”

“Observation: the condition Prince Asriel is describing seems to be amnesia,” Pod 042 chimed in. “This could explain Chara’s sudden change in temperament.”

“Their memories turned them bad?” Asriel asked. “Does that mean…”

He stopped short, bowing his head.

“Does that mean what?” 2B asked.

Asriel cringed.

“What were you going to say?”

He fidgeted nervously with his ears. “I saw those memories that were bothering you. Do you… think you should erase them?”

“I could,” 2B admitted, running her fingers through Asriel’s fur and lightly raking her fingernails across his scalp. There was still an omnipresent aching twinge in her joints—she wasn’t sure if she was just imagining it or not, but petting Asriel made it fade away. “I could have you or Nines hack into me and erase all of the time I spent fighting Wormwood.”

“I think you should do it,” Asriel said. He shoveled another mound of chocolate ice cream into his mouth and licked his chops, but didn’t seem to have the same enthusiasm for the treat as he’d had before.

“I could, but… where does it end?” 2B asked. “I could erase all of my memories of my time in YoRHa, too. I could erase every painful memory, every horrible thing I’ve done, everything that’s brought me despair.”

“Yeah, I guess you could…”

“I could go all the way back to the beginning,” 2B said. “Then I could… be who I was meant to be. Number Two personalities are supposed to be gentle and kind. I’m supposed to be gentle and kind. If I did a factory reset and erased everything that made me cold and harsh, everything that made me close myself off from other people, everything that forced me to harden my heart, I could be that way again. I could have that innocence back. I could—”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” Asriel said, rolling his eyes. “No need to make a speech.”

2B realized that she’d said all of that out loud. She hadn’t been the type to wear her heart on her sleeve in a long time—the rigorous calibrations and training she’d underwent for the first few weeks after her activation had buried those tendencies quickly—but her skin was thin now and her heart close enough to the surface to be all but laid bare.

“Sorry. It’s just that… it really does sound like the right thing to do, sometimes. Especially now. It’s so tantalizing. The idea that I could have a fresh start and do things right next time. But… it’d be the same thing as killing myself.” She loosened the bandages covering her forearms and hands, revealing the semi-healed lacerations marring her skin in the gaps between the gauze (no one else but Pod 042 knew that not all of those had been caused by Wormwood).

The pale skin, the sharpened, slightly-colored nails… it was obvious at a glance that these were not her hands. She was a chimera now.
“I guess I’m just worried,” Asriel admitted. “Chara was a good person when they didn’t remember their past. What if…”

“You’re worried about me,” 2B deduced. “You think that if those memories hurt enough, they’ll do to me what they did to Chara, don’t you?”

Asriel nodded.

“And what about your memories of Flowey?”

Asriel looked away and tugged on his ears again. Of course, he had the same concerns about himself.

“I’m 2B,” she reminded herself as she studied 6E’s hands. “And the reason I’m 2B now is because I was 2E first. Every single thought in my head,” 2B said, “every memory inscribed in my circuits… I won’t give any of them up. Even a painful past still deserves to be a part of you.”

Like always, she would survive. Not a blank slate with her face. Not a version of her with a censored, sanitized past. Her, with everything that entailed.

“It won’t be easy,” she told Asriel. “But if Flowey’s memories ever trouble you… just come to me. We’re strong enough to overcome those pasts.”

Asriel sighed and slid off her lap. “All right. Wanna watch a movie?”

2B shook her head. “Let’s see Alphys first.” She hadn’t left this house in weeks, and though her confinement had been more or less voluntary, she was starting to yearn for fresher air. And besides, she had a promise to keep. Undyne’s final words echoed in her head.

Though she was hurt, though she was in pain, though she was diminished, 2B had a duty to look after her family and friends just as they looked after her.

She’d wallowed long enough. It was time to get to work.

As she pulled herself up from the chair, the front door swung open. “2B?” 9S called out from beyond the threshold.

“Don’t shout!” 6O chastised him. “What if she’s still asleep? You’ll wake her up!”


