Legacy Of The Magi

by TimeCloneMike

Summary

Frisk has faced danger and death many more times than any child should ever have to, but they aren't out of the woods yet. Being the first human in who-knows-how-long able to use
magic has shoved them back in the spotlight. And just when their life was settling down into whatever counts as "normal" for the town of Ebott's Wake, where monsters sell ice cream and the gym teacher thinks anime is real.

It's nothing they haven't had to deal with before at this point, but that doesn't mean it's going to be easy, even with Papyrus taking over as Ambassador and the Finest scientific minds in the town working on a way to help Chara. After all, the first fallen human climbed Mt. Ebott for a reason, and it wasn't a very happy one.

And now, that reason knows about Chara too.
Bed sheets were thrown back as Frisk woke up, skin slick with a cold sweat and their heart hammering a frantic drumbeat. Dread seized them, ice cold in their gut. Their eyes tried to sweep across the room to take in details but everything was blurred and distorted until they saw the wardrobe.

'...that's not right.'

Memories came flooding back, trying to climb up the wardrobe in order to get a sweater, almost being crushed by it, and jumping out of the way at the last second. The impact with the floor had snapped the wood that the hinges were attached to, so... yes, that was right. A week later, after the flu virus had been pushed back, they borrowed Papyrus's power screwdriver and took the hinges and the latch off, switching them to the other side and gluing the broken off fragments of wood back into place.

Despite that, Toriel had insisted on moving the wardrobe into the spare room, and getting a chest of drawers from Joe's House Of Stuff for Frisk to store their clothes.

But there was no sign of that furniture now. Nor was there a desk, or the nightstand that held Frisk's cell phone or the ancient artifact or-

Asriel's bed was gone.

Frisk stumbled away from the bed, sending a plate with a slice of pie on it sliding across the floor, and looked out towards the window to the backyard. Those trees that could lose their leaves were well on their way, filling the world with red and orange and gold.

Somewhere in the house, Frisk heard Toriel scream.

The sound cut through them in a way that a physical weapon could only aspire to do. It was the sound of despair, of grief, of anger, a sound that only a mother could make after having their child taken from them before their time, made a hundred times worse because it had happened twice.

A wave of heat surged through the crack underneath the bedroom door, followed by waves of flames that shattered the door into thousands of splinters, and there she was, wreathed in flames and righteous fury and grief that had turned in on itself and the whole world was burning, their skin and their hair and their eyes and it was going to happen again, over and over and over forever and ever and

Something hit Frisk in the face, like a punch that turned into somebody grabbing them by the nostrils and pulling and the flailed back against the attack with their arms that somehow weren't reduced to ash and they stumbled against a chair and lost their balance and landed on the floor, cold wood underneath them, coughing and trying not to retch.

“Frisk? Are you awake? Chara, what's happening?”

Asriel's voice.

Frisk forced their eyes open, not realizing until then that they were squeezed shut, looking around. A dark bedroom, at night, lit only by a single reading lamp on a desk. The shapes of two beds, two chests of drawers, and most importantly a short fuzzy boss monster with long floppy ears could be seen.
'It's okay, Frisk. You had a nightmare. I mean, that part wasn't okay, but it wasn't real. You're safe.'

Thoughts in their head. Calmer than they felt.

Something in their hands. Frisk brought them up and opened their fingers to see...

Oh.

'Not my first choice, but nothing else was working.'

“Right,” Frisk mumbled, and pushed themselves upright onto shaking legs. The leftover fragments of the smelling salts capsule were deposited in the trash can next to the desk, and Frisk leaned against the door, letting themselves soak in the sensation of cold wood. Or at least, relatively cool. It was summer, after all.

“...guys?”

'I can tell him.' came a thought that was not Frisk's, and they nodded, making a mumbling noise of agreement. Moments later, their lips moved and they spoke with a voice not quite their own.

“We're okay. Mostly.”

“Okay.” Asriel made a sound like clearing his throat that probably was precipitated by him tearing up out of worry earlier. “I saw you fall and I wasn't close enough to catch you and-”

“Crossed signals again. Probably trying to run or dodge in the nightmare.”

Frisk's mind conjured up the image of Toriel as a fiery avatar of vengeance and retribution, and did so very much against the child's will.

“Oh,” the voice said.

“Yeah,” Frisk agreed.

“...do you want to...” Asriel trailed off and sniffed. “Do you want to stay up a bit?”

“Yeah.” The answer came without hesitation. “I don't think I can... I don't want to risk... that. Again.”

“Okay...” There was the sensation of a soft, fuzzy paw on their shoulder. “If we go downstairs. Turn on the lights. I can... I can make us something.”

“...thanks.” Frisk backed away from the bedroom door, and Asriel opened it slowly. Frisk followed the young monster as he made his way out into the upstairs hallway, down the stairs, and into the kitchen; while Asriel carefully pulled a saucepan out of one cabinet, Frisk sat down at the kitchen table and tried not to think.

Adrenaline had done its job and left, leaving the child weary even as their senses strained to detect the slightest change in light and sound; reflexes and instincts and old lessons learned the hard way kept them on edge. Quiet as he was being, every sound Asriel made grated on Frisk's nerves, as they expected her to appear and-

'Not going to happen, Frisk,' Chara's thoughts interrupted the spiral in the child's head. 'Probably,' they amended; their uncertainty didn't help Frisk's anxiety, but their honesty was appreciated.

'Right, because if you can't trust a disembodied spirit haunting your body, who can you trust?'
Exactly,” Frisk said out loud.

At the stove top, Asriel paused and turned to face his sibling... or siblings, as it were... then shook his head and resumed his cooking. Non sequitur statements and responses were rapidly becoming the norm in the Dreemurr household.

The human child continued to stare at the table even as a mug was placed in front of them, steaming from the heat of the cocoa inside. Their right hand reached out, automatically, and pulled it closer. Out of the corner of their eye, Frisk could see Asriel awkwardly move the saucepan and spoon over by the sink, leaving the fireball burning above the stove element. The child said nothing, but felt the hair stand up on their neck.

Asriel sat down next to Frisk with his own mug, then his eyes went wide at the site of the fireball and he reached up; the flames blinked out instantly.

“...do you... want to talk about it?”

“There's not much to talk about.” Frisk shrugged. “It was... it was the day you came back.”

Asriel's brow furrowed slightly. “Did... something go wrong at All Fine Labs, or...?”

“I wasn't clear. I meant the day you came back from Mt. Ebott.”

“...oh.”

“Yeah.” Frisk's mouth opened, but the words that described Toriel's rage and anger and sorrow died on the child's lips.

“You need to talk to Toriel about this, Frisk.” Their own voice, with an unnatural overtone to it.

“Chara's right,” Asriel chimed in. “This is the third time now.”

Frisk shook their head. They expected that Asriel would make such a recommendation, but they thought that Chara, with their inside track, would know why Frisk would dismiss such a subject right out of the gate.

“I can't explain what's wrong without explaining the time loop.”

“Sans and Dr. Aster already know. And so does mom, sort of.”

Frisk shook their head again. “Mom thinks you and I are psychic or something. Some weird form of science and magic that's never happened before. She doesn't know everything can be changed. If she did...”

“It wouldn't change anything, Frisk.” Asriel put his mug down to count on his fingers. “You thought mom and dad would get rid of you, or even kill you, because you could use magic. That didn't happen. This isn't any different.”

Frisk stared at their mug of cocoa, and finally brought it up to their mouth in order to take a drink. Heat suffused through them as the magic evaporated and was absorbed.

“What if we had Sans explain it?” Asriel suggested. “He's like mom's best friend, and he understands the science. And then... well. I'm pretty sure she'd get even more protective. Something that I'm not even sure is physically possible.”

“This mom goes to eleven.”
Asriel snorted and then covered his mouth with one paw.

“Is that louder?”

“It's one louder.” Frisk felt their face smile, and as they heard Asriel's smothered giggling, the smile felt a little more natural.

2:49 AM: hey snas

2:49 AM: gonna leave this here so you see it in the morning

2:49 AM: want to tell mom about the timeline thing

2:49 AM: but need ur help

2:49 AM: rite now she thinks az n me r pyschic

2:50 AM: or something

2:50 AM: so u gotta science it up

2:50 AM SockPuppet90: sry was working on a

2:50 AM: and make sure she undrstands

2:50 AM SockPuppet90: wat the

2:50 AM SockPuppet90: frisk I thought ur mom said no txting wile u were grounded

2:50 AM SockPuppet90: unless it was n emergency

2:50 AM: she said unless it was an emergency

2:51 AM: sans ive had three nightmares in the last week

2:51 AM: its not evn friday yet

2:51 AM: and im already freaked out

2:51 AM SockPuppet90: wat kind of nightmares

2:51 AM: the nightmare kind

2:51 AM: like

2:51 AM: the fever dream in the hopsital had a sequel

2:51 AM: then a trilogy

2:51 AM: nowi ts a whol franchise

2:51 AM: tomrow is last day of grounding
Frisk took a deep breath and closed the chat application on the phone, then plugged it into the charger on the nightstand.

“We're good for tomorrow.”

“Okay.” Asriel sat on the edge of his bed, staring at his paws. “Uhm.”

“...yeah?”

“...never mind. It will keep till morning and we need to try to get some sleep.”

“Well. Okay. If you're sure.”

“Yeah.” Asriel grabbed the covers on his bed and pulled them up as he laid down. “Good... good night.”

“Good night, Asriel,” Chara said, and then Frisk was staring at the back of Asriel's head.

Eventually, the child laid down, staring up at the ceiling. Inside their head, no errant thoughts appeared... just a sense of expectation, drifting across where two minds overlapped.

Some time later, there was a sniffling sound from the other bed.

'There it is,' Chara thought immediately. Frisk slid off of their bed and slowly walked over to Asriel's.

“Scoot over.”

“...you don't have to—”
“You guys don't have to wake me up when I have a nightmare. But you do.”

“Well, I actually do, since I keep getting flashes of images and sounds from you. But yeah, even if I didn't have to, I would. Come on, bro. If we try to sleep on the edge of the mattress we're going to fall off in the night.”

Asriel sighed, and moved over closer to the bedroom wall. Frisk climbed into the bed, pulled up the covers, and reached for Asriel's paw.

He did not pull away.
“Goooood morning, Ebott's Wake! Brett 'The Brett' Brinkmann coming at you with, who else, DJ Pantz! Burgie, how are you doing this morning?”

“Good, but clearly not as good as you. What's the deal?”

“I'm glad you asked and I'll get to that in due time, but first, welcome everybody to The Morning Rush on KEBT FM, broadcasting out of beautiful Ebott's Wake. You know what they say, *If You Can't Make It Anywhere Else, You Can Make It Here!*

“Wait, who says that?”

“The Tourism Board.”

“Oh. Right. I guess that makes sense.”

“Let's jump right into the deep end with our top story, late last night, everyone's least favorite cultist and wannabe magician Jordan Cater was transported without issue to the Lost Eagle County Municipal Courthouse in Quarterhorse Fields to await trial. And *nothing* went wrong. He didn't escape, he didn't attack anybody, nobody even tried to assault the transport convoy, everything went off without a hitch. We just got the report from the Ebott's Wake Police Department by way of Officer Steve about ten minutes before we went on the air.”

“So that's what that mood change was about. I thought the Five Hour Energy finally kicked in.”

“The procedures surrounding the handling and transport of Jordan Cater were kept under the strictest possible security and confidentiality in order to limit any opportunity that other Guardian slash Sage supporters might have to try to interfere, should there still be any out there. Considering that Cater has escaped from custody no less that three times during the last month, that makes perfect sense. It kind of irks my journalist's drive to seek the truth and report it, but I do recognize why the police would do things this way.”

“Does that thing from Officer Steve say anything about Cater's magic abilities? Because people have been calling in about that a lot.”

“I know. I was there.”

“...sooo, yes, no?”

“Nothing specific in the notes from Officer Steve, but my radio sense is tingling and I predict that a certain scientist will call in some time in the near future to fill in the blanks. In the meantime, let's move on to less positive news and get it out of the way. Eagle Eye Realtors in Lone Point is going out of business after the latest lawsuit where the defendant accused them of selling a house with an entire wall missing.”

“Wait, how did they manage that? Did the customer buy it sight unseen?”

“Special Effects.”

“...that explains absolutely nothing.”

“I know, but that's all I have on this sheet of paper. We'll bring you more on this story as it becomes
available, but now it's time for Hailey Skye's weather report! Hailey, what do your meteorologist eyes see?"

“That joke wasn't funny when I started working here and it's not funny now.”

“Sorry.”

“The excessive heat we've been experiencing will continue, probably for the next couple of months. It's summer. It's not rocket science. We do have the possibility of a light shower some time Saturday, but it's only forty percent, don't base your plans around it. And of course even if it does happen, we'll probably be back to the same old song and dance of high temperatures after, with extra humidity on top.”

“Good to know, Hailey, thank you very much. This seems like a perfect opportunity to toss things to Gary Welkin with the traffic report! Gary, how's it look up there?”

“It looks great, Brett! Traffic is smooth and clear, no signs of obstructions and more importantly, no signs of an organized assault anywhere near McMaster's Square!”

“Uh... Gary, McMaster's Square isn't in Ebott's Wake. It's in Quarterhorse Fields.”

“Precisely correct, Brett! The County Courthouse is located at McMaster's Square and if anybody even thinks about trying to break in to help a certain someone break out, I'll see it immediately and raise so much hell that Satan himself will name me Father Of The Year!”

“...what?”

“You took the, uh, the word, right out of my mouth Burgie. Gary, is there any chance that you could take, like, a break, and fly over to Ebott's Wake and, oh who am I kidding, Jeff, can you climb the transmitter tower again... oh. Okay. Fair enough. Uh, we'll try to get some traffic information to everybody soon. In the meantime, let's see what we got on the old news desk... oh, hey! All Fine Labs is opening an official gift shop on Saturday!”

“Well it's about time.”

“No word here if they're stocking shirts- huh? Okay. Go ahead Jeff. Hello Dr. Aster, we've been expecting your call actually.”

“Huh?”

“What the... Quentin?!”

“Uh, I think there was a line mix up, were you guys about to put Dr. Aster on?”

“Uh... no, actually. I made a calculated risk and my math was off. How are you, uh, how are you doing?”

“A lot better than I was, actually! I just wanted to call in to let everybody know that All Fine Labs and Mrs. Dreemurr accepted me into the Educational Annex Program! Uh, it's gonna take a lot out of my time, and you know, between that and managing the hotels and stuff like that, I'm going to be really busy for the foreseeable future, which means I won't be able to call in as much, and I wanted you guys and everyone else to know that at least this time, it's not a conspiracy to keep me silenced! Probably. I'm not, I'm not quite one hundred percent on that, but I gotta take some chances if I'm going to, uh, to get to the bottom of things.”
“Oh. Okay.”

“Yeah, that's, that's it. That's all. I don't have anything world breaking for you today, sorry.”

“I'm sure we'll manage. Thanks for calling Quentin... I don't... I don't feel good.”

“I hear ya Brett. On the one hand, no conspiracy theories. On the other hand, that guy's gonna be learning about magic. It's true what they say. When God opens a door he throws a twenty five pound sack of refined sugar out of a window.”

“...I. I will. Have to take your word for that. I'm gonna go ahead and cue up a song on random, just poking blindly, and then it will be time for station ID after that, but by the time we are back maybe the shakes and the dry heaves will have passed. Stick around for, ugh. For more Morning Rush.”
The School of Hard Water

Elemental Magic Overview

The expression of magic in bullet type and pattern is just as important as the color or spectrum of the magic itself, and far more indicative of personality, talent, and skill. To use fire magic as an example, a fireball can be created using any color, each of which corresponds to an attribute associated with fire. Heat and Light are the most obvious attributes, which can be expressed with Red, Orange, and Yellow magic easily. However, fire magic can also be used to heal or protect with Green Magic, specifically evoking the comfort of a warm hearth or a home cooked meal.

So too do the bullet patterns used to create fire express attributes associated with fire. Fire can progress with the slow patience of a candle flame burning its way through the candlestick, with the rapacious force of a forest fire, or an explosive outward force like the eruption of a volcano. These are the patterns which fall neatly into the concepts of fire as an archetypal force, but fire bullets are not limited to them alone; with practice, any type of magic may be expressed in any color and with any pattern.

(Bullets that are Red Communication magic can be used to light their surroundings in full white light in the visual spectrum, not just red light. You just have to give the bullet just enough “oomph” to manifest, and then give it a push now and then while it decays, so it’s right on the edge of collapsing back into c-velocity range. This gets really tiring really fast, but the light lets you see more, and you can stick the bullet in a stabilizer if you know how to make one. But that’s getting way ahead, into infusion and enchanting. -Alphys)

Other common elements besides fire include water or ice, lightning or electricity, air or wind, and earth or stone. The Five Element system is the most common framework used by monsters, however it has as many cultural connotations as it does practical ones. As magic is a function of willpower and consciousness, it may be easier for humans to manifest bullets according to a system of attributes that they are already familiar with; the Classical Greek Elements still hold considerable sway in the popular consciousness and media, and so that may be more familiar.

Ultimately the organizational framework is simply a tool or teaching aid; what matters is the ability to manifest and direct magic power with purpose. If human magic ultimately ends up with a completely different system, perhaps based on the sense organs or musical theory or even flavors and textures, then that is the way magic will need to be taught.

(If you want to start in at the deep end, consider this; all physical phenomena can be expressed in terms of wave mechanics, of vibrations in energetic and physical media. Sound waves would be an excellent starting point, as they involve vibrations for physical molecules. Finer control of wave media would lead to influence over smaller measurement units of matter and energy, from atoms to subatomic particles to photons and even the long predicted sub-photonic particle bands. In other words, sound waves lead to gravity waves lead to electromagnetism in all its myriad expressions. -WD)

The primary concern when first teaching elemental magic is expressing it safely. While bullets of any color are at worst an annoyance without intent to harm behind them, secondary effects on the environment are a real danger. Fireballs can ignite flammable materials such as paper, cloth, wood, and volatile chemicals, unless those materials have been infused against the influence of fire. (Infusion will be covered later.) Electricity and ice are also very potent hazards if they should get out of hand. It follows logically that the initial lessons of elemental magic be limited to Wind, Earth, and liquid Water.
Frisk stared at the sheets of paper on the table, then pulled out a mechanical pencil and started to scribble a note in the margins.