Asriel leaped out of 2B’s lap, letting the now-empty tub of ice cream fall to the floor. “Nines!”

2B pulled herself up, remembering as she stood up and tried to shift her weight on her feet that she only had one leg now; fortunately, Pod 042 swooped in and steadied her before she could collapse and gave her a chance to prop herself back up on her crutches.

“Nines,” she gasped, smiling, as 9S rushed over to her and wrapped his arms around her. He was exuberant as he hugged her, his right eye twinkling enough to make up for the loss of his left eye—the cracked and scarred eye socket still covered by a white patch plastered to his skin.

6O wasn’t far behind and quickly joined in, all but nudging 9S aside as she squeezed 2B in a tight embrace and nuzzled her neck, the tip of her nose sending a ticklish tingle over her skin. “2B! How are you feeling? Good?” she asked, breathless. “Did you miss us? We didn’t expect the debriefing to take so long, I swear! I’m so sorry!”
“I don’t feel terrible,” 2B said, juggling the two androids in her arms as best she could. It wasn’t entirely a lie—at least, not anymore. “I was just about to get dressed and visit Alphys.”

“Sounds good,” 9S said. “We should all stop by and see her together. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind the company.” He pulled away, taking 2B’s arm in his hands to examine it, probing at the loose bandages and gently exploring the half-healed furrows running across her skin. “Your wrappings are getting a little dirty. None of your wounds have opened up again, have they?”

“No, that’s cherry juice. M—Toriel and I got a little carried away with something this morning.” 2B felt an uncomfortable twinge in the back of her mind. Why had she hesitated to call Toriel ’Mom’? Was it because of the new android in her presence? Was she afraid to show this Scanner in his neat, black uniform that she wasn’t the least bit beholden to YoRHa anymore?


2B pressed a finger to her lips, silencing her before she could further embarrass herself. 6O went crosseyed. “I’d appreciate that.”

Once she’d regained her composure, 6O wasted no time in dragging her off and rifling through her clothes.

▫▫▫

Alphys didn’t need to be in the hospital anymore. The injury to her neck she’d sustained had completely healed without even leaving a scar; physically, she was more than fit to return home.

But she still had a room here, even though the bed was uncomfortable and there wasn’t much to eat besides almost-tasteless nutrient jelly, because it beat going back to the Royal Laboratory and seeing so many constant reminders surrounding her of all the work she had to do that she couldn’t even think about doing until she’d overcome the damage she’d suffered to her brain.

She had plenty of company. Gaubrieta still visited her as often as she could, and it was nice to have her around (even though there wasn’t much they could talk about, given the language barrier). She’d been appointed Acting Royal Scientist in Alphys’ absence on top of her normal duties as chief surgeon of Central Hospital, but still saw Alphys with surprising frequency. Papyrus and Sans stopped by every day, and 9S and 6O visited almost as often. Even Gerson came to her from time to time.

She wondered why 2B hadn’t visited her yet. Maybe she was upset. She was probably in a lot of pain right now and there was nothing Alphys could do to help her. 2B probably resented her for that, and she’d be well within her rights to do so.

There was a small pile of picture books lying in a haphazard pile on the floor beside her bed. Picture books. That was what Alphys had mastered so far. That and some elementary school worksheets with letters of the alphabet repeated ad nauseum in uncoordinated, childish scrawl. It was embarrassing. At least she could still talk as well as before, but it was impossible to be a scientist, especially an engineer and roboticist of her caliber, when there were five-year-olds out there who were at a higher reading level than her.

Everyone told her not to give up, but…
Here was the greatest mechanical engineer in the kingdom, indisposed indefinitely because she had to go back to kindergarten. Pathetic.

The door to her room creaked open just a sliver as somebody knocked on it. For a fleeting instant before reality reasserted itself, Alphys entertained the idea that it was Undyne on the other side.

“C-Come in,” she said, grabbing her glasses from the bedside table and pushing them up her snout.

On cue, the door swung open and 2B trudged into the room, her crutches clacking on the floor. Her eyes lit up when she caught sight of Alphys; Alphys even saw her mouth curl into a faint smile.