(Only one example exists of humans using personalized bullets, Mr. Stanton with his coffee cups. Personality-attuned bullets are clearly possible, but may not be universal. Human magic may work on different principles; need a large enough class size to test for matters of scale, not counting for individual skills. -Frisk)

Frisk looked at what they had written... and then turned to see their right hand finish writing something.

(Stanton’s magic abilities stem from his machine. Natural development of magic powers needs to be compared and contrasted to Phase Integration Magic. -C)

'Don’t start, Frisk. I’ve been watching you read this stuff for the last hour. And unlike you I don’t get a natural high from advanced magic theory. I just want this to be over.’

“Oh,” Frisk mumbled, their protest about how they weren’t going to comment dying on their lips. The papers were brought together, stacked, tapped on the surface of the desk to even them out, and placed on the table with two pencils on top. The chair was pushed out with a scraping noise, and the child walked over to the living room, picking up the TV remote. “What do you want to...”

'I wasn’t... thinking anything specific that I wanted to do instead. I was just bored and impatient.’

“I know, that’s why I...” Frisk pushed the remote into their right hand. “Here, whatever looks good to you.”

Their right hand held up the remote and the TV turned on, and the channels began to change as Chara scrolled through them.

'Might as well sit down somewhere.’

“Right.” Frisk settled on one end of the couch as the TV cycled through 24 hour news networks, the science channel, several channels on history, a few cartoons that did not really appeal to either child, an interview with Officer Steve on Local Channel 55, and finally settled on... a public access station playing a rerun of The Joy Of Painting.

“Good choice.”

"I like his voice. Very relaxing.” Chara replied out loud.

After several minutes of watching a man with an afro slowly create snowy mountain peaks where a
blank canvas once stood, Chara hit the Mute button on the remote.

'Okay, what gives?'

“What?”

'Your gut feels like most if not all of your internal organs have turned to ice. Never a good sign.'

“...I, uh.” Frisk swallowed. “I forgot that. You were there. When I was reading those notes. I got absorbed.”

“Hardly out of the ordinary for you.”

“I know, I'm-” Frisk flinched. “I'm sorry.”

Chara did not respond right away, but all at once, the remote was put down and Frisk's right hand knocked on their head.

“Stop that right now.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop those thoughts. Just because you didn't vocalize them doesn't mean I didn't see them. You are neither my prison, nor my warden, Frisk.”

“...you're stuck in my head and you've been that way for-”

“For eighteen months plus change and counting. Could be worse.”

“...how??”

There was a pause before Chara spoke again.

“I could have ended up in someone else’s head. Someone who did not care who they hurt, as long as they got what they wanted in the end. Somebody who would have left nothing but dusty footprints in their wake. And I don't know if I could have even slowed them down, much less stopped them. So if the alternative is watching everyone I ever cared about be murdered in front of me, I will take being stuck in your head, and being bored while you do your science nerd stuff, any day of the week.”

“...oh.”

Chara picked up the remote control and pressed the Mute button again, so the soothing voice of Bob Ross once again filled the living room.

“If you hadn't realized I was still here. I would have just watched. I was... I was okay with that, Frisk. I made my choice a long time ago. Knowing that Toriel and Asgore and Asriel, that they were finally together again... that was all I needed. To know that they were doing okay. I didn't need to be a part of their happy ending. I just needed to know that they got one, even if it took a while to get there.”

“...yeah, well... you're a part of it now. So. You don't need to put up with just waiting on me. Not anymore.”

“...too bad we can't do that thing where we each read a different book with a different eye.”

“Yeah.” Frisk rubbed their temples. “Maybe we can work out something with audiobooks or
something. One person reads while the other person listens. Even if it doesn't work, we won't have a massive headache—"

Frisk's words, and Bob Ross's voice, were drowned out as something slammed into the front door multiple times; the human child jumped off of the sofa, light sluicing out of their hands and taking the form of weapons; a jagged red knife in their right hand, and a yellow pistol in their left.

“HEY! OPEN UP NERDS!”

The magical weapons faded to nothing in seconds, and Frisk took a deep breath.

“Ah yes, Undyne. What she lacks in patience she makes up for in volume.”

Frisk grinned and walked over to the door, opening it and revealing a tall muscular fish monster and a short skeleton.

“Hey guys.”

“Hey punk! You ready to spar?!”

“Uh, what?”

“Toriel wanted you to get some lessons in water magic from an expert, just like she knows fire magic inside out! And the best way to learn is to train all day, every day!!”

'What are the odds we can convince mom to let us stop by the star in Heritage Park before this sparring session starts?'

“...I have to put some papers away first, but I'll call mom, assuming she didn't hear the knocking earlier.”

“Hello? Was that Undyne knocking on the door?” Frisk turned to see Toriel emerge from the hallway to her office. “Ah, hello Undyne. And Sans, hello, I did not expect to see you today.”

“me neither, but here we are.”

“I hope I am not being overeager, but is this related to Chara's...?”

“sorry Tori. no breakthroughs. just background.”

“Aha. Well, it has been less than a week.” Toriel nodded. “And it is wise to have a knowledge of the fundamental sciences that will be involved.”

“Great! You two can nerd out, and I can start the epic training montage with these two goobers!” Undyne held up a clenched fist in what was probably meant to be either a symbol of resolve or a victory dance. “Oh, does Asriel want in on this? Broaden his horizons?"

“While he may be interested in the future, today Asriel is spending time with Asgore. Playing catch and making up for lost time.” Toriel smiled. “I will relay your offer to him upon his return.”

“Sounds good! Okay, less talk, more spears!!”

“Okay!! First things first! Magic is all about willpower, so you gotta put everything you got behind it!” Undyne held out one hand, and light began to coalesce into an orb held in her fingers, until it
Frisk held up one hand, and light began to gather together, forming a rough spheroid shape with a rippling surface. The sphere elongated and narrowed, much like the magic Undyne had used... then bowed under the weight of gravity, splitting into individual drops and splattering to the ground before dissipating back into the ether.

“...I think I'm missing a step.”

Undyne rolled her eye.

“No you're not. We're trying to do Water magic. You were thinking that because it's water, it acts like water does. Going downhill.”

Undyne inverted the spear, jamming it into the ground, and globules of what looked like water began to rise from the earth.

“You have to remember that magic is energy. It doesn't have to follow the same rules as physical matter because it isn't physical matter. And when magic and matter do overlap, that doesn't mean the matter drags down the magic, unless you get stuck thinking that. Magic is all about what you think and feel becoming real. If you're convinced that you can't do something, you'll struggle with it. Just like everything in life, when you get down to it.”

The floating globes of water expanded into bubbles and popped, leaving nothing behind. Undyne removed the spear from the earth, and pointed at Frisk.

“Give it another shot.”

Frisk shrugged and held out their hand. A rippling energy filled in the space between their fingers and palm, spread out, and finally stabilized as a sort of pole or staff with a hexagonal cross section, which immediately began to steam and drip as real water in the atmosphere condensed on it.

“That's ice magic, Frisk! We're trying for water!”

“Yeah. I know. It's water in solid form.”

“Not the...” Undyne reached up with her free hand and rubbed her forehead, then adjusted the strap of her eyepatch. “Okay, let's take a step back. There's a fire, an ordinary fire, with chemistry and oxygen and all that nerdy stuff. How would you put it out with magic?”

“Wood or paper fire, either a high pressure stream or big bullets that splash and cover it. Oil or grease fire, block off the oxygen by creating an airtight shield with green magic. Thermite or other self-oxidizing reaction, use ice magic to lower the temperature of the materials below the ignition point long enough for the reaction to stop.”

“Okay, this helps. You went through those options like you were following some sort of map or checklist in your head, or something like those programming flowcharts that Alphys makes. That's not a bad thing. But those systems do as much to limit you as they do to help you. You're relying on those systems for leverage, for... I don't know what the human term would be, but the ability to... to accept the possibility that magic can take that form. But at the same time, if it's not on those charts, it means you can't do it, even if you can see that other people like me can.” Undyne twirled the spear in one hand. “Honestly I don't know how we'd go about changing that. And as much as I hate to say it, I don't think Alphys will have any ideas either. She thinks like you do, all systems and patterns and statistics and other nerdy stuff.”
'Hey, there's an idea.'

“Wait, what?”

“I mean, she looks at what's already there, like she's looking for permission or something.”

“I'm sorry Undyne, I didn't mean I misunderstood. Chara said something and I was confused.”

“Oh.” Undyne stared. “So, are we going to hear about this idea anytime soon?”

“A lot of what we know about fire magic, we know from exposure. Watching Toriel cook. We didn't have the same exposure to water magic. What if you handed that spear over, and we tried to... you know. Figure out how it works.”

“Oh, like trying to copy something. Alright, I dig it! Like trying to learn a fighting style by studying your opponent's moves!” Undyne flipped the spear around and tossed it up in the air, and Frisk managed to catch it in both hands. “Let's see what you got!!”

Frisk held the spear up, rotated it slightly where the morning sunlight was refracted, tapped the surface... it was hard and unyielding, almost like glass or ceramic. Inside the shift, the occasional bubble could be seen, rolling around and shifting location as the orientation of the spear changed.

“...surface tension??”

Frisk held out their left hand, which once again filled with a peculiar light that elongated into a long stick... with no point at the end and several curves that slowly shifted as weight distribution changed.

“Okay, that's a little better.” Undyne pointed. “I mean, it looks like a pool noodle but it's staying together.”

Frisk sighed as their attempted spear collapsed into motes of light, and tossed Undyne's spear back to her.

“Your confidence is truly inspiring. Something tells me I'm sticking with fire magic.”

Undyne cackled, showing off a number of teeth that would probably startle and unnerve anyone unfamiliar with her.

“Frisk, you know how long it took me to get my spears right? Years. Lots of them. Lots of training, lots of practice. Same as when I was learning to play the piano, and honestly I've been waiting to use this analogy for a while now so gimme a minute. You don't get to be good at playing music by just studying music theory. You gotta pick up an instrument and screw around with it and make noise before you learn how to make music. Same with anything artistic, and that includes magic, because magic is an expression of your feelings and ideas, just like a song or a drawing or a story or anything else. Understanding the theory is going to help, it's not a liability. But it's not enough. You have to practice, and you have to be willing to put up with a lot of mistakes and screw ups and false starts and dead ends.”

“...but last Friday I basically pulled a Wave / Force Collapse cannon out of nowhere. And before that I was able to teleport twice.”

“Yeah, because you were in a life and death situation that narrowed your focus to a razor's edge, and when you were done you passed out!” Undyne let her spear vanish and got down on one knee in front of Frisk. “It's one thing to have a bookcase fall on somebody and then pull it off of them in the heat of the moment. That does not mean you can go into the gym the very next day, stick a hundred
pounds of weights on a barbell and start doing dead lifts. You need to build up to that. Build up your magic potential and stamina, work on your focus, figure out how to, I dunno, trick yourself into thinking that a given type of magic will work. So... yeah, that's actually a more important lesson than anything I can tell you about just water magic, I think.”

“...makes sense... uhm. To be honest. It kind of feels like there's a lot of pressure. Didn't have that when I was reading the book, but now... mom's working on lesson plans, exercises, diagrams, and... I know I have to walk before I can run. But it's hard to walk when it feels like so many people are pushing me to go faster.”

“...that's never been an issue for me. Actually my biggest obstacle was other people trying to tell me to slow down. That's why Asgore refused to fight me for so long, he was waiting for me to get older and stronger, so I had a chance at all.” Undyne grinned. “Don't let the pressure get to you, punk. Go as fast or slow as you need to. And... and remember. Magic is how monsters express themselves. No reason why it should be different for humans.”

Frisk sighed and nodded.

“Right... you know. A week ago. If somebody told me you'd be giving me pointers on water magic today, I would have thought they were making a pun at my expense.”

“...hey. Was that what had you distracted during the dodge ball game? That dream where we were fighting, it wasn't like an action replay of our first fight? It was about this kind of stuff?’

“Yup. Everybody found out, and... you did what you thought you had to do. To protect monsters.”

Undyne sighed.

“You know I kind of want to be indignant about how you thought I wouldn't stand by my friends no matter what, but when we first met I did try to kill you a couple different times. So, you know. Fair's fair.” Undyne narrowed her eye. “Did we have like, a big epic battle?”

“No, I woke up after your opening attack, while you were getting ready for a follow up.”

“Oh. That's a little anticlimactic.”

Frisk stared at Undyne, and the woman's eye widened in realization when they understood what they said.

“That, uh. That came out wrong.”
Double Blind Experiments

The test chamber door opened with the hiss of a positive pressure seal being broken, and a figure almost completely covered in safety gear stepped forward slowly, turning to face the table in the center of the chamber. There was a burst of static that transitioned quickly into words.

“Brendan, your pulse and respiration just jumped up. You feel alright?”

The figure grunted as they walked forward towards the table, their reply muffled by the ventilator mask on their face.

“Do I have to answer that question?”

In front of the table, Brendan breathed in and out, slowly, staring at the machine on top of it.

“Just like we planned it, Brendan. Take one glove off first.”

“Okay. Okay. Yeah. Okay. Removing... removing my left glove now.”

Inside the observation room, four pairs of eyes and one pairs of eye sockets tracked Brendan's every move.

“Everything looks good, Brendan. You are cleared for Phase Integration Test Number One.”

“I know. I know.” Brendan’s uncovered hand slowly moved towards the machine, shaking the whole time. Beneath the ventilation mask and the goggles above them, what little of his face that could be seen did not look at all confident.

“Any time now would be good, Brendan-”

“Don't rush me, okay?! I'm, I'm reaching for it!”

“Brendan you're wearing a lead vest, a helmet, goggles, a mask, gloves, boots, elbow and knee pads and an inflatable inner tube. What the hell more do you want, a bomb disposal suit?!”

“Is that an option? Because, right now-”

“Just touch the machine, Brendan!!”

“Actually between me and Cavanaugh we probably know at least one guy who could hook us up with-”

There was the sound of a non existent throat being cleared.

“Justin, while that may prove useful in the future that would impose too great a time delay for the experiment. Joe, please stop badgering Brendan. Brendan, whenever you’re ready, but ideally some time within the next fourteen hours.”

“Okay, okay... okay.” A hand slowly reached out and wrapped itself around the handle of the machine. “I... I have. I got it.”

“Contact confirmed. You are ready to activate the Phase Integrator.”

The figure's other hand reached for the controls on the front of the device. Fingers rested on several
buttons and a dial... and the test chamber was filled with a shrill scream.

“What the hell?!”

“Oh god oh god! Abort! Abort! Brendan g-get out! Get out of-”

“It's not even turned on what's happening to him-”

“Brendan! Brendan, what's-”

“I'M FINE I'M FINE I'M JUST REALLY FUCKING SCA-”

Shaking fingers finally pushed one of the buttons on the machine.

“OH SHIII-”

And-

The-

World-

Was-

Filled-

With-

Light-

Brendan shrieked and stepped back, tripping over his feet and landing on his back, and quickly curling into a ball in an attempt to protect the more vulnerable parts of his anatomy. On the table, the Phase Integrator tipped back and landed on its side with a dull sound of plastic hitting plastic. One red light bulb on the front was lit up.

“We have a red light. Test concluded. Brendan, how do you feel?”

Slowly, Brendan uncurled from the ground and managed to stand upright again after considerable effort, owing to the layers of improvised armor he was wearing.

“Uh... normal? How should I feel?”

Inside the observation booth, skeletal hands reached for the microphone.

“That's what the tests are supposed to tell us. When the Integrator was activated, we saw some sort of rapid color effect across the spectrum, from red to magenta. Did you experience that?”

“Uh... yeah, I think so. It was all... it was kind of a blur?”

“Right...” Dr. Aster rubbed the bridge of bone between his eye sockets. “We'll look at it again on the video playback later. In the meantime, go ahead and head to the chamber door. Joe's already headed your way.”

“Okay. Got it.” Brendan shuffled over to the doorway, and after a few moments, the door slid to one side with the same hiss as before, and the instant there was enough room a figure walked past Brendan, stepped towards the table, and reached out an arm... with a glowing purple hand shaped
light on the end.

As Brendan watched, the fingers elongated, shooting towards the machine on the table, wrapping around it and inside it, and in less than five seconds had reduced it to a pile of machine screws, loose wires, bulbs, light emitting diodes, printed circuit boards, vacuum tubes, batteries and assorted molded plastic.

“Disassembly complete.”

“Confirmed, Joe. I'll t-take it down to the high security storage vault ASAP.”

“Sounds good.” Joe turned around and walked out of the chamber into the informal 'clean room' right outside, where Brendan was slowly removing layers of protective gear.

“Your confidence in my work was touching.”

“Fuck you Stanton! I could have died!”

“...I kind of want to get mad at you for that remark, but thinking about it, a faulty prototype would have saved us a lot of trouble last week.” Joe shrugged and pulled out his cell phone, thumb typing as he spoke. “Hey, Justin.”

“Sup.” The reply from Joe's phone was loud enough for Brendan to hear it, and Joe held his phone away from his head in surprise as he started walking through the halls of All Fine Labs.

“Gah! What the... I think I butt-dialed my volume up to max again.”

“That can happen. What's up?”

“Integrator's just a pile of parts now.”

“I saw, I was still in the observation room when you did your fastest magic hand in the west routine. I'll escort Dr. Alphys down to secure storage soon as possible.”

“Alright.”

“Hey, did you see Steve on TV?”

“What?”

“He had in interview on Local Channel 55.”

“First I've heard of it.”

“Yeah, it was about moving Cater. Wasn't sure if you had the time to see it if you were setting all this up.”

“Nope. Is it going to air again?”

“It's probably on Youtube at this point, so technically yes.”

“Cool. I'll watch it when I get back to my desk.”

“Oh, you have a desk now? Moving up in the world.”

“Fuck you Justin.” Joe grinned. “Party still set for tonight?”
“Yup. Couldn't get helium for the balloons, but other than that, everything else went off like
clockwork.”

“Well, all good things must come to an end. See you at the garage tonight if I don't see you before
then.”

“Right. See ya.”

The phone beeped as the call ended, and Joe returned the device to his pocket as he approached the
door to his office. It wasn't a very large office, more like an over sized janitorial closet with internet
access, but it had his name on the nameplate and that was what counted.

Once inside and with the door shut, Joe pulled open a desk drawer, and then held what was left of
his right arm over it. The magenta light returned and snaked down to his lab coat pocket, pulling out
a small electrical component and dropping it into a pile of almost identical components in the drawer,
*almost* being the key word.