“Alphys,” she said, her voice hoarse. “I’ve missed you.”

2B looked better than the barely-alive specimen who’d fallen from the sky on the day the Barrier had been destroyed, but looked far from well. Beneath her loose and airy blouse, gauze bandages still bound her arms and wrapped around her torso, hiding the wicked scars marring her skin. There was nothing below her left knee, the bandaged stump poking out from below the hem of her skirt. Exhaustion was baked into every detail of her face, magnifying the faint scars that ran across her cheeks and forehead. Despite all that, though… she didn’t seem to be in much pain. In fact, she looked happy.

Alphys should have been happy to see 2B in turn. And she was, kind of—but because she’d been hoping, however irrationally, that Undyne had come back for her, she felt a painful emptiness gnaw at her stomach and twist her chest into knots instead.

“H-Hi,” she said.

2B hobbled over to the side of the bed, her pod hovering at her side and Asriel trailing behind her. “Howdy, Doc,” the prince chirped. “What’s up?”

“Oh, u-uh, just… r-relaxing,” Alphys lied. To be honest, every time that door opened, she expected to see Undyne’s goofy, snaggletoothed smile behind it; every time, she was profoundly disappointed.

Undyne, her best friend, her girlfriend, the woman who had made all of her dreams come true, was gone forever.

It never really sank in. It hurt just as much the fiftieth time realizing it as it had the first. Undyne, the hero of the Underground, the strongest monster in the world, the Spear of Justice, was gone and Alphys, small, insignificant, weak little Alphys, a scientist with scrambled brains, was left behind.

That was the greatest injustice Alphys could possibly imagine.

Three more androids piled into the room after 2B and Asriel. 9S and 6O, of course, and a third android. The third one was nearly 9S’s spitting image, right down to the uniform.

“Morning, Alphys.” 9S gestured to his twin. “This is 11S. He’s from the surface. 11S, meet Doctor Alphys. She’s been taking care of our repairs while we’ve been down here.”

11S’s eyes lit up. “You can repair YoRHa models? That’s amazing! Ever since the access points all went dark, it’s gotten so much harder to source compatible parts for repairs. How do you…”

Oh, great, Alphys thought, noticing the Scanner’s limp and the worn-away skin around his bare knees that exposed bits of his chassis. Another android for me to feel bad about not being able to fix.

“Now’s not the best time,” 9S told 11S, mercifully cutting him off. “As you can see, Alphys isn’t
really in any position to do any complex repairs right now.”

“Right.” 11S bowed curtly, his cheeks flushed pink from embarrassment. “Sorry, Doctor Alphys. Nice to meet you, though.”

“N-Nice to meet you,” Alphys said. “And, uh, 2B… th-thanks for coming.”

“Sorry I took so long.” 2B replied. She glanced at her entourage, then looked down at the floor. “Nines… 6O… can I have a minute alone with Alphys?”

“Uh… sure,” 9S said, taking 11S and 6O aside.

“You, too, Asriel,” 2B told the boy prince.

“What? That’s not f—” Asriel yelped as 9S dragged him along.

2B turned to her pod next. “And you, too, Pod. I’d like to talk in private.”

“Understood,” the pod said, drifting away to join the others. It shut the door on its way out.

The pit in Alphys’ stomach didn’t stop growing deeper. What could 2B possibly have to say to her that she didn’t want the others to hear? She expected the android to chastise her for everything. For failing to help repair her. For wallowing here in misery. For taking too long to mourn Undyne. For lying here like a useless lump while the world went without her skills. For living like this when Undyne’s life had been cut short. 2B could say any number of horrible, cruel, cutting things to her, and they would all be true, and Alphys would deserve to hear them.

“I—I’m s-sorry, 2B,” she stammered. “I-I know I—”

2B reached out and laid her hand over Alphys’ forehead, supporting herself on just one of the crutches propping her up as the other clattered to the floor. Her fingers ran across the dry scales of Alphys’ horned crest. “Alphys… it’s good to see you again. I’m sorry I took too long.”