*Comparative Magic Project*

While revealing the existence of the Phase Integrator was a necessity due to the long term
consequences of concealing information, it has resulted in a considerable number of short term
problems. Granted, having numerous organizations offering a frankly ludicrous amount of money
for the design specifications is not something most people would consider a problem. The veiled and
not-so-veiled threats made towards All Fine Labs *when we refused to qualify* however.

So far the only fallout has been the cancellation of all the scheduled investor meetings for the next
two weeks, and it's impossible to be certain if this is from the application of political or economic
pressure, or if it's just the end result of having a business in a town that's had a dangerous man
escape from law enforcement three times in as many weeks. Financially, All Fine Labs is still viable
thanks to a generous donation from the Dreemurr family, but we can't rely on their generosity in the
long term. Thus, the necessity of the Comparative Magic Project.

All projections indicate that, with or without access to the Phase Integrator machine, human
rediscovery of magic is inevitable. To prepare for a world with ubiquitous magical potential, All
Fine Labs has constructed a secondary building, the Educational Annex, which will serve as an
instructional and training facility. A sort of “magic summer school” to quote Frisk Dreemurr. At the
same time, it will allow All Fine Labs to perform a detailed comparison study between artificially
enhanced magical abilities and naturally refined ones.

Brendan Cobb has been selected for the Phase Integration half of the study, and his friend Alex
Carson will take Toriel Dreemurr's initial courses when they start this weekend to complete the other
half. At the same time that we measure the capabilities of different magical training methods, we
may also make the Phase Integrator less of a temptation. Of course, there will always be those who
want to take shortcuts... though, if the pressure gets too bad, Joe has suggested handing out the
design *without* any of the safeguards he added after the original mishap. I'm certain this would
create more problems than it solves, but I'd be lying if I said that the idea doesn't have some sort of
appeal.

So far the curriculum for the school that Queen Dreemurr has compiled, based on input from Frisk
Dreemurr and several other prospective students, covers all of the basics along with several higher
order concepts. My own input has been requested multiple times, and in each case I have to remind
myself that this is not a remedial course for monsters. There are concepts in the literature that we
have taken for granted that simply don't have an equivalent in any human language or culture because it wasn't necessary. On the plus side, constant reevaluation of what we thought we knew for certain has lead to a few insights, including at least one I feel is a promising avenue for the treatment of Amalgamation Syndrome. On the downside, I almost ended up explaining monster reproduction to Frisk, something that I doubt Toriel was interested in happening based on the expression she was giving me before I stopped talking.

So far it looks like the first part will include an overview of the magic spectrum and the processes behind bullet formation, then specialized areas like Elemental Magic and Elemental Infusion, Enchantment, and so on. At the same time, Frisk pointed out that we would need to point out areas where human mythology or cultural assumptions were inaccurate and to what extent. The concept of Magic Potential will probably be easy; human entertainment quantifies the use of magic in fictional settings as a finite resource more often than not, and humans working at the lab have compared the concept to “Magic Points” or “Spell Slots” among other things. Other ideas will likely be harder to convey; the whole idea of “spell colleges” that fits everything together according to the end result would be like lumping wax candles, oil lamps, incandescent light bulbs and light emitting diodes together just because they all create light, but there seems to be this idea already that the different bands of the Magic Spectrum fit into that metric.

Even though it's not part of the syllabus at this time, I'd be interested in using this as an opportunity to test one of Alphys' theories regarding magic expression in humans. Joe and Frisk have provided us with mountains of experimental data, but both qualify as special cases. Tabulating the results from various “students” taking this course would give us a much more accurate cross section of human magic capabilities, including range and bullet affinity. It's entirely possible that some or even most of humanity don't manifest magic in the form of bullet projectiles at all.

Of course, considering bullets are the default means of expressing magic for monsters, that's going to leave yet another obstacle as far as magical training. And will also make the Phase Integrator more of a temptation for those who covet power at any cost.

Dr. Aster stared at the screen for a few moments, pressed a keyboard shortcut to save the document, and pull out his cell phone.

“...hello, Dr. Ross. This is, uh. This is Wing Ding Aster. Leaving you a message, because you're probably busy... which you already know if you're listening to the, uh, the message, that's implicit... uh... what I'm TRYING to say, is, would you be interested in stopping by the Stop And Go some time this weekend? I have no idea what your schedule is like so it makes sense to leave the details up to you, so if that, uh, if that sounds like a good idea, just, you know, let me know. Uh. Goodbye.”

Dr. Aster tapped the screen on his phone a few times, stared at it, then dropped his elbows on his desk and his skull in his hands.

“Uuuuuugh. It was like trying to defend my thesis all over again....”
The Work Of Children

Toriel stared at the table in front of her, fingers wrapped around a mug of coffee. The only sounds were the hum of the air conditioner, the ticking of a clock, and the muffled shouts of Undyne's encouragement and instruction from the back yard.

“Uh... I know that was a lot to take in at once. If you have any questions...”

Sans trailed off, and it almost seemed like Toriel had not heard him, until she brought up the coffee mug to her face and took a sip.

“I... I believe that I understand the science, or as much of it as a layperson can expect to. And... after what happened in the CORE, I understand why a simpler explanation would be more useful and more easily understood. But... there are implications in what you have told me that I am very reluctant to consider.”

“Right.”

Toriel placed the mug on the table again, and stared at Sans, her expression strangely neutral.

“Sans, tell me. How many times have my children died?”

“...I don't know. Asriel and Frisk never told me exact numbers. But-” Sans added as he saw Toriel's mouth twist into a frown, “Before you ask them, you need to be absolutely sure that you want to hear the answer.”

“...you are right.” Toriel's frown lost some of its tension, until the queen of all monsters simply looked sad. “And... and of course. I understand that... whatever else has happened... Asriel has already died once. And Chara... twice. And Frisk... Sans. I know what happened to Asriel and Chara. But for me to feel as if I already knew Frisk the first time I met them, then something must have happened to them.”

“Something did.” Sans sighed. “They won't say what. But according to them, and Asriel... they managed to get out of the Underground during what Frisk calls their first Run.”

Toriel nodded, a sad expression on their face. “I see. They would have had to... oh. Oh dear.” A paw came up to Toriel's mouth. “That must be why... when Asgore, when he was, when he was going to try to offer his life in recompense for the fallen humans, Frisk wouldn't let him... and... Frisk has always tried. So hard. To make him feel welcome here, even when I was trying to do the exact opposite.”

Sans opened his mouth, then closed it, and then finally opened it again.

“Whatever happened on their first Run, we do know something, or someone, killed Frisk on the Surface, and everything started over. And... we know things were different the second time around. A lot of folks had that *deja vu* kinda feeling, but... I was watching Frisk the whole way, practically from the moment they walked out of the Ruins. They weren't afraid of anybody, they danced through bullet patterns like they had 'em all memorized, went out of their way to make friends, to boost Mettaton's ratings, to ship Alphys and Undyne together, to encourage Shyren to sing professionally, heck they even dragged Burgerpants out of that existential crisis while he was slinging burgers for Mettaton.”

Toriel stared at Sans, her brow wrinkled in confusion.
“Tori, this kid was out. They were back on the Surface again. They were home. The adventure was over. And whatever happened to them to Reset the timeline like that...” Sans shrugged. “I was tracking an anomaly in the timespace continuum for a while. Timelines jumping left and right, starting and stopping, and I honestly didn't know what to do. How do you stop something like that, if it's hostile? How can you fight it? How can you outsmart it? I spent ages just trying to figure out what it wanted, and when Frisk showed up acting like they'd seen it all before and I got some weird readings, I was certain that this human kid was the anomaly. And I hoped that the timeline jumping would stop once they got what they wanted, once they were happy.”

Sans held up one of his hands, moving it back and forth and rubbing the gloved fingers together.

“It never occurred to me that what they wanted was for everyone else to be happy. The Perfect Ending. Or at least, as perfect as they could manage. And that's why they finally talked to us about it, after dad came back. They want the time loop to end, and everything that's happened in the last year and a half, to be safe.”

Toriel looked down at her coffee mug, staring at her reflection in the liquid.

“...and for all that. You cannot even tell me. How many times. My children... my baby... how many times they had to suffer and die. For us to sit at this table. And drink coffee.”

A massive arm was brought down on the table with a loud crash, sweeping the mugs off in one swift movement. Before the mugs could collide with the floor, both were surrounded by a blue glow.

“I told you. I can't tell you because I don't know-”

“You should not have to tell me because the number should be zero!” Toriel yelled, standing up and towering over the skeleton. “What of the other humans that fell, how much did they suffer before-”

Through the back door, a tall fish monster with a pair of spears burst into the room.

“OKAY WHAT'S WITH ALL THE YELLING?!” Undyne yelled, completely oblivious of the implications of her own outburst, and then slowly took in the image; a boss monster standing at her full height, glaring at her, with a short skeleton sitting on the opposite side of the table, left hand glowing blue, along with two coffee mugs levitating in midair.

“...uh... I guess nobody's broken in then?”

“nope.”

“Okay then. I'll just. Go back out and. Get back to training Frisk.”

“See that you do,” Toriel growled, and Undyne sprinted back out into the back yard, slamming the door behind her. Toriel turned to glare at Sans again and opened her mouth, but before she could speak the two mugs had been returned to their original places.

“Do you remember the night dad came back?”

“I fail to see the relevance to the subject at hand, Sans.”

“I know you don't, and as much as I hate to say it, that's a problem. So I'll ask again and I respectfully request that you indulge me. Do you remember?”

Toriel inhaled slowly through her nose, and then out again.
“After school. You insisted that Papyrus hang out with Frisk here. We watched that cartoon that they both adore. You brought Wing Ding here. We called everyone together, to have a celebratory dinner. Frisk plied Wing Ding with questions about the CORE and his work...” Toriel's expression shifted. “Before that. They were interested in science and technology. Spending their pocket money on books and old appliances at the thrift store. But... did something change, then?”

“That's an important point, Tori, but it's not the most important one here. Keep going. What happened that night?”

“...we finished eating... we were washing dishes...” Toriel slowly looked down at the mug in front of her that had almost had a terminal appointment with the dining room floor.

Sans picked up the mug in front of him, and made a show of looking inside it even though it was obviously empty.

“...if either of these mugs, or both of them, had hit the floor and broken just now. Frisk would have heard that noise. I saw their expression when the plate was dropped. They would have run in, even if Undyne tried to stop them. Hell, they might try to bridge their way in. And they would have seen you angry and for fuck's sake Toriel they can't see you angry about this.”

Toriel looked up at Sans in surprise at hearing the profanity, but the skeleton pushed on.

“After dad disappeared, after I had recovered and was trying to figure out what happened... if Papyrus hadn't been there relying on me, I don't know what I would have done. I was angry, I was worried that me slacking off had caused the experiment to go wrong, I was... I was not the same person who knocked on the door to the Ruins one day. After mom was gone, Dad and Paps were everything to me. My whole world. If I thought there was a way to get dad back, there was no trial too great, no challenge too difficult, no crime too heinous, that I wouldn't attempt them all. And Frisk... Frisk is the same way. They broke the laws of physics to get us up here. To get this Happy Ending. And they don't want to have to do it again, Toriel, and I don't blame them one bit. But if something happens to them before we can stop the time loop or detach them from it somehow...”

The skeleton shook his head.

“And that brings me to why I'm here today. Because Frisk has been having nightmare all week long, and not about the attack on the school. Or not just about that, anyway. Because, you see, there is a way to stop all that from happening.”

“...and that way is?” Toriel finally spoke up.

“The same way that the other six humans stopped it from happening.”

Toriel stared at Sans for a few seconds, and as she opened her mouth, Sans held up a hand.

“Before you yell at me again, I'm not advocating that. Not even as a plan of Last Resort. And I know Frisk wouldn't do that as long as Chara is... attached to them. But once we get them separated...”

The mug was put back down on the table, and Sans stared at Toriel, his eye sockets black and empty.

“That kid has already died who knows how many times. If they think they can help everyone by doing it one more time, they won't even hesitate.”

The queen stared at Sans for a minute, then rested both elbows on the table, and her head in her hands.
“What a cruel twist of fate, to build a future on the suffering of children.”

“...I have an important question. And it's not for my sake. If it was to save one child—”

“*Do not* finish your question, Sans. I am not a fool. I know that if... something happens to Frisk. And we are all... returned to the Underground, with no memory. Asriel will return to his previous form, without a Soul.”

“...so is that a yes or a no?”

Toriel raised her head and glared at Sans. “*It is a no, Sans.* I will not sacrifice anyone, for any reason. Or have you forgotten why I was on the other side of that door you were knocking on?”

“I haven't forgotten.” Sans closed his eye sockets. “But I'm not the one you need to convince.”

Sans stood up from the table and stared at one of the coffee mugs, tapping it with one finger.

“It makes sense to be angry at the situation. To be angry at god or fate or whatever mysterious entity is manipulating events behind the scenes so that the fate of the world is resting square on one person's shoulders. That is monumentally unfair, and it's worse when they're a kid. But you can't let Frisk think that you're angry at *them.*”

“...you make a valid point, Sans. And I thank you for your patience, when I lost my temper.”

“Well, like I said. If there was ever something to get mad about. This would be it.”

Frisk stared at the glass in their hand. Scant moments before, it had been full of iced tea, but now only ice cubes remained. And to add insult to injury, they still felt excessively hot.

They could hear the sounds of voices, but as if through a long, echoing tunnel, muffled by distance. It sounded like Undyne, Sans, and Toriel, which made sense because they were still in the house.

Their right hand moved on its own, pulling the glass out of their left hand and resting it against their forehead.

'*Whenever Alphys and Dr. Aster. Figure out how to give me my own body. It better be one that's immune to heat.*'

Frisk nodded in response, unable to martial the energy to vocalize their agreement... and in the process, pushed the glass out of position, causing it to fall and spill its ice cubes on them.

'*...this works too.*'

The child giggled and managed to stand up, grabbing the glass and managing to pick up all of the scattered ice cubes. Shuffling into the kitchen, the glass was emptied into the sink and then rinsed out with water before being placed on the drying rack. Shuffling back into the living room, Frisk heard the sound of Toriel clearing her throat and looked up to see her sitting on the sofa.

“Oh. Hi.”

“Hello, my children.”

“...did Sans and Undyne already leave? I was really out of it.”
“Yes, that was not long ago.” Toriel reached down and rested one paw on the seat cushion next to her. “Would you... would you sit with me for a moment?”

“...yeah.”

Frisk walked over and sat down next to Toriel, and felt the boss monster's paw rest on their head for a few moments.

“...did Sans, uhm. Did he explain things?”

“Yes. Sans told me what I needed to know.”

“Oh. About... time, and timelines and stuff, then.”

“Yes.”

“...at one point. It sounded like you were upset.”

“I was. But. It was something I needed to hear.”

The house was awkwardly silent for a while.

“Frisk.”

“Yes?”

“...before you and Undyne came back inside. I had time to think upon what he had told me. And... about other things. Sans did not mention particulars. But... the way you would respond sometimes, after a nightmare. I... I would ask you to be honest with me. In those... in those other timelines. Did...” Toriel stopped talking and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. “Did I... hurt you?”

Frisk stared at the coffee table and let out the breath they didn't realize they had been holding. Almost without thinking about it, Frisk started to rub their hands together.

“It was an accident.”

“...will you tell me what happened?”

“...the first time I met you. You wanted me to stay. I... didn't want to, even though I didn't know what was in the rest of the Underground. We fought. And I thought...” Frisk shrugged. “I thought you wanted me to prove that I was brave enough and strong enough to handle whatever was outside. So... I walked into your attacks on purpose. I saw your face before I... and that's when I realized you didn't want that to happen, you were just trying to scare me off.”

“...oh.”

Frisk took the chance of looking up, and saw that Toriel's eyes were not seeing anything in front of them.

'Maybe honesty wasn't the best policy in this case.'

Frisk watched as Toriel closed her eyes, and reached up to rub at the fur that had become matted as her tears had started to run.

“Thank you for... letting me know.” Toriel sniffed. “I cannot... I cannot imagine that this was. Easy for you. For either one of you.”
Toriel's paw came down and Frisk felt it rest on their back.

"Frisk. Chara. I want you to know. That I am sorry. I cannot remember what happened. But I know that I have hurt you both, and that is the last thing in the world that I ever want to do."

Frisk twisted in their seat and wrapped their arms around Toriel, at least to the extent that a ten year old human child's arms could reach around a full grown boss monster.

"We know, mom."

"...I... I want you to know something else, too. I am sorry for trying to trap you in the Ruins with me. It was... not fair to you, but also. It was irresponsible of me to think that I would simply... ignore the rest of the Underground. And try to recreate what I had lost. To pretend that it had not been lost at all."

Frisk felt Toriel's other arm wrap around them.

"You both deserved so much better than to be the wish fulfillment fantasy of an old, stubborn woman. And I am so proud of you, for standing up to me."

"Mom. There's something else." Frisk pulled back from the hug, looked up at Toriel's face, and swallowed. "If something happens. Then all of this-"

"I know. It will all be reset again." Toriel's paw came up and started to run through Frisk's hair. "I have lost too many children already, Frisk. I cannot lose another. No matter what the alternatives are. So... you cannot fix things in that way. And you cannot take the kinds of chances that you have taken before. Not now, and not in the future."

Frisk let go of Toriel, and the queen responded in kind, and one of Frisk's hands came up to rub at their eyes.

"First I thought... you would want me dead. Because of the magic. And then I thought. You would want me dead. To protect Asriel. If there was... uhm. I'm just glad I was wrong. About that stuff."

"Frisk, I have something else to apologize for. After... after Asriel told me what you could do. I should have talked to you then, rather than waiting for you to come to me, and continue to worry about what I would do."

The child shook their head.

"If I thought that you, or anyone else, had found out. I probably would have panicked. And I don't know what I would have done then."

"That may well be true, but it does not change the fact that I have made a terrible mistake at some point. I am your mother, and the safety of children is paramount in any mother's priorities. Whatever your response to discovering you could use magic might have been... you should have felt safe being able to tell me. Somewhere along the way... I have made a mistake, and I do not know where or how. But I want to set it right, now that I have the-"

"It wasn't your fault." The words came out of Frisk's mouth in a rush. "You did everything right. You gave me a home when I had nowhere to go. You gave me a family when I had no one else to turn to. I couldn't ask for more than that."

Toriel was silent for a while, and then shook her head.
“Regardless of who is at fault. I am glad that we can speak of these matters openly now. And I hope that in the future, any further developments can be discussed just as openly. Although I cannot possibly imagine anything more groundbreaking than what we have already dealt with.”

“Yeah.” Frisk nodded. “I mean, at this point we'd have to get extraterrestrial aliens, parallel universes, evil twins, or giant robots involved just to make it register.”

“Perhaps. In any event it is getting close to lunch time. Would you be interested in helping me in the kitchen?”

“Yes. I would like that.”

“Very well.” Toriel smiled. “You should wash up, first. After all, you were out in the heat and exercising quite a lot.”

“Oh. Yeah. That's a good idea. I'll be right back.”

Frisk hopped up off of the sofa and made their way up the stairs, and Toriel stood up, watching the child climb until they were out of sight. Walking into the kitchen, the smile on the teacher’s face vanished, replaced with a scowl as they heard the bathroom door close. One paw came up in front of the queen’s face, and orange light gathered into a fireball, that got brighter and brighter, until it was almost like a miniature sun, its burning light reflected in Toriel's eyes.

“A child. That does not think that they can ask for more from a parent. Than the bare minimum?”

The fireball faded away, but the glow in the queen's eyes remained even as she lowered her arm.

“Jason Taylor, I shall have your head.”
“That's exactly what we were trying to avoid this morning, which was why our attempts to move Jordan Cater were kept under the strictest security.”

Asriel frowned, and his face contorted in a grimace as he opened his eyelids slightly. He could hear voices, and one of them sounded very familiar... Officer Steve. It had to be.

“Did you take any special measures to prevent Cater from using any of his, well, magical abilities?”

“After speaking with Dr. Alphys and Dr. Aster of All Fine Labs, we were able to take appropriate precautions, though for obvious security reasons I cannot state what they are publicly.”

“Were the monsters able to provide you with some sort of magic-proof security measures?”

“Actually, and I do not think that it is a security breach to share this, no. Monsters and monster culture differs dramatically from most human cultures when it came to both criminal activity and responding to criminal activity. The biggest difference is that monsters have never had prisons. There was no room for them. Most of their criminal justice system is based on what is called a restorative model, rather than a punitive one. In other words, they were very big on community service.”

“So no magic-proof handcuffs or anything like that.”

“Actually I asked about exactly that. The closest thing to magic-proof materials are materials that have undergone a process that monsters call Infusion. This makes them resistant to elemental magic and related physical processes, so for example, fire infusion makes something fireproof. Because the suspect's abilities appear to default to Purple Magic, or Pattern Magic, he wouldn't necessarily be able to produce elemental attacks like that, which meant it would be an unnecessary complication to our security procedures while also introducing an unforeseen element of risk. All Fine Labs has barely scrapped the surface of what human magical ability is actually capable of, and for all we know somebody with the right know how or magical ability might be able to suck the magic energy out of infused matter and use it. We all agreed we did not want to provide a potential advantage or head start to anybody being charged with multiple felonies.”

Asriel finally managed to open his eyes up enough to look around; he was lying on his bed, in the bedroom, and the sound was coming from Frisk's laptop on their desk. Frisk was seated in front of it, and while their left eye seemed normal from where Asriel was, the telltale red glow on the wall behind the desk indicated that Chara had one hand on the proverbial wheel.

“That does make sense. I don't suppose you could share with us any of the precautions you are taking for the court appearances themselves?”

“Unfortunately no. As persistent as Jordan Cater has been, a lot of the credit for his multiple escapes from police custody can be attributed to outside help. We cannot risk any vital or potentially damaging information reaching those who sympathize with his cause until after the fact.”

Asriel watched as Frisk's head nodded in agreement.

“Let's pause it there. If I watch anymore I'm going end up stabbing somebody.”

“Okay.” Frisk's fingers reached for the mouse and clicked on the play button, stopping the video in the middle of one of the interviewer's questions. Asriel cleared his throat as he sat up, and the human child turned towards him. “Oh. Hey sleepyhead.”
“Hey guys. What were you watching there?”

“YouTube video of Officer Steve talking about moving Jordan,” Chara replied. “And I'm only using his proper name because I don't want Frisk to get in trouble for saying what I want to call him.”

Asriel opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“...okay then.”

“Uh. How did your day go with dad?” Frisk asked in a transparently obvious attempt to change the subject.

“It went pretty good I think. We... we had some tea. Did some gardening. Played catch. No heavy conversations about identity or responsibility or morality or stuff like that... or at least, I don't remember any. I think that, I think I got too tired after playing catch. But... it was a good tired.”

Asriel nodded. “I guess dad brought me or home or something.”

“Yeah. He was carrying you in while Frisk and Toriel were working on lunch.” The human child blinked, causing the red light shining on the rest of the bedroom to strobe. “Oh, Sans stopped by and, explained the time loop stuff to Toriel. She, uh. She took it about as well as anyone could.”

“She may ask you about what happened to you. We didn't volunteer anything, so... whatever you want to say to her. That's up to you. But she may not ask today.”

“Or at all.”

“Okay. At least I have options.” Asriel kicked his legs back and forth for a bit. “I'm not really sure I wanna... well. You know.”

“Yeah.”

“...so. You mentioned lunch, earlier. Did I sleep through that, or...?”

“Yeah, don't worry though. We saved you some stuff. Should be in the fridge when you're ready.”

“Cool. Thank you. Uh. Undyne was supposed to help you with something right? How did that go?”

Frisk shrugged.

“It was tiring. As expected. Gave me a little bit of insight at least. Not sure I'm going to get my second wind all the way back by the time Papyrus gets here to talk to me about Wave Magic, though.”

“Right. Undyne and Papyrus in the same day is a lot to ask of any one person.”

There was a beeping noise, and Asriel pulled out his phone from one pocket.

“...huh.”

“What is it? Or, I guess, who is it and what do they want?”

“It's Dr. Alphys, and she wants... a sample??”

Frisk stared at the young monster.

“She didn't say. So... all of the above, I guess.”

Asriel put his phone back in his pocket, pausing as the sound of the doorbell filled the house. Frisk got up from their chair and stretched.

“He's almost half an hour early. The meetings with the city council must have wrapped up early.”

The two children made their way out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the ground floor, where Asgore and Toriel were already standing in front of the open front door, speaking too...

“Ah, hello Mr. Coppersmith. I was wondering if we would see you again after all of the disturbances over the past month. Please, come in.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Dreemurr.” The man reached out and shook Toriel's hand, then repeated the motion with Asgore. “And you Mr. Dreemurr, nice to see you again, wish it didn't have to be in an official capacity.”

“Hello Mr. Coppersmith.”

“Hello Frisk, how are...” the man's face took on a confused expression. “Uh. What's going on with your eye?”

Frisk froze on the staircase, and their right hand immediately came up to cover the red glow from their right eye.

'SHIT SHIT SHIT I FORGOT I FORGOT SAY SOMETHING FRISK'

“Oh shit, I forgot about that.”

As if by reflex, Toriel cleared her throat at the sound of Frisk swearing.

“Is that something worth worrying about?”

Frisk dropped their right hand and blinked their eyes a few times. “Is that better?”

Mr. Coppersmith frowned. “The red light isn't there anymore, but that doesn't actually answer my original question.”

“Okay, good.” Frisk continued walking down the staircase until they reached the ground floor. “And no. It's not worth worrying about. It's just a side effect of magic use, apparently. The eyes are the windows to the Soul and all that.”

“Oh. Alright then. Not exactly something I was expecting to see when I walked in, if I'm honest.”

“What has brought you here, Mr. Coppersmith?” Toriel asked. “Also, would it be more convenient to discuss it at the table, or otherwise seated?”

“I don't actually expect to be here that long, but yes, I am here in response to a number of calls expressing concern about Frisk's welfare. Apparently a lot of people have reported them being attacked with magic?”

“Oh, those are training exercises.” Frisk waved one hand in a dismissive gesture. “I guess if people didn't know what's going on, it could look like a fight. Especially with Undyne involved.”

“So... you have been attacked with magic?”
“No.” Frisk stared at the man. “I just said I was being taught how to use magic. It's not all book learning. There are practical exercises too.”

“...okay.” Mr. Coppersmith didn't look very convinced. “I'd still like to look around and check on Frisk's living environment, though.”

“Of course,” Toriel smiled. “Let us know if you need anything.”

“Uh, if you need to see the bedroom, I just want to say that we were going to pick up stuff later, before dinner.” Asriel raised a paw, and Mr. Coppersmith turned to face the young boss monster, with a curious expression.

“Wait, who... oh, oh right! You're, uh. You're Asriel Dreemurr. The, the monster child that came back.”

“Yeah. Though I guess technically I was never actually gone. I was just... shorter.” Asriel crossed his arms. “And, uh. Yellower. And meaner.”

“Right.”

Asriel suddenly felt the weight of Frisk's arms on his head, and heard their voice coming from above and behind him on the staircase.

“Asriel is my brother from a monster mother. And it's his bedroom too. So don't hold it against us. He didn't even have arms until a few weeks ago.”

“Frisk.” Asriel growled. “You're embarrassing me.”

“You're my brother, it's my job.”

“No, that's mom and dad's job!”

“Oh, it is?” Asgore turned towards one of Toriel's bookcases. “In that case, I will get Asriel's baby pictures-”

“OH MY GOD. Come on, the sooner you see the bedroom the sooner this nightmare ends.” Asriel turned around, ducked under Frisk's arms, and started marching up the stairs.

The substance inside the transparent cylinder pulsed and rippled, suspended in midair and tinted green by the Healing Magic filling the container. Dr. Aster tapped a pencil against his teeth, making an odd clinking noise, and then scribbled something on a clipboard nearby.

“Hey, Alphys.”

“Yes?”

“You know that text you sent Asriel earlier?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

Dr. Aster pointed towards the containment cylinder.

“This didn't occur to me until literally just now when I was looking at Endogeny's ichor sample, but it seems like removing part of a person who had consciousness and physicality, but no Soul, and
keeping it away from the Soul that they do have now, might backfire.”

On the opposite side of the room, the empty cylinder Alphys was putting together slipped out of her claws and clattered against the counter top.

“Oh my g-god.”

“Yeah. We need to study his physiology in more detail if we're going to crack this reconstituted magic field problem, but we definitely can't just do what we do with the Amalgamates.”

“...yeah.”

“You know, Papyrus has been telling me more and more about what Asriel got up to. In town and in the Underground. It's been very insightful.”

“Uh-huh.”

Dr. Aster scribbled another note on the clipboard before dropping the clipboard in a basket next to the cylinder.

“Hey, I know this is a huge subject change, but where is Joe? I haven't seen him since the Integration experiment with Brendan. Or Justin now that I think about it.”

“Oh. Right. Uh. They're both taking half-days today. Something about a Shop Class project.”

“I see...” There was another, similar clinking sound that turned out to be Dr. Aster tapping his teeth with his fingertip when Alphys looked up. “Alphys, can I ask you a personal question?”

“...uh. I guess?”

“You and, and Undyne. When you were, well, first starting out. In a relationship. How did you broach the subject with her?”

Dr. Alphys stared at the skeleton, with a little blush spreading across her face.

“Well. Actually, I, uh. I d-didn't.”

“Oh. So it was Undyne that made the first move. I guess that makes sense. Not sure why I didn't think of that right away.”

“Actually, uh. She didn't either.” Dr. Alphys stared at the parts in her claws, then put them down and turned around in the chair next to the table so she could see Dr. Aster easier. “We, you know, uh. We b-both did that thing where we d-danced around each other b-because we were afraid of guessing wrong about the other p-person's feelings.

“...oh.”

“Yeah. There was a lot going on, but some of the big stuff was, like. How I get hyper focus with some projects, and everything else falls away. Social contact, progress reports, even eating and b-bathing. She, uh.” Alphys begin to blush some more. “She thought the dedication, giving a hundred percent to a project, was, uh. K-kinda hot. But at the same time. She thought that, the way I was so focused on everything... I wouldn't have any attention left over for. You know. Anything else. Or anyone. And of course, on my end, I just c-couldn't see anyone ever really wanting to be with me in that way, least of all the bravest, strongest, toughest, cutest fish in the sea, in both a metaphorical and a literal sense. So yeah. We probably would have stayed awkward friends doing the same old mutual
pining song and dance until we Fell Down from old age if not for Frisk.”

“...wait, what? Frisk played matchmaker?”

“Yeah... d-didn't I tell you this story at some point?”

“You might have, and I just can't remember it right now. It's been a busy month.”

“Heh. You're not wrong. Okay, yeah.” Alphys grinned. “So, it turns out that when I was getting Mettaton to help me try to convince Frisk not to fight Asgore, he and Frisk ended up spilling the beans about my massive, massive crush on Undyne to everyone on live television. And because Undyne had accidentally burned her house down trying to give Frisk a cooking lesson earlier, she was hanging out with Papyrus, and Papyrus loves to watch Mettaton's shows. So she heard about it that way, and, well, that gave her the push she needed to write a letter for me to tell me all about her feelings. But she got so wrapped up in trying to find the right words, she, uh, forgot to sign it. And then, uh. She g-gave it to Frisk when they were coming back to Snowdin for some reason, and Frisk brought it to Hotland, and...”

Dr. Aster's eye sockets narrowed in confusion, then opened wide in enlightenment. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Alphys shrugged. “Honestly I wasn't thinking straight at the time, and a part of me just felt flattered that anybody would feel that way about me. So we ended up, uh, g-going on a date. At the garbage dump. Only Undyne was already there... looking for me and Frisk, because she remembered that she forgot to sign the letter, and wanted to try to stop that misunderstanding before it started. And...” Alphys' face turned almost completely red. “Somehow Frisk managed to get me to c-confess that I loved Undyne at the top of my lungs, so of course she heard me and, well, we had to have a conversation about everything after that.”

“And that's when you actually sat down and finally hashed everything out between you.”

“No, that's when Undyne picked me up, threw me through an old basketball hoop, and I fell into a trash can.” Alphys face slowly shifted into a goofy grin. “Good times. I know it's not exactly storybook romance, but I wouldn't change a thing. And, as they say on the human internet, it's still a better love story than Twilight.”

“...what?”

Alphys' smile vanished.

“It's a bunch of really bad vampire romance novels. I mean, what humans thought vampires were. And technically the author couldn't even get that right. B-but that's like, a whole other pop culture thing to catch you up on, when we have like a weekend free to watch the movies. With the Rifftrax commentary, obviously.”

“Nothing about what you just said was obvious.”

“I'm sorry, I'm g-getting ahead of myself again. Uh... what was your original question?”

Dr. Aster sighed.

“Don't worry about it. I'll figure it out. Eventually.”

Mr. Coppersmith stared at the object, haphazardly constructed from loose wire, old screws, scrap
lumber, and mismatched plastic buttons.

“So... what am I looking at?”

“Right now, nothing. It needs a prism, right here.” Frisk pointed at the triangle-shaped slot in the center of the device. “But when I finally get a prism, it'll be a magic field spectrometer. I use magic, the light travels through the prism and separates, and it'll give me a literal breakdown of my strengths and weaknesses. All Fine Labs already has like eight of them, but I wanted to make one myself to see if I could do it, just like all the other stuff I build.”

“...well, if that's what you do for fun, then that's what you do for fun.”

“What can I say, I have a lot of very specific vices.” Frisk put down the work in progress machine and starting counting on their fingers. “Discworld books, Root beer with added caffeine, cartoons about transforming robots, and do-it-yourself projects... that's actually just four. Four vices.”

“What about beating people at the radio quiz show?” Asriel commented as he dropped an armload of dirty clothing into the hamper at the foot of his bed. “You enjoy that way too much for it to be anything else.”

“Okay, five vices, but the quiz show doesn't count because I don't have to spend money on that.”

“That's true, your bet is always a piggyback ride from whoever loses.” Asriel stopped trying to close the wicker lid of the hamper on the clothing inside after it became clear that the attempt was futile. “You enjoy that way too much too.”

“Okay, fine. Six vices.”

“Okay, okay, okay. Wow.” Mr. Coppersmith walked out of the bedroom into the upstairs hallway, shaking his head. A few moments later, he looked up at Toriel and Asgore. “Yeah, this was definitely just a formality. Everything here is bizarre in the ways that healthy families develop. Dirty clothes on the floor and all.”

“That does not mean that you can get out of cleaning it up, children,” Toriel commented.

“Actually, the only thing that's really got me concerned is, well... after all the stuff that did happen in the last month, I'm surprised that Frisk isn't showing some signs of trauma.”

Frisk walked up to the bedroom doorway, arms crossed.

“My arch nemesis is in prison in another city entirely, and it looks like it's gonna stick this time. Everything that's still been bothering me, I've been working through. Especially with Undyne. Since magic is connected to how you think and feel, it's important to get baggage out of the way.”

“Huh... I suppose that makes sense, and that was the only thing that was still a concern. So.” Mr. Coppersmith held up his hands. “I guess I should get out of your hair, and get back to the office to my mountain of paperwork.”

“Thank you for stopping by, Mr. Coppersmith.” Toriel smiled again. “And know that as a teacher and administrator, we are kindred spirits when it comes to the suffering of pain-perwork.”

“Ow.” Mr. Coppersmith winced and rubbed his forehead. “That pun was so bad I think it caused actual brain damage.”

“See? See?! It's not just me and Papyrus!” Asriel rushed up behind Frisk and pointed one
outstretched finger at Mr. Coppersmith. “He gets it-”

Asriel’s point, whatever it was, was drowned out by the sound of the doorbell ringing.

“Oh, that must be Papyrus. I will go greet him.” Asgore turned and made his way down the stairs, and Mr. Coppersmith turned to face Toriel.

“We are still legally obligated to investigate every claim, of course, but based on everything I’ve seen and learned, both this visit and the various visits before, I feel reasonably confident in saying that a lot of calls made to Child Services about Frisk are intended purely as harassment. Having said that, some of the more recent calls might be out of genuine concern and not understanding what was going on.”

“I cannot fault anyone who takes action when their first impulse is to protect children. And as for those who make false claims, if that is the worst they do now and in the future, I shall consider us all quite fortunate.”

“Well, you may be fortunate, but these wild goose chases cost my department time, money, gas, and attention that could be going towards children who actually need help.”

“I did not intend to trivialize your problems, Mr. Coppersmith, and I apologize if I sounded flippant.”

Mr. Coppersmith shook his head. “No, you're fine. I'm just... this kind of stuff burns my toast and maybe my fuse is a little short these days.”