“You’re sorry?” Alphys felt tears well up in her eyes. She bowed her head. 2B’s soft, fleshy palm was warm against her scales, exerting a gentle pressure on her forehead. “I—I’m the one who c-can’t help you… th-those arms, that leg, they must h-hurt so much and here I-I am… useless…” Her throat tied itself into a dry, tight knot; her next words stuck to her tongue. “Useless and s-stupid…”

“Undyne told me to take care of you,” 2B said.

“What?”

“I haven’t been doing that. I’m sorry.”

“2B…”

“You can feel it, too, can’t you?” 2B lowered her head, her snowy white bangs drooping over her eyes. “That voice in your head… the one that says, ’she should be here right now.’”

Alphys nodded.

“The one that says, ’it should have been me.’ Or… ’I want to be with her again.’”

Alphys closed her eyes, squeezing out the tears blurring her vision; they rolled down her snout, speckling the bedsheets pooled around her waist. “Yeah…”
“These are the hardest days,” 2B said. “The first days, the first week, the first month. It’s hard to even want to go on living.”

Of course. Of course 2B understood that. Alphys bowed her head and though about the earnest thoughts she’d had about just… giving up and letting go. Of course, with a medical wunderkind like Gaubrieta doting on her and the entire hospital at her beck and call, it was almost impossible to act on those urges.

Propping her crutch against the wall, 2B sat down on the side of the bed next to Alphys, moving slowly and deliberately to keep her balance, and folded her hands in her lap. “When I was just a few weeks old, I thought I’d get used to death. I thought that the universe would truly be cruel if I didn’t, considering what I was meant to do. I never did. But… I’m not so sure the universe is as cruel as I thought.”

“Yeah?”

“Memories… they can outlast us, if we let them.” 2B lifted her head. “Every time I had to kill 9S… a part of him survived, here, in my memories. Him, and all of the people who are no longer with me… all those ghosts live on. The final screams they summoned on the edge of their death still echo within me. They always will, as long as I live. So those of us who outlive our precious ones… the people we love… we have a duty to keep those lights alive… to keep our own lights alive. As long as it takes to tell their stories.”

Alphys knew what 2B meant. Undyne still lived on within her memories. And she lived on in Alphys’ memories, too. And yet… it wasn’t the same. Memories of the two of them together, of warmth and light, of smiles and laughter… They weren’t enough. In time, they would fade away into nothing.

“I d-didn’t have enough t-time with her,” Alphys said. “I—I was s-so obtuse, I d-didn’t even know we were d-dating until… until t-the night before she… she…”

“We never have enough time. Days, months, years… centuries… it’s never enough.” Tears rolled down 2B’s cheeks. “Because we want eternity.”

“Yeah,” Alphys sniffled, taking 2B’s arm and pressing herself to her side. Her tail curled into her lap and she tweaked its tip nervously.

“I offered her my black box,” 2B said. “The two of us could have lived as a single entity. I don’t know why she turned my offer down.” Her voice was growing hoarse; she choked down a lump in her throat. Hearing 2B’s strength waver, Alphys felt the pit in her stomach grow deeper, the emptiness so strong it was nearly painful. “Maybe she still resented me… maybe she was ashamed of what she’d done. Maybe she saw the pain I was in and didn’t want me to make a decision she thought I would regret when I came to my senses. I don’t know. I’ll never know…”

2B paused, letting the sobs wrenching themselves from Alphys’ heaving chest hold the silence at bay.

“Or maybe,” she said, “she just didn’t want to make things weird between you, me, herself, and 6O.”

Alphys sniffled. “‘M-Make things weird?’ W-What do you m-mea—Ohhh…” She blushed as she let out a pained, awkward laugh. “I-I don’t th-think Undyne would’ve h-had that on her m-mind…” she said, snickering and trying to hold herself together as the part of her that just seconds ago had been crying now wanted to laugh. It was always strange how easily such extreme emotions could shift from one to the other; she’d heard of laughing until you cried, though, but never crying until you
“It wouldn’t have been weird…” 2B’s shoulders quivered as she pressed her hands to her mouth. “The four of us—the three of us—n-no, the four of us,” she gasped, muffling her voice and stifling her own laughter, “we—we’d have made it work!”