“Uh, Mr. Coppersmith?” Frisk walked up to the man. “If you're still having doubts about the whole magic training thing, and you can spare a few minutes, I have an idea.”
The Mark

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The smell of antiseptic cleaner, while strong, couldn't completely overpower the odors of vomit, human waste, and especially old blood. Nor could the thick walls completely muffle the sounds of activity outside, from people moving around to the paging of an intercom to the vibrations of heavy vehicles driving past the police station.

Thomas O'Dell, to any outside observer, seemed oblivious to all of it. Sitting in one corner, one leg stretched out in front of him, the other bent with both hands clasped together just below the knee. Anyone watching through the security cameras would have been hard pressed to say if the man had done any movement other than blinking for several hours at a stretch.

*Hey, Tom. It's been a while.*

O'Dell's head suddenly jerked, which sent a spasm of pain through the man's neck that was probably related to sitting very still for a very long span of time. The grasp on his leg relaxed and one hand came up to rub at his neck.

“Sonnovabitch...”

O'Dell's gaze turned up to the ceiling as part of his attempts to get rid of the crick in his neck, where he saw a shadow with nothing casting it, darkness growing in defiance of the light in the cell, dropping down to the floor and reforming.

*I don't have a lot of time so I'll make this quick. In about two minutes, you're going to get a visitor. Somebody who isn't officially supposed to be here. They're going to want something from you, and they're going to offer you something in return. They're not going to keep their end of the bargain, but it would actually work out better for both of us if you gave it to them anyway. It'll get them out of our way and actually make it easier for me to spring you later. Having said that, things will go easier if you don't mention that I'm here.*

O'Dell slowly opened his mouth, his lips soundlessly forming the words “What the fuck?" as the darkness floated up to the ceiling and spread out, fading slightly until the ceiling of the cell just appeared to be poorly lit. The sound of the various locks and other mechanisms on the other side of the door got O'Dell's attention, and he turned to face the door as it slowly swung open. On the other side were two uniformed police officers, though O'Dell couldn't positively identify who they were, as there was a woman in a business suit standing in front of them. The woman stepped inside the cell, and the door slammed shut; O'Dell noticed that the woman didn't even flinch at the crash of metal on metal.

The echoes of the door slamming faded away, and the two stared at each other in silence.

“Thomas Valentine O'Dell,” the woman said, breaking the silence.

“That's me. I'm guessing the middle name is there to show you've done your research.”

“You could say that.”

The cell was silent once again, and O'Dell stared at the woman who had not introduced herself with even an alias. The silence stretched on and on, but O'Dell said nothing.
“Mr. O'Dell. You're in quite a lot of trouble right now.”

O'Dell nodded, but did not reply.

“Maybe we can help each other out. You have something I want.”

O'Dell remained silent, and continued to remain silent as the woman stared at him.

“According to a report filed by local law enforcement, you claim to have spoken with... someone, or something, before your recent misadventures. I want to know how.”

The man's brow furrowed in confusion.

“I'm surprised Officer Steve put that part in his report. And I'm even more surprised that you, whoever you are, want to hear about a man's account of an acid trip.”

The woman smiled a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

“We live in a world where monsters and magic are real, Mr. O'Dell. A lot of old ideas that were once taken for granted have been re-evaluated in light of new evidence. And that's why I'm here.”

O'Dell narrowed his eyes, remembering what he had recently been told.

“Do you want to hear the whole trip from beginning to end, or is there a specific part you're interested in?”

“Not the whole thing. Just the very beginning. What you did to make it all happen.”

“...alright then.” Slowly, and with the occasional twinge and cramp as muscles stiff from inactivity were pressed into service, O'Dell pushed himself up into a standing position. “Do you have a pen, or something else to write with?”

“THE MOST IMPORTANT DETAIL TO REMEMBER WHEN WORKING WITH WAVE MAGIC IS THAT IT INTERACTS WITH ANY MOTION, EVEN THAT WHICH HAS NO RELATIVE MOTION TO THE MAGIC ITSELF!” Papyrus declared with one index finger in the air, a light blue bone balanced above it. “FOR THE SAKE OF CONVENIENCE, WE MAY USE THE PRINCIPLES OF MAGNETIC INDUCTION AS AN EXAMPLE: BY MOVING A CONDUCTOR RELATIVE TO A MAGNETIC FIELD, WE MAY INDUCE AN ELECTRICAL CURRENT WITHIN THE CONDUCTOR. WAVE MAGIC MAY BE CONSIDERED TO BE ANALOGOUS TO THE MAGNETIC FIELD IN THIS EXAMPLE, AND THE CONDUCTOR IS PHYSICAL MATTER, AND AS A CONSEQUENCE, THE ELECTRICAL CURRENT IN THE CONDUCTOR CORRESPONDS TO THE PHYSICAL RESISTANCE TO MOTION ONCE THE WAVE MAGIC IS ENCOUNTERED. THE HIGHER THE SPEED OF INTERACTION, THE GREATER THE RESULTING DISRUPTION!”

The skeleton pointed at a wooden stick that had fallen off of the tree holding the tire swing at one point, which floated up in the air. The light blue bone dropped beneath the stick, and the blue glow vanished, so the stick fell... right next to the bullet.

“WHOOPSY DOOPSY. LET ME TRY THAT AGAIN!”

The stick was lifted up with blue magic again, dropped again... and missed again. The third time, it
actually did overlap with the blue bullet, and there was a cracking noise as the stick broken apart, the
two halves flying slightly away from the bone, which faded away.

“THERE WE GO! NOW, IF THAT STICK WAS DROPPED FROM A GREATER HEIGHT,
AND OVERLAPPED WITH A WAVE BULLET TRAVELING IN THE SAME DIRECTION
AT THE SAME SPEED, THE STICK WOULD STILL FEEL THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS
OF THE MAGIC! THAT IS BECAUSE BOTH THE STICK AND THE BULLET, WHILE
UNDER MOTION, HAVE KINETIC ENERGY THAT MAY BE EXPRESSED AS A
VECTOR RELATIVE TO THE SURROUNDING MAGIC OR PHOTONIC FIELD! THIS IS
WHY WAVE ATTACKS CAN BE AVOIDED BY STANDING PERFECTLY STILL!”

“Right.” Frisk crossed one arm over their chest and pulled it close with their other forearm, then
repeated the motion with the arms reversed, in order to limber up. “So the Wave magic doesn't
interact directly with the matter, or the surrounding field, it interacts when physical matter itself is
agitating that field by passing through it.”

“THAT IS A MOST COGENT SUMMATION!” Papyrus raised his arm again, producing a flurry
of bone bullets. “THIS MAKES WAVE MAGIC PARTICULARLY SUITED FOR DEFENSES
AGAINST PHYSICAL ATTACKS AT RANGE, AS ANY PROJECTILES WILL BE
TRAVELING QUITE FAST INDEED! IT IS ALSO USEFUL TO DEFEND AGAINST ANY
CLOSE RANGE ATTACKS WITH BLUNT OBJECTS OR CUTTING WEAPONS,
ESPECIALLY IF THE ATTACKER IS CARELESS ENOUGH TO ALLOW THEIR
APPENDAGES TO TRAVEL INSIDE THE WAVE MAGIC FIELD ITSELF!”

Frisk pointed at the bones Papyrus had produced. “Those are magic, though.”

“THIS IS TRUE, AND IT IS AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION! COHERENT BULLET
ATTACKS ARE SOMEWHAT RESISTANT TO THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECTS OF THE
WAVE MAGIC FIELD, BUT THEY ARE NOT IMMUNE. THE KEY LIMITATION TO
USING WAVE MAGIC DEFENSIVELY IS THE RISK OF BEING ATTACKED WITH
FORCE MAGIC, RESULTING IN A CATASTROPHIC WAVE-FORCE COLLAPSE.”

“And because the Wave Magic Shield would be closer to me, I'd get most of the explosion.”

“PRECISELY SO! IT IS STILL A VITALLY IMPORTANT DEFENSIVE OPTION TO HAVE
AVAILABLE, EVEN IF IT IS NOT A UNIVERSAL SOLUTION TO ALL PROBLEMS!”

“So... the right tool for the right job, then.”

“YES! NOW, CREATE IF YOU WILL A WAVE MAGIC SHIELD, AND WE SHALL BEGIN
THE PRACTICAL LESSON!”

Frisk nodded, breathing in and out several times, before holding out their hands. Cyan light began to
glow, flickering slightly, before increasing in intensity and filling out a shape in space like water
filling up a transparent container it was being poured into. A few seconds later, Frisk was holding an
flat, eight sided shape between their hands, with the letters 'STOP' shining out from the center of the
light blue octagon.

“Will this work?”

“THAT IS SUITABLE TO OUR PURPOSES! NOW, OBSERVE THE POWER OF WAVE
MAGIC!”

Papyrus pointed, and the bone bullets launched themselves towards Frisk. The child raised the blue
stop sign to intercept them, and the attacking bones fizzled out into motes of light as the tried to pass through the shield.

After the attack was concluded, Frisk stared at the stop sign shape, which was flickering even more than it had been before, but was still intact.

“Okay, I think this is about to-”

The stop sign collapsed into motes of blue light that faded away.

“Collapse,” Frisk finished, stating the obvious. “Sorry, but Undyne was here earlier and that's always a work out.”

“BUT OF COURSE! THAT IS WHY THIS IS A LESSON ON FUNDAMENTALS FIRST AND FOREMOST!”

“Right. But I think if I hadn't been exhausted, I could have kept that shield up a lot longer. If I'd been using Green Magic for shields, that probably would have shattered really fast.”

“A DISTINCT POSSIBILITY! THAT IS WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT THAT YOU HAVE A LESS TIRESOME MEANS OF DEFENSE AVAILABLE! PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT IS A HANDS ON EXPERIENCE OF THE PROPERTIES OF WAVE MAGIC AND ITS OPERATING PRINCIPLES! NOW, LET US MOVE ON TO THE OFFENSIVE APPLICATIONS!”

Inside the house, staring out into the backyard through the back door, John Coppersmith watched as Frisk held up their hands and formed a light blue fireball between them, which they threw at a wall of bones that the skeleton had generated. While it was easy to hear what the skeleton was saying, given his lack of volume control, understanding it was much harder. The human child, on the other hand, seemed to have no difficulties with comprehension and several times looked down at their hands to focus on whatever process allowed them to marshal magical energy, completely ignoring Papyrus and his various magical projectiles.

That, combined with their relaxed posture and body language, was very telling. A child expecting to be attacked would be very reluctant to let their guard down at any point.

“I think I've seen enough, actually,” Coppersmith commented. “I'm not exactly sure what the human equivalent is here, maybe martial arts or something, but... yeah. There's a lot of kids out there with problems that need my intervention. Frisk isn't one of them.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Coppersmith?”

John turned away from the door and saw Asriel getting up from the sofa.

“Yes?”

“I, uh, I'm not completely up to date on all the stuff you've been involved with as far as Frisk and Mom and Dad, but something's been bothering me. If anybody around here was worried about Frisk being attacked with magic, why wouldn't they just call the police? The police could come right away, but it sounds like you have a lot to do already.”

“That's, well, that's very true. And if nobody has called the police, then that just adds more evidence that somebody is trying to use my department to harass people, rather than letting us do our jobs.”

“If my memory does not fail me, the last time that any police officers were here was on Monday,
when Officer Steve stopped by and said that he was interested in participating in the Magical Education Program but was unsure that his work schedule would be compatible.” Toriel mused. “If there were any complaints at that time, surely he would have brought them up then.”

“Right.” Mr. Coppersmith nodded. “This definitely falls under the category of making false claims, but considering that these are always anonymous tips there’s not a lot we can do. In any event, I should probably head out and get back to work. That pile of forms on my desk isn’t getting any smaller.”

“In that case I will call Frisk and Papyrus in,” Asgore commented, opening the back door. “Papyrus, Frisk! Time for a break!”

“You don’t need to... never mind,” Mr. Coppersmith trailed off as bullets winked out of existence in mid attack and both Frisk and Papyrus came inside. The human child made a straight line for the kitchen, and John could hear the sounds of a cup being filled with ice cubes, while Papyrus walked over and sat down on the sofa next to Asriel. The young monster immediately started some sort of conversation with the skeleton, which was too obscure in subject matter for John to follow, so he simply waited until Frisk walked back into the room with a glass half full of what looked like iced tea.

“Well, as I mentioned before, now that I have context for what's going on, nothing I've seen really jumps out at me as an issue. So I'm going to head back to the office now. Having said that, considering that magic in and of itself is not something that ever came up when the procedures and laws and processes involved in my job were created, I can't really fault anybody for getting worried. I'm sure that a lot of the calls to my office were intended on harassing you folks, but I can't rule out the possibility that some of them were genuine, either.”

“Likewise, Mr. Coppersmith, we cannot fault you for your genuine concern for the safety of children,” Toriel replied with a smile. “And as for those who seek to harass us, the joke as it were is on them. We are more than happy to entertain guests.”

“Right. Well, I had best get back to my work, and leave you to your magical education and such. Mrs. Dreemurr, Mr. Dreemurr.” John nodded to the royalty, then turned to Papyrus and Asriel. “Asriel, Papyrus, pleasure to meet you both.”

Finally John turned to Frisk, who was rubbing the cold outside of the now empty glass of iced tea against their forehead.

“Frisk, nice to see you again, glad you're doing alright.”

“You too Mr. Coppersmith. I'd shake your hand but mine's really cold and clammy right now.”

“That's considerate. Goodbye everyone.” The man walked out of the front door as Toriel opened it, and through the window it was possible to see him climb into his car... and pull out his cell phone.

After a few rings, the phone on the other end was answered. “John, that you?”

“Yeah. I'm done in Ebott's Wake. I think it's just harassing phone calls again. Frisk and that, uh. That monster kid. Asriel. They seem to get along about as well as kids usually do when they grow up under the same roof.”

“What about the magic abuse thing?”

“Training exercises, apparently. Looks like the monsters are teaching Frisk all the secret family recipes. I saw them make a shield, and we know from YouTube that they can give just as good as
they get. Damned if I know exactly how to categorize it but I'm not as worried about Frisk as I am a lot of other kids in the county. Which reminds me, can you pull up the latest address for Mercy Cooper and Verisimilitude Johnson?”

“...what was the second one?”

“Verisimilitude. It means accuracy or truthfulness.”

“Jesus Tap Dancing Christ. Giving a kid a name like that should qualify as abuse just by itself.”

The cell was once again filled with the echoes of a door slamming shut, and O'Dell let himself slide back down into the corner again.

A few seconds later, the darkness descended from the ceiling, reforming on the floor again. Alright, now we're getting somewhere.

“Are you going to tell me what that was about?”

An in depth answer would take a few hours but the short answer is that somebody has realized what magic can do and wants to run before they learn how to walk. They want to talk to me because they think I can make it happen.

“...can you?”

Yeah, but it comes with some nasty side effects. They're not going to like what I have to say. But that's a whole other problem that won't directly concern us for a while. Our main problem right now is we need to get you out of here. Orange isn't really a good look on you.

“...so you actually can help me out of here?”

I've broken an almost comically large number of people out of prison. But each person was different and more importantly each prison was different. There's no really way to standardize a jailbreak. That means this is going to take time.

“Well, it's not like I'm going anywhere.”

Yeah, that's the problem actually. In the meantime, you remember everything else that Jordan Cater taught you?

“Most of it.”

Good, you might want to keep all of that in mind in the future. More importantly, you should also learn from his mistakes. The magic energy and skill he got from the Phase Integrator let him escape from the hospital, but in the end he couldn't let go of his fixation with the Dreemurs. He charged right into the lion's den.

“...he tried to run before he could walk. Like you said.”

Yes. Also he was running headfirst into a concrete wall. Two metaphors for the price of one. Oh, that reminds me. Did that woman remember to take her pen with her when she left?

“No, I think she was too focused on what I was drawing and writing for her... wait, you were here, weren't you watching?”
I was distracted. I've got a lot of irons in the fire right now. Okay, that will save you some time and make things easier all around, and if everything goes according to plan, a lot of folks around here are going to get complacent and let security procedures lapse for a few days, now that they don't have to worry about Jordan Cater anymore. So you'll have a bit of wiggle room. It's just that, whatever you remember, you don't want to leave lying around and tip your hand, so I don't recommend writing on the walls. Okay, I have to run, I'm on a deadline. I'll be in touch as soon as I've set up everything to get you out of here.

The darkness faded away, and for a while O'Dell just stared at the spot that he had last seen the... whatever it was. Eventually he shook his head and produced an ink pen from someplace not readily discernible to an outside observer. The sleeve covering his left arm was pulled up to his elbow, and the cap was pulled off of the pen.

“Not a lot of room to work with... better make it count.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Undertale-iversary, everybody! Had to rush to get this ready in time, but here we are. :P
“Any sign of them?” Justin raised a transparent plastic cup to his mouth and sipped some red liquid that had the flavors of fruit punch, orange juice, and (most important of all) alcohol competing with each other.

“No, but it won't be too hard,” Steve grumbled. “Just need to listen for the wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

“You know, if you guys weren't my best friends I'd known my whole life, I'd be inclined to take that as an insult—”

Hal's comments were cut off by the revving of an engine, and the elongated profile of a recreational vehicle made itself visible as it turned a corner; a recreational vehicle with extensive additions and modifications that almost certainly were not present when the vehicle was originally manufactured. The RV made its way along the street, causing more than a few bystanders and pedestrians to stop and stare at it in confusion or alarm, until it coasted to a stop in front of the opened doors of the Greene Machines Garage.

After a pause just long enough to make an observer start to wonder if anything else would happen, the door opened. Two figures stepped out, although a more discerning eye might say that the man strutted and the woman danced.

“HONEY WE'RE HOME!”

“Hey dad!” Hal immediately broke ranks with his friends and ran up to the older gentleman, wrapping his arms around him, a gesture that was immediately returned. “Welcome back!”

“Hal my boy, good to see you! And the Garage is still standing, I knew you had it in you!”

“Yoo hoo!” The woman waved a hand to the various figures behind the older and younger Greenes. “How are you boys doing?”

“Just fine, Mrs. Greene.” Justin answered, raising his cup of punch as a sign of acknowledgment.

“Mrs. Greene? Well isn't this a formal party!”

Justin rolled his eyes. “I've made it this far in life not calling you by your first name, I'm not starting now.”

The woman cackled in laughter and made her way inside the garage, making a straight line to the table where Joe, Eli, and Mike were still unfolding chairs.

“Hello boys!”

“Hello Mrs. Greene,” three voices replied in near unison, and the woman made a “tsk tsk” sound.

“Now Joe and Eli can get away with that, but you, Mikey, are a different matter!”


“Ah ah ah!”

Van Garret shook his head. “Hello Wily.”
“Was that so hard?”

“Like pulling teeth.” Van Garrett returned to his task of setting up chairs while Joe attempted (in vain as it turned out) to muffle some snickering.

“Oh my God Joe, what happened to your arm?!”

Joe's snickering stopped immediately and he turned to face Hal's mom.

“And to think there were times I actually missed you and your lack of mouth filter. If you must know, I lost a bet.”

“What, did somebody bet you couldn't juggle chainsaws?”

“What's this about chainsaws-” Dave Greene stepped closer to see what his wife was making a fuss about, and stared at Joe for a few seconds. “Joe, not sure if you've noticed but it looks like some hooligan has made off with your right hand and a lot of the neighboring real estate.”

“Oh, really? I HADN'T NOTICED.” Joe made an effort to glare at Dave Greene, but it only lasted about two seconds before his face relaxed and the scientist picked up his own cup of punch. “All sarcasm aside that is almost exactly what happened.”

“Wait, really?”

“It's a long story and it's rated R for blood and violence.” Joe turned and held out his right arm towards the massive pegboard along the back wall of the garage, and streamers of purple light shot from the man's body, touched a five-eighths inch wrench, and pulled it off of the board. Joe turned back towards Dave and Wily, who were both staring in stunned silence for what may well have been the first time in both their lives as they saw the wrench suspended in a field of purple light where Joe's right hand used to be

“Looking on the bright side, I can do this. Also Dr. Alphys is doing me a solid and building me a robot arm so sometime in the next few weeks I'll be a bad ass cyborg scientist with magic powers.”

“On a motorcycle,” Hal pointed out, and Joe snapped his fingers.

“That's right! On a motorcycle! So that's like cyborg, scientist, magic, motorcycle... that's four cool modifiers. If I could get like a katana or something like that we could kick this shit up to five exponents.”

“Oh, Dad, since Joe brought it up, All Fine Labs figured out why humans couldn't use magic and why that's changed and they have a training program to use it and I'm in it and it starts Saturday.” Hal paused to take a drink of fruit punch. “Oh, also. Kind of important. We all fought a Sage holdout like three times last month, and the second time we turned into a giant flower because I'm now best friends forever with the prince of monsters, Asriel Dreemurr, who came back from the dead. Also, and most importantly! I shut down the gas pumps and stopped that part of the business after Metzinger's gas tax thing went through, because fuck that guy.”

Dave stared at his offspring and sighed.

“Son, whatever it is that's got you so mad at that boy, you really need to let it go at some point.”

“How about no?”
Background Magic Field Notes

The Background Magic Field is one of the fundamental concepts behind the study of magic as a formal, organized body of knowledge. More than just an ambient source of energy, the magic field can account for many physical phenomena and allow them to be manipulated, including Inertia and Gravity. This has not yet been experimentally vindicated using human science, although there are tentative theoretical models; theories notwithstanding, the Background Magic Field concept itself will simplify teaching any magic that relies upon Force, Wave, Dimension or Pattern Magic dramatically.

(Depending on your frame of reference, you can use the model of photons traveling faster than c with visible light being in the energy level ranges needed to interact with physical sensors, or you can use the model where c is the speed limit of visible light in the same way that a sonic boom can still only travel at the speed of sound even if a bullet or jet is traveling faster. Either one works, but trying to use them both at the same time is contradictory and confusing. We may be able to settle once and for all which model is more accurate once the Background Emission Photon Interferometry Satellite is launched, but there's no way of knowing when that's going to happen. - WD Aster)

In terms of practical applications Pattern Magic is the safest to introduce to new students, because it avoids the dangers of Wave and Force and combining them and also the possible hazards of learning Dimensional Magic.

(Dimensional Magic might be a better draw. Flight or Super Jumping or Telekinesis is def going to be more popular than X-Ray vision. -F)

(For most people this is true, but anime has taught me that there's always exceptions. Dr. Alphys can back me up on this. -C)

Hand in hand with the Background Field Model are the limitations of exposure; humans either do not require ambient magic to survive, or are able to survive on the minute amounts remaining in the environment following the creation of the Barrier and the resulting cumulative drain of ambient energy. It has taken over one and one half years (measured using the human Gregorian Calendar) to reach ambient energy saturation at a point that any humans can naturally draw on that power.

(The processes that restore this ambient energy to the environment will need to be addressed, but those aren't directly relevant to the process of instruction. Might consider discussing them alongside the process of infusion, when the lessons will already be talking about the interactions between magic energy, physical matter, and electromagnetic field transformations. -WD Aster)

(the fact that magical energy reflects the intentions and mental state of the person influencing it, and that the background field is postulated to exist throughout time and space, supports a form of panpsychism, a philosophical model that postulates that consciousness is a fundamental attribute of the universe rather than an emergent phenomena. that's not particularly relevant to any of th is , i just think it's pretty neat. -sans)

The ability to absorb ambient magic from the environment is itself quantified using the term Magic Potential, often abbreviated in monster documents and references as MP. Until very recently, humans were considered to have lost any capacity for Magic Potential; even with evidence to the contrary it has not yet been directly measured through Soul Scanning, but it is possible to make an indirect measurement through the production of magical effects.

(In a way, MP may be considered directly analogous to breathing for humans; no matter how much oxygen is in the air, physical traits like lung capacity, respiration rate, the efficiency and speed of the
Toriel smiled at the notes written on the sheet of paper and put it back down on the coffee table, then turned to check that her presence and motion had not disturbed the children. Asriel’s head was lolling back, tongue hanging out of one side of his mouth as he snored. Lying on top of Asriel and, by extension, stretched out like he was, Frisk was similarly exhausted, with their head resting on Asriel’s chest and one leg dangling off of the side of the sofa.

When once child’s snoring dropped off, the other child’s snoring picked up again, and Toriel could not resist pulling out her cell phone and taking multiple pictures. Once her phone was returned to its pocket, and Toriel walked away from the sofa, her expression became more somber; by the time she sat down at the dining room table, with Asgore once again seated on the opposite side, they both looked equally serious.

“...if I recall correctly, before Mr. Coppersmith arrived, I had just mentioned that Dr. Aster and Sans know enough about the phenomena to understand it, but not yet enough to stop it.”

Asgore nodded, but said nothing.

“...unfortunately. There is not much that we can do except wait.”

“Right.”

“...there is something else. Frisk was just as reluctant to bring up this matter as they were when it came to broaching the subject of magic, and for the same reasons. They feared some manner of retribution or... punitive action.” Toriel sighed. “I hope that this is simply an aversion wrought from the sheer enormity of the issue, and its unprecedented nature.”

“I hope so as well, but I'm worried that it is not.” Asgore shook his head. “As I understand it, even after Frisk had spoken to you about magic, they were still concerned about the rest of their friends. And after that proved to be an unnecessary concern, our responses to this... time loop, that is what occupied their attention the most. If this is simply a matter of addressing the most serious concerns, then I would hope that now their greatest concerns are at least more familiar, the types of worries that all children must confront as they grow. And yet....”

Asgore lapsed into silence, paws clasped together. After an expectant silence, Toriel cleared her throat.

“Ah. Yes. My apologies. I was... distracted.” Asgore sighed. “It is my fear that rather than their mind sorting through potential dangers from most serious to least, their first impulse is to expect the worst, regardless of the scale or severity or even the commonality of their problems. It is... it is unfortunately not out of the realms of possibility that, just as Frisk considered both their magical prowess and their involvement in the time loop to be... deal breakers, I believe the term is... it is possible that they will be convinced that whatever concern is foremost in their mind will be treated with the same level of severity. Even if their concern is as mundane as academic performance, their first crush, or learning to operate an automobile for the first time.”

“That also concerns me, especially after that mishap with the broken dinner plate. An accident in the
kitchen may well pose a serious risk of physical injury, but it should not be categorized as an unforgivable offense. With the benefit of hindsight... and many, many conversations... it is clear that this is what Frisk was taught by their human parents. Whether by accident or by design is unimportant at this point, and while it pains me to say it, it taxes my willpower greatly to stay calm and supportive when every instinct compels me to seek out Jason Taylor and return all of his cruelty tenfold.”

Asgore nodded, staring at his paws, and Toriel shook her head.

“Sometimes, I wonder... if this is how you felt. In those moments, just before...”

Asgore said nothing, and Toriel cleared her throat.

“...well. All of that notwithstanding. We at least can put a name to the architect of Frisk’s hardship, and Chara’s too. Something that we cannot do with our son. No matter the trials that Asriel confronted in the time loop, and I have no desire to even imagine or speculate on them, he was still but a child. He puts on... a brave face. For Frisk and Chara. But... I know my baby. And even with his fire magic returned, he still...” Toriel tried to swallow the lump that formed in her throat, “he still hurts, on the inside.”

“...Undyne said, when she and Papyrus brought him home after the attack on the lab, she said... he was convinced that he was not really our son. That... that Asriel could not have done what he did to that human.”

Toriel nodded.

“I wonder, if Asriel could see how that fire burns in our Souls as well as his, then perhaps he would be reassured? But such a display... when I lashed out the day he came back. All three of our children were terrified.” Toriel blinked a few times. “If ever there was a moment that I wished that I could undo past events, that would certainly be one of them. But the rest of us can only go forward.”

Asgore lowered his arms to rest on the table.

“Asriel did enjoy playing catch today. I think it was less a matter of having his fire magic return than it was being able to once again enjoy a familiar pastime.”

“Well, no matter which one it is, he was happy, was he not? That is all that matters in the end.”

“Of course.”

Toriel shifted in her seat, turning back to look at the sofa; Asriel’s ears were still draped over the armrest on one end, as they had been earlier. The queen returned her gaze to Asgore.

“Gorey... about Chara.”

“Yes?”

“We have made plans here, to clear out and reorganize the spare room, so that one of the children may have a private space of their own. It is not clear yet if this will be necessary, and if it is, who that child will be. While I anticipate that Chara being forced to share every moment of every day with Frisk for so long will result in an increased desire for privacy... I may well be incorrect in my assumptions.”

“If any of the children require a change of scenery, or more space, I would be more than happy to have them join me at my house. Though in light of what I have learned today, I have my doubts that
any of them would see that as an improvement.” Asgore stared at his paws, tapping one finger on the table idly. “I used to wonder why Frisk would look at me with such a strange expression, or refused to return my gaze.”

“...they informed me that... I hurt them. As well.”

Asgore's eyes opened wide in surprise, and Toriel turned to look towards the sofa again.

“They say it was an accident. But it would be in keeping with their past actions to withhold the truth if they thought that doing so would save us any amount of concern or grief.” Toriel turned back to face Asgore. “In any event, I already know more than I wish too. Ignorance, in this case at least, really is bliss. And the line... the line between the two of us, between the choices we made and the reasons behind them, grows ever blurrier.”

The house was silent for a while, punctuated only by Asriel's snoring, the ticking of a clock, and at one point, the activation of the air conditioner.

“Well...” Asgore said, breaking the silence, “whatever may have happened in the past, or pasts plural as the case may be. Now we know enough to make better choices going forward-”

Asgore paused, his expression becoming confused, and a moment later Toriel understood why; the distant sound of police sirens slowly becoming louder and louder. There was a strained sound of alarm from the sofa, and Toriel turned to see Frisk's head sticking up above the back of the sofa, eyes glowing red and indicating Chara's presence.

"I warned him. I warned him not to try anything. Asriel, get up. We have to fight."

"Wha??" Asriel winced at the light and brought up one paw. “What’s going on?”

"Jordan has a death wish is what's going on.” Chara slammed their hand into the side of their head. "Wake up, wake UP."

“Chara, stop hitting Frisk.” Toriel paused for a split second, confused by the sentence she had uttered out of parental reflex, as well as the circumstances around it. “It may be nothing at all, but both of you, stay away from the windows just in case. And if that accursed man has escaped yet again there will be nothing left of him for the police to collect.” Toriel stood up from the table and made her way to the door. With the front door open, the siren was dramatically louder, and it was possible to make out assorted voices as well, but those were quite secondary to what Toriel could see; a massive red sphere made of inflated fabric, dragging assorted ropes and lines behind it as it rolled down the street with a police cruiser chasing after it, along with many humans and monsters on foot.

“Don't let it get to the end of the street!”

“What we need now is a giant inflatable pizza crust.”

“teM chass the RED ORB OF DETSINY! SooN Tem hav INFINITES POWERS!!! Yayaya!!”

“Don't try to tackle the ropes while it's on the road! You'll get scraped- I SAID DON'T TACKLE THE ROPES!”

“WHOA BOY! WHOA! WHOA MEANS STOP!”

“Oh, hey Tim, let me off here for a second.”

A wooden boat with wooden legs skidded to a stop just outside of the queen's house, and a human
wearing coveralls stained with oil, grease, and what appeared to be cake frosting hopped off and ran up to the doorway with a paper plate in one hand.

“Hey your majesty, a little bit short on time gotta make this quick, my parents are back from vacation and we had a party and I saved a slice of cake for Asriel since I knew he was still grounded, it's human food so I don't know if monsters have a pancreas or not so be careful because this icing is pure sugar—”

“HAL COME ON!!” Justin's voice carried from across the street. “WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR SIDE QUESTS RIGHT NOW!!”

“Sorry, duty calls!” Hal practically shoved the plate into Toriel's paws and sprinted back to the Riverperson's boat, which reared up and somehow made a sound like a horse whinnying before galloping down the street.

Toriel blinked, then looked down at the slice of cake, then stepped back inside the house. The cake was carried into the kitchen, placed inside of the refrigerator, and Toriel returned to the living room. Asriel was standing by the window, peering out, while Chara remained seated on the sofa. Their left eye had stopped glowing, and the awkward way their left arm was reaching up to rub the right side of their head implied Frisk was awake.

“I'm up, I'm up, stop hitting me, what's going on?!”

Toriel sighed.

“Mr. Greene brought something by for Asriel. Beyond that, I do not know, and I doubt very much that I would understand even if given a detailed explanation.”
Asriel's chest rose and fell with a slow, regular rhythm. The yard outside was filled with the distant chattering of insects. From time to time, the air conditioner turned on in response to the rising temperatures inside the house, even at night. More frequently, and less regularly, there were the sound of engines in the distance as people drove too and fro, part of the nightlife of regular activity in even small towns.

Frisk heard it all, and reflexively flinched, or clutched the bed sheets with their hands with a strength that would have surprised anyone based on their size and age.

'I would say you're overreacting, but... he did try to kill us, three Fridays in a row.'

Frisk did not reply, but managed to free one clenched fist from the sheets, and grasped part of Asriel's arm that was draped over them.

'The first time, he got us with a cheap shot. The second and third times, we ruined his day.'

Frisk squeezed their eyes shut, trying to ignore the images and sounds and sensations from almost a week before. The nausea from the dimensional bridge, the shock from the cold rain, even the splitting headache as Chara vented literally years of frustration and anger, and the injuries from the fight itself... it didn't hold a candle to what came after.

Even knowing that the man was likely an actual murderer, and certainly had attempted to kill them more times than was comfortable, the bottom dropped out of Frisk's stomach seeing Cater's body completely still. And what was left of their stomach turned to ice as they slowly realized the implications of what they had done in the heat of the moment. Most importantly, that Undyne was right behind them, she had just seen them use magic, and that they were to exhausted to dodge, never mind create any sort of defenses.

And one thought rang like an alarm bell even as their vision grayed out and their legs buckled; they were going to have to do the whole week over again. And next time, Cater would know what to expect.

'Didn't happen. They already knew. Except for Dr. Aster but that's a whole separate issue. They just didn't want to make things awkward.' Chara paused for a moment, and to the extent that Frisk could actually make distinctions about thoughts in their head that weren't technically theirs, Chara sounded... curious. 'I wonder what else Dr. Alphys says in her sleep.'

"Probably something like, 'Oh Undyne, pile on the smooches' or something,” Frisk whispered to the dark bedroom and Asriel's snoring form, and felt the right corner of their mouth twitch upward.

'That seems likely.'

The bedroom was silent once again, save for those same sounds of the outside night that crept in.

'It's not going to work, you know.'

“Hmm?”
'Dr. Aster's project. I don't have what Asriel had to work with. He wasn't taken out of the flower and put in a Boss Monster body. And that soul. That came from part of you. I don't know how many times a human soul can withstand being broken up like that, but I doubt the answer is More Than One.'

“...that's why they're doing research. Maybe Alphys can build you a robot body, like Mettaton. And maybe somebody else's Soul could do the same thing. Like an organ transplant.”

'...I spent over a year terrified that anyone would notice I was here. Stealing moments from a life that wasn't mine. Best case scenario was that they found a way to cut me out of you like a tumor, and were, well, humane about it. Being... accepted. I didn't anticipate that. And that makes it far more frightening than any of the worst case scenarios I came up with.’

“You're not a tumor, Chara.”

The bedroom was silent once more.

'What was life like with your human parents, Frisk? Before everything fell apart? Sometimes I'll see bits and pieces, but I didn't want to pry.'

“...it was good. My human mom. She told me stories. Like at night, to help me sleep. But also other times. Stuff that taught me important lessons.”

'Like Aesop's Fables?'

“I think she just made them up, or had them passed down from her parents. I don't remember any of the stories she told me being in the books I got at the Library. And... before all the screaming started. He was. He would do stuff like take us camping, or work on the car, or on the house, and he showed me what he was doing. He taught me how to start a campfire and build a shelter, change oil, find a wall stud, all sorts of things. One time I built a rubber band gun after I saw some older kids playing with one, and he taught me how to aim properly.”

'Okay that bit about the marksmanship training was a little weird.'

“I was like three or four years old. Cut me some slack.”

'...you were how old??'

Frisk sighed.

“Three or four. Like I said.”

'...it sounds like it was pretty decent. Up until it wasn't, that is.'

“Yeah.”

'...the Guardian compound wasn't like that. Jordan and Elizabeth weren't like that. Not to me. I was a disappointment from the day that I was born, and they made sure that I knew it. And considering that I got my best friend killed, broke up the marriage of my adopted parents, and almost caused another war between humans and monsters, they probably had a reason for it.'

Frisk blinked, opened their mouth... but no words came out.