Alphys laughed so hard that it hurt to breathe. She laughed so hard that she lost track of how long she spent laughing. She laughed so hard that she started crying again. 2B wrapped her arms around her for support, all but wheezing with laughter. Alphys had never seen her laugh so hard before.

She could swear she heard a third person laughing, a phantom voice between the resonance of hers and 2B’s, but there was nobody here but the two of them.

“I know it’s not the same, and I know it’s not enough,” 2B croaked, coughing. “But you’re not alone.”

Alphys leaned into 2B’s hug. She wasn’t Undyne. No one could ever be her. But 2B had been there for her so many times, too. If anyone could make that omnipresent ache in her heart start to fade…

“So, uh… h-how’ve you been d-doing?” Alphys asked.

“I’ve been pretty out of it.” 2B cleared her throat. “It’s been hard. Everything has felt unreal, like any second this whole world will vanish and I’ll be back in the darkness again. This is the most I’ve talked in weeks. My throat’s starting to hurt.”

“B-but you’re feeling b-better now?”

2B nodded. “Yeah. Couldn’t keep lying around forever. Have I missed Undyne’s funeral?”

“No.” Gerson had agreed to postpone any ceremony on her behalf until Alphys was well enough to attend. And, well, she was now, but…

Maybe that was why she hadn’t wanted to leave.

“Good. They’re not waiting for me, are they?” 2B sheepishly asked.

“No, no, they’re w-waiting for both of us. O-Or, I guess, n-now they’re waiting for me.”

“And how are you feeling?” 2B asked.

“I, uh… I d-don’t know if I’m ready.”

“No one ever is.” With a heavy sigh, 2B held Alphys closer. “It’s okay to grieve for as long as you need. The greatest loves inspire the greatest pain. But no matter how long it takes, sooner or later, you’ll have to learn to walk again.”

2B glanced at her missing leg, fully aware of the irony in that statement. “To that end, Alphy, if there’s anything I can do for you… anything in the world… if there’s anything I can be for you… let me know. I’ll always be here for you.”

Alphys closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and slipped out of bed, planting her feet on the cold, tiled floor. Her legs wobbled beneath her. “N-No time like the p-present, I guess,” she sighed.

Doctor Gaubrieta diligently pored over Alphys’ latest test results. Physically, the Royal Scientist was
more or less healthy by now, but still refused to leave the hospital. Something psychological was holding her back, and much to Gaubrieta’s dismay, a physician could do little to heal the heart.

Alphys was a brilliant woman and one who commanded Gaubrieta’s respect and loyalty through both her achievements and her humility. It stung that the two of them couldn’t talk without an interpreter to read the movements of her hands; if there was anything Gaubrieta could say to spur Alphys forward and rekindle the fire in her soul, it would be something best said in private.

With that option unavailable to her, she did whatever else she could to look after Alphys. And lately, she’d had better reason than usual to keep an eye on Alphys’ health. Her test results over the past few weeks had suggested… something, but nothing Gaubrieta could conclusively name.

Until now.

Gaubrieta picked up and shook a small vial of dust that had been drawn from Alphys’ veins. Spectral analysis of the blood before it had solidified showed an anomaly in her magical essence.

Something was growing inside Alphys’ soul.

Lost in thought, Gaubrieta absentmindedly tapped the vial against her bony forehead. Where could that have come from? A brief and intimate intertwining of one monster’s soul with another’s. But whose soul? It could have been anyone’s.

But Alphys and Undyne had been close… and surely they had had some time to themselves before Undyne’s demise… in fact, hadn’t they had quite a few minutes of privacy before Undyne had rushed to her demise? Could it have been then?

Gaubrieta stood bolt upright, clutching the printouts of the test results in her bony hand, and strode out of her office and into the hallway, the hem of her black cloak swirling over the linoleum floor.

She stuffed the printouts into her robe and snapped her fingers at the first member of the hospital’s staff she saw to get their attention. A young, blonde reindeer monster clad in a nurse’s smock looked up from the book she’d had her snout buried in; apparently, she’d been on a break (Gaubrieta hoped she’d been on a break). There was fear in her green eyes—although considering the imposing figure she cut, Gaubrieta knew that alone was no evidence of a slacker caught in the act (or, non-act).

[You there…] Gaubrieta snapped her fingers a few more times to jog her own memory. This girl… a volunteer apprentice, was she not? She’d signed up so she could be closer to her father, who was in this very hospital due to his chronic illness. She was very diligent, which meant that if she’d been shirking her duties, it would be that much more of a disappointment. And her name was…

[…Holiday,] she signed. [Noelle Holiday, yes?]

Noelle gulped. “Y-Yes, that’s me,” she mumbled.

[Come with me. We have good news to deliver to Doctor Alphys.] Without missing a beat, Gaubrieta continued on her course, drifting across the hall like a specter.

Noelle stuffed her doorstopper of a book into her knapsack and hurried after her. “W-What kind of good news?”

[I’d rather not say in a crowded hallway; it would be a violation of the good doctor’s privacy. Besides, you will tell her what I have to say soon enough.]

Gaubrieta felt the magic running through her skeletal system surge with excitement. But that
excitement was tempered; she had no way of knowing how Alphys would react to the news that Undyne had given her one last gift.

But when she arrived at Alphys’ room, she found it empty. The medical cot was unmade, the sheets all bunched up at the foot of the bed. Even her books and ‘homework’ were missing.

Alphys, it seemed, had finally checked out.

Gaubrieta smiled.

Sunlight beamed down on the side of the mountain; a glistening layer of rime coating the alpine trees sparkled as though they were covered in diamonds. 2B surveyed the area outside the corridor that led from behind the throne room to the surface—now no longer blocked by the impenetrable Barrier that had clung to the mountain like a second skin. The ground here was covered in loose pebbles and gravel, with sparse sprouts of grass and flowers poking through intermittently; ahead, a breathtaking vista of forest, river, and lake stretched across the ground.

6O squeezed her hand and clung more tightly to her as 2B’s gaze drifted to two parked YoRHa flight units left abandoned on the mountainside. This, 2B realized, had been where Chara had landed with 6O in tow; she hadn’t thought of the memories seeing this place might have stirred up. She squeezed back.

“Couldn’t have had this on any shorter notice, eh?” Gerson laughed, then coughed into his wizened, scaly hand. In his other hand, he held an urn that was filled with Undyne’s dust. “You young’uns…”

“Gonna make this a double funeral, old man?” Asriel asked, shivering against the bitter wind as he clutched Emil to his chest.

“Asriel, apologize this instant,” Toriel chided him. Behind her, the guests she’d been entertaining from the surface—Anemone and her entourage, and the machine Pascal—watched on, flanked by Dogamy and Dogaressa.

“Sorry.”

“You really found all of Undyne’s dust?” 9S asked Gerson, skeptically raising an eyebrow. “I couldn’t see anything left of her.”

“Well, maybe some of it’s just dirt from the site,” Gerson admitted, hefting the urn.

“Maybe most of it,” Sans chimed in.

“But, hey, it’s the thought that counts!” Papyrus said.

“Well said, kiddo.” Gerson let out another wheezing laugh, which quickly turned into another cough. “This mountain air,” he gasped, “is too healthy for me. It’s like eating a salad after having nothing but junk food for a week!”

“W-Well…” Alphys stammered, her teeth chattering as another gust of wind buffeted the mountainside. “L-Let’s g-get this over w-with.” She took the urn from Gerson with trembling hands. “A-Anyone wanna s-say a few w-words?”

Nobody didn’t.
“Undyne was the most enthusiastic student I’d ever known,” Gerson said. “Not the best, mind you, but the one with the most gumption! No one I’d ever met climbed higher than her. I’m proud of her.” He sniffed and adjusted his monocle.