'You don't have to say anything, Frisk. I know what I am, and what I have done. I have had over a year to come to terms with it. I'm a bad person, Frisk. No matter what Papyrus says about actions
and ethics and morality, nothing I do will change what I am. All I can aspire to, no matter what body I am in, is to be a bad person for a good cause. To do the right thing for the wrong reasons.'

Frisk closed their eyes and swallowed, turning over in the bed and draping one arm over Asriel, scooting over until their head was nestled in the gap between the monster's chest and his lower jaw. Asriel grumbled and pulled Frisk closer without really waking up, and Frisk relaxed.

'You're wrong, Chara. I'll prove it to you. One way or another.'

Chara didn't respond.

Slowly, Frisk drifted off. Outside the house, the town continued its normal nightly orchestra of insects and distant vehicles. When the air conditioner turned on again, Frisk was not startled awake.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter today because I'm sick.
A Detailed Explanation

“Goooood morning, Ebott's Wake! You are listening to The Morning Rush on KEBT FM! I am your master of radio ceremonies, Brett 'The Brett' Brinkmann, joined by the one and only DJ Pantz!”

“Beware of imitations, always look for the DJ Pantz Seal of Good Enough.”

“...wha, wait, what?”

“I was going to say Seal of Quality but I don't want to oversell.”

“Oh. I guess that makes... sense? Anyway, I hope all of you listening at home and at work and on the way to or from work, as your schedules dictate, are having a lovely morning here in Ebott's Wake, Where Dreams Go To Fly.”

“Haven't heard that one before.”

“As a matter of fact that particular slogan hearkens back to the 1980s, when there was considerable interest in the possibility of establishing an airport within the municipality of Ebott's Wake. Unfortunately the interference from Mt. Ebott quickly made the plan impossible from a safety perspective, and even with the Barrier gone, the Quarterhorse Fields airport handles all the air traffic in and out of Lost Eagle County pretty handily so there's no real point in building another airport.”

“That's remarkably down to earth compared to a lot of the other slogans.”

“...was that a deliberate pun?”

“What? ...oh. Ugh. No. I've been spending too much time around Sans.”

“Happens to all of us eventually. Moving on to our top story, the Fancy Pants Fashion Show has been postponed by one week after the mishaps during the setup process, when one of the large inflatable vegetables broke free of its mooring lines and began to roll through the streets of our fair city, causing much confusion and stalled traffic but no injuries or accidents... I'm being informed by Jeff that a tomato is actually a fruit, which I actually already knew, so I have no idea why I called it a vegetable just now. Uh... that's right, the Fashion Show theme this year is 'Low Carb' so, I guess, do the best you can with that everyone. Speaking of delays, the Lost Eagle County Little League Baseball season has been postponed in its entirety based on prospective heat advisories, and any future games, if and when they take place, will be announced on a case by case basis.”

“Yeah, on days like these, kids should be inside where there's air conditioning, playing computer games.”

“Agreed. Moving on to the next story, the Lost Eagle County Ham Raffles are going ahead as planned, so be sure to purchase your tickets in the town that is offering the type of ham that you are most interested in. This year Ebott's Wake is going traditional with a sugar glazed ham. As with every Ham Raffle, the proceeds from the ticket sales goes to a local charitable cause or municipal service. In our case, the lucky beneficiaries will be the... Ebott's Wake Community College Scholarship Fund.”

“So I was going to ask last year but I never got around to it, how did this whole Ham Raffle thing get started?”

“Regrettably we don't have time to go into that right now, but later this afternoon we will have Dr.
Zenobia Harrison from the Community College here to talk about Lost Eagle County Facts and Fables, and there is a non-zero chance that the subject of the Ham Raffles will come up! In the meantime, let's toss it over to our guy with the eye in the sky, Gary Welkin, with the traffic report! How are things looking up there Gary?"

“Brett, traffic is flowing smoothly as far as the eye can see, with the critical exception of Kelly Plaza where yet another vegetable has broken free from its moorings and is terrorizing commuters and pedestrians alike! A massive ear of yellow corn continues to barrel along Ridge Road with no regard for the cost in innocent lives! OH THE HUMANITY!”

“...okay. Well. You heard it here first everyone. Stay off of Ridge Road if you can possibly avoid it. Actually, Jeff, is corn a vegetable? ...well, you reminded me of the tomato thing, I was just... alright, alright. It was just a question. Uh, we should pause for station identification and a word from our sponsors, but don't go anywhere. When we come back, our summer intern Bob the Temmie will be speaking live with Simon Paulson of the Banner, Banner and Paulson law firm to speak about the many and various legal precedents that will likely be made in the prosecution of Jordan Cater.”

“Who is still in jail. Just in case anyone was worried because it was Friday. Although if anything on that story changes we will certainly let everybody know as fast as we can.”

“That is true, and it is kind of strange that all of Jordan Cater's actions took place near the end of the week, isn't it? I mean, is there something about Fridays that's important here, or is this just some really weird coincidence?”

“Don't know, don't care. As long as he's in jail that's good enough for me and I bet it's good enough for a lot of our listeners.”

“Well, you're probably not wrong about that Burgie. Stick around everybody, more Morning Rush after this.”
Asriel heard the sound of birds before it occurred to him to open his eyes. The only thing he could see, when his eyes adjusted to the morning sunlight, was the window in the wall of the bedroom near Frisk's bed. And moving his head immediately caused his chin to bump into something.

“Mmf?”

Asriel awkwardly moved his head up and away from the pillow, and lowered his chin to his chest so that his muzzle did not collide with what turned out to be Frisk's head.

“Good morning Frisk.”

“...morning. Are we...?”

“We're okay. I still got you.”

“...thanks.” Frisk's arms squeezed a little harder, and then unwrapped from Asriel. “We better... we should get ready. Just in case.”

Asriel stared at Frisk's eyes, still half closed from light sensitivity, but also felt their body tense up underneath his arms.

“...okay. Yeah. Just in case.”

The two children managed to disentangle from each other and Frisk headed out the bedroom door, while Asriel made his way over to the chest of drawers and pulled out clothing. His eyes lingered on some of the items on the top surface, eventually resting on the astronomy book.

Several minutes later, when Frisk came back into the bedroom, they found Asriel staring at the open book, holding the three cards that had been hidden in the back pocket of the book in one paw.

“Uhm... are you going to get dressed now, or should I grab my clothes and come back later?”

“...sorry, I got stuck on an idea.” Asriel replaced the cards, closed the book, and then started pulling off his pajama top. “No peeking this time.”

Frisk's face turned red as they turned towards their own chest of drawers and pulled out their own clothes. “I told you. That was an accident. And I didn't see anything anyway.”

“Frisk, you still have to do something embarrassing involving dad to complete the trifecta.”

“Ugh. I'm never going to live that down.”

“Nope.”

Toriel portioned out some hash browns onto plates, and set them on the table before turning towards the stove top once again. Behind here, there were the sounds of little feet descending a staircase, and then walking inside the kitchen.
“Good morning my children. Breakfast is in progress, but feel free to start now.”

“Thanks mom.”

“Thank you mom.”

“Thank you Toriel.”

Toriel flipped over a pancake on the griddle with practiced ease. “You may call me ‘mom’ as well, Chara, if you are comfortable doing so.”

“I know, it’s just... it’s complicated right now.”

“I know, dear. I know.”

Behind Toriel the sound of chairs scraping was following by the clink of utensils on plates.

“Frisk, if I may, I would like to test your accumulated knowledge over the past week. Is that amenable over breakfast or would you prefer to wait until after?”

“Now’s good,” Frisk tried to say around a mouthful of crispy shredded potatoes.

“Very well then. Can you state for me the different categories of magic use in monster culture, and what sets them apart from each other?”

“Combat, Recovery, and Utility. Combat magic is magic with either specific intent to harm behind it, or has the formalized structures of bullet exchanges between monsters who are fighting or sparring. Recovery means magic used beneficially, which may be applicable inside of combat but has ample use outside as well. Utility means magic used to simplify tasks to make them easier, faster, or otherwise solve a problem through their application.”

“Correct. What color magic cannot be used to directly influence physical matter?”

“Red Magic. The same energetic attributes that allow Communication Magic to bypass obstacles and ignore range limitations of distance also mean that it is limited in influencing those obstacles as well, regardless of distance. Like Extremely Low Frequency radio waves transmitted through water, used by Navy Submarines.”

“Correct, although I did not know about the submarines. Interesting.”

“Librarby,” Frisk replied between bites of hash browns.

“Of course. Hmmm. What is the operating principle behind Pattern Magic Analysis?”

“Uh. Well. In theory. All matter is constantly absorbing and transmitting light, and the properties of that light are defined by the nature of that matter. That's how spectrometers work. Pattern magic is supposed to be the same principle, applied to the faster-than-c light waves used in magic. That's what the book says, anyway.”

“That is also correct. Speaking of Pattern Magic, after breakfast, I would like to go through some basic Pattern Magic exercises again.”

“...okay.”

Toriel turned away from the stove to see Frisk staring at their breakfast, rather than eating it. A few seconds later, Asriel stopped chewing and stared at Frisk as well.
“Uh, Frisk? You feeling okay?”

“M’fine,” the child replied automatically, pushing the potatoes around on their plate. Toriel returned her attention to the griddle just long enough to remove a pancake from its surface, then removed the magic fireball beneath it and turned towards the kitchen table.

“Frisk... you can talk to us about that which bothers you. You know that, do you not?”

“I know. I know.” Frisk stared at their plate. “I'm... I'm just supposed to be smart, is all.”

The silence that filled the kitchen was itself so thick that it could probably have been cut into slices, fried, and served for breakfast as well. Slowly, Toriel pulled one chair out and sat down at the table.

“What do you mean, Frisk?”

“...exactly what I said. I'm supposed to be smart. I figured out all the magic stuff in that book when Sans gave it to me and I have all those gadgets and inventions in the bedroom. I know how to do home maintenance stuff and fix stuff around the house and hooking up electronics. The teachers at James Madison even pushed me one grade ahead. But I can't even get Pattern Magic to work once. Now it feels... it feels like everything I did so far. It's like it doesn't count. Or I got lucky. Or, I was faking it and I can't keep up the act anymore.”

Toriel opened her mouth to reply-

“That doesn't make any sense! You can use six of the seven colors of magic, and most people can't use any unless they touch that, you know, the thing at All Fine Labs! And it's been less than a month! You're so far ahead of everyone else that you're about to overtake them again. If there's a fluke or something, it's got to be the Pattern Magic, not you. I...” Asriel threw up his paws. “I dunno, I'm not a scientist, but maybe you can't use anything Magenta because it's too far away from Red and your Soul is Red, or something like that.”

Frisk turned to look at Asriel.

“If that holds true, then you wouldn't be able to use-”

“I know, I know, I just realized that.” Asriel rubbed his forehead. “And I can. Alphys had me run through the entire spectrum one time when I was doing the scan, back when I was struggling with fire magic. I can do it all.”

“Frisk,” Toriel finally said. “Frisk, there is very much that has been lost from long ago, when human magicians were common. This may be perfectly normal and no cause for alarm, and certainly no cause for the feelings you describe.”

The kitchen lapsed into silence for a moment, and then the human child replied with a whisper that Toriel almost did not catch.

“I still feel them though.”

“...I did not mean to dismiss your feelings, Frisk. I simply... I should have been more careful with my words.”

Toriel looked down at her paws, and then sighed.

“However, I still want to try several things which previously had not occurred to me, if you are willing.”
Frisk nodded.

“Yeah. I'll try.”

“That is all that I ask. In the meantime, you should continue eating. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, especially when one does not know what that day will bring. And that is almost a foregone conclusion in this town.”

Frisk managed to smile, even if their eyes were still downcast and focused on the table.

“That much is true.”

The wrench scraped against the water line a few times before finally slotting into place and turning. After several repetitions, there was a mumbling sound that could have been “dammit I'm an idiot” and the bony hand let go of the wrench as the tool was surrounded in blue light. The wrench spun around and around, tightening the water line connection, before slowing down and floating up and away back into the hand again.

“Okay, that should be the water line done. Go ahead and open that line but be ready in case it starts to leak. Or spray for that matter.”

Dr. Aster stood up, straightening his lab coat as the janitor opened the valve upstream of the connecting line. There was a conspicuous absence of sprays of water, and Dr. Aster nodded.

“Allright, let's plug this in and take it for a test brew.”

The electrical cord was plugged into a nearby socket, and Dr. Aster punched a few buttons on the machine's control panel, before grabbing a paper cup from a nearby stack and holding it underneath the nozzle. A red light turned off, a green light turned on, and a dark brown liquid began to fill the cup, while also filling the air with an unmistakable aroma.

“Allright. Time for the moment of truth.”

Dr. Aster poured the liquid into his open jaws, and it vanished into apparent nothingness. The skeleton looked at the empty cup, and then turned to face the various humans who had gathered to watch the spectacle.

“That's pretty conclusive. Have fun, everybody.”

There was a little bit of light applause, a lot of smiling, and practically a rush of bodies pressing forward to try out the machine. The janitor nodded at the scientist in acknowledgment, then started to pack up his tools.

“You guys work fast.”

Dr. Aster turned around so quickly that some coffee in the cup threatened to escape its container through centrifugal force, and found himself looking at a familiar human face.

“Dr. Ross, what a pleasant surprise, to meet you in the building you work in.”

The surgeon grinned and nodded to one side, in the direction of a man with short hair wearing scrubs.

“Have you met John Skye? He's going to be taking that class at All Fine Labs.”
“No, I haven't had the pleasure.” Dr. Aster reached out one bony hand and the nurse immediately responded in kind to complete the handshake. “Glad to meet you. I suppose you'll be part of the first wave of humans combining healing magic with existing surgical and pharmacological knowledge.”

“Eh, not until we get the legal green light from the various regulatory agencies, but once we do, we want to hit the ground running.”

“Speaking of running, I just recently managed to check my messages and heard a long, convoluted run on sentence that mentioned something about getting a cup of coffee this weekend.” Dr. Ross tilted her head slightly and tapped her chin with one finger, before pointing that same finger at the newly installed coffee machine. “While my schedule is actually booked tomorrow, and Sunday, and Monday through Thursday, I can't help but notice that there is a coffee machine right here. What do you say we grab some cups, find an out of the way corner, and catch up?”

Dr. Aster managed to remember to close his jaw, which resulted in a loud click.

“Uh. That. That sounds like an. An excellent Plan B. I will. Get on that, right away.”

The skeleton turned towards the small mob of dangerously under-caffeinated medical professionals, then back to Dr. Ross.

“At this rate it might be faster to bridge over to the Stop-And-Go and come back.”

“That sounds like a solid Plan C.”

“Okay then.” Dr. Aster turned around, walking towards a threshold to another room. “I'll just. I'll be right back.”

There was a flash of blue light as the skeleton crossed the threshold, and John turned to his colleague.

“Now I see where Papyrus gets it.”

Toriel stood in the center of the back yard, with Frisk several feet away, trying to breathe slowly and regularly. From time to time, the child's eyes turned towards the tire swing, where Asriel's legs were sticking out, and his paws wrapped around the rope above.

“I fear that I have been guilty of a rather serious oversight, Frisk.” Toriel gestured with both paws, creating a red fireball in one and a purple fireball in the other. “Most colors in the magic spectrum involve external objects or forces, and use them as an indication of activity. Red and Magenta are different. Their primary role does not involve directly or indirectly affecting physical matter, but intangible consciousness. Communications magic connects one consciousness to another, and Pattern magic makes more clear those connections between different physical objects and phenomena, so that they may be more easily understood.”

Toriel paused, and Frisk let their breath out. “I understand what you mean.”

“My oversight is in forgetting that you appear to default to Red Magic. Without external feedback, your process for learning that color likely would have been different from the rest of the spectrum, only you can already wield it easily. The distinction, and the difference in focus when attempting to learn Pattern magic, would not be readily apparent. And compounding that is that your clear ability to start at an advanced level with most of the spectrum has led to myself neglecting several fundamentals. That is what we will attempt to address now.”
“...so what do you want me to do?”

“I simply want you to look at me, Frisk. Look at me, and relax. Do not focus on achieving some arbitrary standard of performance. Put out of your mind, to the best of your ability, the events of the past month. Consider what you know about me, but do not hold that in your mind.”

“...okay then.”

“Very good.

Frisk stared at Toriel. They looked at Toriel's long muzzle, short horns, floppy ears. They looked at Toriel's white fur and purple dress and the Delta Rune stitched into the pocket on one side.

“...I'm not sure what else is supposed to be happening. I can see, uh, what I see any time I look at you. But I'm not doing anything different than I normally would.”

“Hmmm.” Toriel clasped her paws together, bringing her index fingers right up next to her muzzle, then dropping her arms to her sides again. “There are two ways to focus the mind, through abstraction and through synthesis. I do not know that synthesis would be a superior alternative, because the state of mind that it encourages is not dissimilar to your default state of rapacious reading and absorbing of information.”

“Right. If I could do it, I would have done it already.”

“Not... not necessarily, my child.” Toriel raised one paw and two fingers were outstretched. “Pattern Magic, like all magic, responds to will and intent. In order to utilize its receptive and diagnostic properties, one must be willing to trust the information one receives... it is possible that your analytical mind is inclined to disregard that information as unreliable. An equally plausible scenario is that, you are so inclined towards experimentation that you require the same feedback we discussed earlier as a prerequisite to your learning style.”

“Toriel, I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“You can use Pattern Magic yourself, correct?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Can you show us how it works, like an example? That really helped with water magic when Undyne was showing us the ropes.”

Toriel blinked.

“I do not suppose it could hurt to try. Very well. First I will attempt Pattern Analysis, and then Pattern Influence.”

Toriel's eyes began to glow with a pronounced purple light.

“...when we are finished out here, you really must finish eating breakfast, my child. You are clearly flagging from lack of energy and it is only morning.”

“Yeah, well... that's true. But I've been under a lot of stress lately.” Frisk shrugged.

“I can see that also.”
“And it wasn’t my idea. All I wanted to do was, you know. Once the school year was over, start grilling Alphys for stuff I could use to help Asriel. Also build an automatic change sorter. It’s been on my to do list since February.”

“I thought it was March.”

“Late February then?”

“Oh, this is interesting. Chara, when you speak, I can see something change under Pattern Magic Analysis. We may want to mention this to Dr. Aster and Dr. Alphys.” The purple light faded from Toriel’s eyes and she held out one paw. “Now, watch as I demonstrate Pattern Influence.”

Purple light emerged from the queen’s palm, circling back on itself and branching off into repeating fractals.