“She was the best teacher I’d ever had!” Papyrus added. “Whether it was fighting, or cooking, or anything else, no one else believed in me like she did!”

“No one did a better job babysitting Papyrus when I was out working,” Sans said. “And no one else looked the other way when some of my jobs turned out a little less than, uh, legal. For someone who hated the cold so much, she was pretty cool.”

“I didn’t really know her,” Emil said, “but she was always really nice to me! One time, my wheel broke, and she lifted my whole cart over her head and carried me to her house!”

“I didn’t really know her, either,” Asriel said. “But she was—Mmph!” The wind picked up, blowing his long, floppy ear into his mouth.

“We had our differences,” 9S said, “but in spite of everything that came between us, she never forgot that we were… friends.”

“She put herself through hell to protect me,” said 6O. “I didn’t even know her, but she fought so hard to keep me safe… I’d never met anyone like her before.”

2B nodded. “She was everything I’d always wished I could be… and a good friend.”

“We were proud to serve under her,” Dogamy said. Dogaressa nodded in agreement. “And, of course, we’ll miss her.”

Pod 042 nodded. “Statement: even though I was not assigned to her as a tactical support unit, I, too, felt a great deal of affection for Captain Undyne.”

Toriel stepped forward, crouching down and resting her paw atop Alphys’ head; the cold breeze ruffled her snow-white fur. “Undyne was truly a remarkable person. She did not serve her kingdom blindly—instead, she chose to let its values guide her heart, even when it pitted her against the kingdom itself. In that respect, she was its staunchest defender. She was, perhaps, the bravest person our humble realm has ever known.”

Everyone mumbled in agreement, even the visitors from the surface.

Toriel hugged Alphys. “Go on, dear. It is time.”

Emboldened, Alphys stepped forward into the center of the mountainside glade. “Undyne… It’s b-beautiful, isn’t it? The s-surface… I c-can’t think of a b-better place to p-put you to rest. We m-made it, Dynes.” She held the urn to her cheek and closed her eyes. “I d-don’t think I’ll ever l-love anyone a-as much as y-you… b-but it might b-be a l-long time b-before we ever s-see each other a-again. S-so, please, be p-patient and w-wait for me.” She uncapped the urn. “W-Well… h-here goes.”

“Wait.” 2B took a step forward, nearly slipping on the fine gravel; 6O and 9S helped her keep her footing. “Alphys, I have an idea. Pod, are either of these flight units operable?”

“Scanning.” Pod 042 paused. “Analysis: one flight unit is operable. However, its weapons systems are nonfunctional.”

“That’s fine. Can you operate it remotely?”
“Affirmative.”

2B reached down and laid a hand on the urn’s cold ceramic surface. “Alphys… I have an idea I think Undyne would like. Do you trust me?”

“Y-Yeah…”

“Give me the urn.”

Alphys handed her the urn. 2B peeked inside. Its contents weren’t the off-white color of monster dust, confirming 9S’s concerns that it was mostly just dirt. But still, she felt that within here was at least some small amount of Undyne’s essence.

She put the lid back on, hobbled over to the flight unit Pod 042 had indicated as usable, and hooked the urn into its cradle, then whispered her plan to the pod.

After 2B had backed away from the flight unit, it took off, leaping into the air and folding itself into its flight mode by tucking its limbs inside itself and spreading its wings. It shot straight up.

“Y-You’re s-sending her to space?” Alphys gasped. “I g-guess… she’ll see th-the most of the s-surface in o-orbit…”

“No,” 2B said. “When the flight unit reaches the stratosphere, its self-destruct system will activate.”

“What?”

“Statement: the air currents in the stratosphere will ensure maximum dispersal of Captain Undyne’s remains,” Pod 042 explained. “If Captain Undyne’s wishes were to be spread across the Earth, this will maximize the efficiency of its implementation.”

Everybody craned their necks and looked skyward as the flight unit climbed higher and higher until it was just a pinprick in the cloudless blue sky. Then there was a tiny flash of light as if a star had briefly appeared in the sky; it was nearly invisible against the glare of the noonday sun. Toriel gave Alphys another hug.

“Excuse me,” Pascal asked, raising a spindly arm. “I’ll admit I did not know this Captain Undyne, but may I say a few words on her behalf?”

“If you would like,” Toriel said, “you may, Pascal.”

Pascal stepped into the clearing, his green optical sensors flickering. “These are the words of a human poet. I believe his name was William Marlowe. He wrote, ‘the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.’”

“Well, she may not have been a prince,” said Gerson, chuckling, “but she sure did set the heavens ablaze, didn’t she?”

2B shook her head. Undyne may not have been royalty, but Asgore had loved her like a daughter. Even if not in name, she had been a princess to him.

“Goodbye, Undyne,” she murmured, bowing her head as tears dripped down her cheeks, rolled off her chin, and speckled the gravel beneath her foot. 9S and 6O wrapped their arms around her, steadying her and applying a soft, gentle, and tender pressure to her chest as her chassis tightened around her black box. “Become one with the Earth you loved, and may your hopes and dreams at last be fulfilled. We will carry your memory and your light onward into eternity.”
The wind howled, buffeting the mountainside with frigid gusts and the attendees of the funeral hastened back into the mountain.

▫▫▫

A cold autumn wind blew down the mountain and rolled through the shaggy field of golden flowers surrounding the ancient, burned-out church nestled in the foothills. Within that church, in its dilapidated basement, lay the charred, centuries-old remnants of an ancient android. None now lived who remembered the android’s name or had ever heard the android’s heretical proclamations.

A single black flower which had sprouted in the field of wildflowers poked out from a crack in the concrete floor beside the android’s body and kept watch over it like a sentry.

Chapter End Notes

Well, after 62 chapters and about 10 months of constant updates, it's finally over.

This fanfic was a labor of love, and boy, when I say "labor," I mean it. For a long while, I was treating this fic like a second job on top of my full-time job and devoting a good chunk of my free time outside of work solely to writing this. I'm so, so glad you all read it and (since you read this far) enjoyed at least a fairly sizeable portion of the ride--I mean, I don't think this is the kind of fanfic you would read to completion if you didn't like it.

If you feel like it, it would mean a lot to me if you left a comment telling me what you thought of Ghost in the Machine, even if it's only a sentence, even if it's only two words.

As for what's next, well... I have some plans.

For starters, I've still got a few ideas for side-stories I might tell eventually in Long Story Short. Maybe you'll see a few additional epilogue chapters in this fic as well. I'm also considering working on a music project to go along with Ghost in the Machine, so please keep an eye out for future updates!
And, uh, I guess you should subscribe to me here on Ao3 to keep abreast on any future works and updates, if you aren't already.

Also, my good friend wordbending wrote a Nier/Undertale crossover of her own, please read it!
Chapter Summary

A special announcement regarding the future of this fanfic.

The first chapter of this fic was published on March 21, 2018. Since then, my life has never known peace. The following day, snakes started manifesting in my house physically.

It's really hard to imagine that I started publishing this fic a whole year ago as of today. Sometimes, it feels like I only started writing it a couple months ago, half a year at most, because it can't have been that long since I first played Nier Automata, right? I mean, that's ridiculous...

Then I look at how long this fucking monster became and I'm amazed it didn't take two years. Or more.

The thing is, I still can't leave it alone. I keep thinking about more epilogues and more side stories I can write in this weird little crossover universe, even while I'm heads down on yet another weird Nier crossover (P.S. please read it). I keep thinking about where I left everyone at the end of this story and where they'll go from there.

But right now, writing more about our favorite sad robots and their adoptive goatmom isn't very high on my radar, because on top of writing "The Long Night at the End of the World" (whew, what a title), I've got a very special project I'm working on to go along with "Ghost in the Machine." Here's a little taste of what's to come:

And oh boy, do I have more in store for you! At this point I'm sitting on about 30 minutes of material for this "soundtrack," which means it's more or less 50% done.

I'm so excited to share the rest with you when it's all ready! Thanks for sticking with me all these months and stay tuned for more fun stuff!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!