“Pattern Influence allows you to impose a connective framework between discrete elements, or to divert energy within an existing connective framework. In this instance I am simply using it in the open air. Had we some sort of sandbox or pool of water I could impose regular interference patterns upon those media as a demonstration as well.”

“That is beautiful....” Frisk stared at the arrangement of the purple lines, and Toriel smiled.

“Thank you, Frisk. There is much to be said for the elegant beauty of simple mathematical relationships, and of course I had to practice quite a lot to make these patterns clear and coherent. Now, would you care to try?”

“...sure. Let's see what I can...”

Frisk trailed off and held up both hands... but nothing happened.

“...wait, let me try something else.”

Between Frisk's hands, there was a green light, coalescing into a six sided, regular cube, rotating slowly in the air. Frisk narrowed their eyes, and the cube fractured into several smaller cubes which dissipated into nothing.

“Well. That didn't work.”

“What was that? A test?”

Frisk shrugged at Asriel's question without looking up at him.

“I was thinking maybe I could start with one color in the spectrum, and then shift it over somehow. But the bullet fractured when I tried.”

“Yeah, I saw, but it fractured into small copies of itself.”

“That was what I was thinking of, yeah. But it's not Pattern Magic, it's me imposing a normal pattern on a magic bullet.”

Frisk balled their hands up into fists and stared as they were surrounded with a Red aura.

“It's so easy to do this. I could do it all day. Everything else is... some of it's tricky, some of it's really hard, but I can do all of it. All of it except Pattern. What's wrong with me that I can't make this work?”
The entire back yard fell silent, even accounting for the sounds of insects and the wind in the tree branches and the occasional automobile going down the street.

“My child... nothing is wrong with you. This is not a personal fault. This is an experiment, a learning experience that teaches you more about what you can and cannot do. There are no grades, there are no tests, and there is no failure.” Toriel sighed. “One month ago, for all we knew, all magic was beyond your reach. Now we know that six types of magic are within your ability to comprehend and utilize, in some cases without realizing it. How is achieving the impossible six times less of a triumph than achieving the impossible seven times?”

“Well, it's one less.” Asriel let go of the tire swing rope to hold up a single index finger, and Toriel frowned.

“Asriel, I do not believe that this comment is helpful at this time.”

“No, he's right, the math checks out.” Frisk sniffed, running the back of their left hand over their eyes. “Maybe... I don't know. Maybe when the classes start tomorrow. I can approach everything. With a clean slate. Or learn something. From somebody else in the class.”

'...tell them the rest of it, Frisk.'

“What?”

'No more secrets, right? We've already covered everything else. All the big stuff. There's no point in clearing the air if we're just going to go right back to the way things were before.'

“It's just in my head. It doesn't count.”

'Yeah, well so am I.'

Toriel turned to look at Asriel, who was staring at Frisk with a worried expression on his face.

“Chara, my child, is there something you want to tell us?”

“No, mom. It's not for me to say.”

Frisk stared at the ground, then looked up to see Toriel's face, and then their eyes darted over to Asriel, still spinning slowly in the tire swing, before looking back at Toriel.

“...Uhm. At James Madison Elementary. Before. All this. I think. I told you about how I got pushed ahead one grade, and then I was left to figure out everything on my own. Uhm. When I couldn't keep up the, the high grades and fast work.” Frisk reached up and rubbed at their eyes again. “The, uh. Counselor. She talked to me. But, she didn't actually ask questions about what was wrong, or anything like that. So it wasn't a talk. As much as a lecture. About how I had... I had potential. And I was wasting it. And there were people who wish they were as smart as me.”

Frisk paused, but neither Toriel nor Asriel filled in the silence.

“Uhm. And. I got told that a lot. And. It stuck. So... before all this. I felt like, I could be smart on my own time. And just be a good student, at my own pace, at school. And if I finished my work early, I could pull out my notes for Ambassador stuff. And... it actually. It kind of worked. For a year. But now... it kind of feels like everything is starting over again.”

“...my child, do you mean that you feel like you have been, perhaps pushed to move ahead faster than you prepared for?”
“Yes,” Frisk responded immediately, with obvious relief. “That's, that's a huge part of it. I feel like... I had to give up being Ambassador for this, even if it just for the summer. So I'm all in on this. And when I was reading the book, and experimenting, and sparring with Undyne and Asriel and Alphys and Papyrus, it wasn't, you know. It wasn't a chore, it wasn't a responsibility. It was fun. It was. It was getting to be a part of something new. A part of my friends' lives that I couldn't really understand or be a part of before. And everyone was, they were so happy to share this with me. And, you know, before last week I thought this getting out there would be a death sentence so anything is an improvement, but to be accepted with open arms, and....”

Frisk's voice cracked, but they breathed in deep, and let it out slowly, and continued.

“It's not fun, not anymore. Some stuff is easy and some stuff is hard and some stuff is in the middle, but even the hard stuff. I was so happy. When I figured it out. When I beat the challenge. But this isn't like learning how to levitate stuff from across the room, or make bullet patterns spell words. Everything I try when it comes to Pattern Magic is like hitting a brick wall. And no matter how much I study I feel so stupid, and no matter how hard I try it feels like it's never enough. But. I can't give up, because... everyone else is expecting me to win. To figure this out. And....”

Frisk swallowed, and when their mouth opened again, their voice was a lot softer, and a lot rougher, than it had been before.

“And I'm scared of how everyone's going to react when I disappoint them.”

Frisk held up their hands and stared at them, and Toriel in turn stared at Frisk, and sighed.

“Frisk, I know that... after all that has happened to you. Simply saying that you cannot disappoint us is not enough for you to really believe me. But I would be remiss in my responsibilities as your mother if I did not. And... and I doubt very much that your educators at James Madison Elementary knew of... of this,” Toriel pointed at Frisk's hands, glowing with red light, “when they spoke of potential.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Frisk nodded in agreement.

“I must confess. As a teacher and a mother both, the thought of seeing you, of seeing all three of you excel, both academically and professionally, brings me joy. But... you all have lives of your own. Dreams and ambitions that are indifferent to, or incompatible with, my own standards of success. I would be... a disgrace to motherhood, if I put my own hopes and dreams ahead of your own.” Toriel smiled sadly. “As I have said earlier this week. You all deserve to be more than the wish fulfillment fantasies of an old woman. And this holds true for everyone, not simply me.”

Frisk continued to stare at their hands, until they heard the sound of footsteps as Toriel walked over and knelt down in front of them. The red light faded away, as Toriel grasped Frisk's hands in her paws.

“I know that you can do amazing things, Frisk. I have seen it with my own eyes. But just because you can do something, that does not mean that you have to.”

Frisk slowly looked up at Toriel's face, and swallowed.

“Thank you. I... I don't. Know if I can, really... If I can make myself believe it. But. It means a lot to me. That you said so.”

“Frisk... magic relies on intent, and that means that it comes from the heart, as they say. What brings you joy, my child? What truly makes you happy?”
Frisk's eyes automatically, and without conscious awareness, darted to one side, where Asriel was trying to get himself out of the tire swing without falling on the ground.

“Uhm. Hanging out with everybody. Reading. Learning new things, figuring stuff out. Going real fast on the bike, but that might just be adrenaline.”

Toriel smiled.

“In a very real sense, you may not need Pattern Magic at all. It would take away the suspense and mystery of discovery, of solving puzzles by intellect alone. If you feel inclined, I encourage you to study the field academically, and abstractly, from the standpoint of science. But do not trouble yourself with practical applications, if all they do is bring you distress. For monsters, magic is first learned by playing. And if you are not having fun, it is not play, it is drudgery.”

“...okay.”

“Okay, then.” Toriel stood up, walked several steps away, and then turned around, a fireball cupped in her paw. “Now... with the classroom exercises concluded, or suspended rather, who is ready for recess?”

Chapter End Notes

The weather is going crazy in my nick of the woods, so this chapter has taken a while and I expect the next one to take a while too. Especially once we start planting fields.
Chalk squealed slightly on a blackboard as flaming fingers dragged it around, to proclaim to all and sundry the price of the day’s special. Grillby dropped the chalk into the tray beneath the chalkboard and turned to face the bar. Despite legal restrictions on the timing of the sale of alcohol, there were always the occasional hopefuls, not to mention the stubborn ones, but most of the humans and monsters settling on bar stools were probably there for burgers and fries and similar fare.

“...what’ll you have?”

“Tra la la. A caffeinated quencher of thirst, magical in its nature and random in its flavor.”

“...coming right up.”

The Riverperson nodded their head to the sound of the music playing on the radio, but stopped abruptly as a shadow with nothing casting it surrounded them in darkness, then retreated into the silhouette of what might have been a person.

_Sorry about that. It’s been a hell of a month. Still getting used to everything._

The Riverperson shrugged.

_I know you can’t talk freely right now with everyone else nearby, but I did want to let you know that some stuff has come up on my end. And some plans have been thrown a little out of whack as a result. I’ll share the details later._

_As abruptly as it appeared, the darkness faded away._

The Riverperson sighed, prompting a human sitting on the adjacent bar stool to turn their way with red, bloodshot eyes.

“You said it, buddy.”

“HELLO DWAYNE!”

“GYAH!” Dwayne Riley flinched in surprise, sending multiple books and a clipboard flying through the air, all of which were quickly suspended in a blue glow. Spinning around, Dwayne turned to see Papyrus holding one hand out, surrounded in an identical blue light.

“Holy fuckballs, are you trying to give me a heart attack man?!?”

“That was not my intention, per se. Are you actually having a heart attack? Should I contact human medical services?”

“No, I’m fine, or I will be in a few minutes. Can I have my stuff back please?” The assorted books and clipboard dropped into Dwayne’s waiting arms, and the man narrowed his eyes at Papyrus.

“What’s with the fancy suit?”

“AH, DO YOU LIKE IT? METTATON HELPED ME GET IT STYLED PROPERLY FOR MY DEBUT AS INTERIM AMBASSADOR!”
Dwayne stared at a sleek black suit worn over a white shirt, with a pink ascot at the neckline, to the extent that such a term applied to skeletons. The man’s eyes panned down to see neon purple shoes that practically bored into his retinas with the intensity of their color, and quickly back up towards details he had missed before, like the folded handkerchief in the breast pocket, the pocket watch on a chain, and the fact that despite the fanciness of the rest of his apparel Papyrus was STILL wearing his red gloves.

“Jebus. Are you trying to intimidate people into passing pro monster legislation with your clothes?”

“THAT IS BUT ONE STRATEGY AMONG MANY THAT I MAY EMPLOY. FRISK HAS BEEN EXPLAINING TO ME THE MANY AND VARIED PLANS AND PROVISIONS THAT THEY HAVE BEEN WORKING ON DURING THE COURSE OF THEIR WORK.”

“Well… good luck, I guess.”

“Hey, is everything alright?” A bearded face peered around the edge of the bookshelves. “I thought I heard screaming.”

“I wasn’t screaming. I was yelling. Big difference. And you can blame tall, dark, and bonesome for that.” Dwayne pointed to Papyrus with the corner of his clipboard, and Van Garrett nodded.

“Ah, that explains a few things. Hey Papyrus. Nice suit.”

“THANK YOU, MR. VAN GARRETT!”

The librarian retreated back to the checkout desk, and Papyrus turned towards Dwayne. When his jaws opened next, his voice was softer than it previously had been, though this was a relative measurement at best.

“YOU SEEM TO BE GETTING ALONG WELL WITH MR. VAN GARRETT.”

Dwayne shrugged.

“We fought against that prick Cater together. That helped. Also he was right behind Frisk and the Royal Family in arguing for clemency when I was in front of the judge Monday. A two thousand dollar fine and five hundred hours of community service beats the hell out of prison time.”

“I THINK I SEE. THE LIBRARY DOES OFFER COMMUNITY SERVICE HOURS. AND YOU HAVE MADE IT CLEAR HOW YOU HATE BEING IN ANYONE’S DEBT IF YOU CAN POSSIBLY AVOID IT.”

Dwayne stared at Papyrus.

“Wait, how do you know that?”

“WE TALKED EXTENSIVELY OVER THE PREVIOUS TWO WEEKS!”

“…you picked up on that just from visiting me in the hospital?”

“I WAS NOT AWARE IT WAS A SECRET, IT SEEMED RATHER OBVIOUS TO ME!”

“…this is freaking me out.” Dwayne resumed the shelving of books and checking them off on his clipboard. “So was this visit to the Library a social call, or are you looking for something in particular?”

“DO YOU HAVE ANY BOOKS THAT DESCRIBE THE HISTORY OF NEON SIGNS?”
“...I don’t know that off the top of my head. We’ll have to check the catalog.”

“COME JOIN THE FUN”

“No, you come join the fun,” the scientist grumbled as she approached the fluctuating mass in the corner of the workshop. Not that the Memoryhead could understand her.

In Dr. Alphys’ claws, what looked like a heavily modified vacuum cleaner pointed towards the amalgamate, with a hose running toward a transparent cylinder with several pumps and lights on the metal end caps of the cylinder. Her thumb flicked a switch, and a beam of blue light shot out of the hose.

The Memoryhead split almost in half in the middle, creating a hole in its mass that allowed the light to pass through and strike the walls behind it.

“Oh come on! That’s cheating!!” Alphys waved the hose back and forth until part of the amalgamate was caught in the beam and started flowing towards the hose. Faster than she expected, the rest of the Amalgamate started moving towards her, and the scientist flailed at it with the hose, breaking off the contact with the blue magic beam. The Memoryhead skirted around the scientist and slammed into the closed doors several times before realizing it couldn’t escape that way, then rolled and flattened out behind several cabinets.

“Will you stop hiding dammit?! I’ve been in here for three hours! Don’t make me call Undyne! She’ll give you some real bad memories!” Alphys sighed and pulled out her cell phone, unlocking it and speed dialing with a practiced motion.

“Carrow here.”

“Justin, it’s Alphys. Are all the vents for the physics lab still sealed?”

“...that’s what the monitor says.”

“Okay. I’m coming out and we’ll lock down the room, and I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a plan, and actually it kind of works out for us.”

“Huh?”

“Some folks showed up while you were trying to wrangle the Memoryhead thing. Asked to see you. Well, more like demanded. Graham and Paul told them you were unavailable. They insisted. Joe punched one of them in the dick.”

Alphys rubbed her forehead with one claw.

“Of course he did. Ok-kay. I’m on my way out.”

Hands carefully picked up the photographs by their edges and slid them into the transparent sleeves and holders that would protect them from the elements, before tracing the images that had been recorded for posterity.

A collection of monsters and humans gathered next to an old bulletin board, preserved under glass.
A slightly askew and out of focus picture of a cheering blue fish monster with several empty bowls in front of her, still stained red with the spicy food that was inside.

A young human and monster competing in a high stakes game of Dance Dance Revolution, while another human child, a bat monster, and a propeller driven airplane watched.

A human child and a monster child, barely visible behind the massive arms of the King and Queen.

The same children, falling asleep at the dinner table while other monsters were animated and excited, if the blurring of their images and limbs in the picture was any indication.

The children leaning against each other on the sofa.

And the same children as a blanket was being placed over them, after they had finally toppled over on their side.

Frisk’s fingers backtracked to the picture where they and Asriel had barely been awake. Everyone whose face was visible in the photograph had been smiling, save for the two exhausted children. Dr. Alphys was the only missing face, and that was because she was the one who had been taking the picture to begin with.

Slowly, the photo album was closed, and Frisk carried it over to the bookcase, sliding it back into the space where it had previously rested. Frisk walked back to the sofa, and sat down again, staring dully at the other materials on the coffee table left over from adding pictures to the album.

‘Need to do something. Loose objects. Trash. Clean up.’

The thought seemed logical, but the thought that would follow it in succession didn’t seem to be forming correctly. Without their conscious awareness of it, Frisk’s head turned and they stared at Asriel, sitting in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the coffee table, reading his astronomy book.

“Frisk has officially tapped out mentally.”

“...well, that was a lot of exercise this morning.” Asriel closed the book and rested it on his knees. “Dad plays catch for fun, Mom plays catch for keeps.”

“Yes she does.”

Frisk sighed and leaned back into the sofa cushions. “I need a vacation.”

“You are already on vacation.”

“I need a vacation from my vacation.”

“Wait, isn’t that going back to school?” Asriel’s brow furrowed. “So... your vacation from the vacation starts tomorrow, right? That’s how it works.”

“Bah.” Frisk leaned over on their side, managed to kick off their shoes, and rested their feet on the armrest of the couch. “I live here now.”

“We already live in this house.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Pretty sure I don’t.”
“Ugh,” was Frisk’s only reply.

The banter ended with the knocking on the door and the ringing of the doorbell, and Frisk’s eyes shot open.

“...Cater wouldn’t knock before attacking, right?”

Asriel turned to look out of the window facing the street.

“Oh. It’s just your friends. Probably not a threat.” The astronomy book was set aside and Asriel walked over to the front door, pulling it open in mid knock and facing a young human child.

“Okay, week’s up, where’s Frisk?!”

Asriel blinked at the two human children, the familiar reptilian face of Poncho, a bat monster and a hovering propeller driven plane.

“...sorry, what?”

“Frisk’s grounding. It’s over. It’s been a week. That’s how math works. And calendars.” The human child pushed their way past Asriel into the house. “Frisk! Where are you?!”

“I’m literally right here Mary. Don’t shout. Mom’s busy in her office.” Frisk waved from the sofa, raising one arm above the back so it could be more easily seen. “Also aren’t you supposed to be in Disney World?!”

“You can thank that jerk who went after the school for that. Dad had to delay the trip because he was swamped in all the political stuff, not to mention all the legal stuff.” Mary walked over to one of the chairs opposite the sofa and sat down without being prompted, or for that matter invited.

At the door, the other human child held out his hand to Asriel.

“Hi. We haven’t really met. I’m Douglas Carmichael. Mary’s punching bag.”


“Right.” Douglas pointed to the rest of the group in succession. “That’s Skate, this is Poncho-”

“Yo, we met already at the Librarby!”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. And, uh. This is Casey.”

“Nice to. Uh, meet you.” Asriel’s brow furrowed. “Uhm. You would you like to, maybe, come inside of the house?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Still lying on the sofa, Frisk stared at Mary, who was staring at them.

“...can I help you?”

“What’s been going on this last week?”

“...I could ask you the same question, considering the times I’ve been outside the house after last Saturday could be counted on one hand.”
“You know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.” Frisk rolled over on the sofa until they were lying on their back. “Also thanks for the heart attack. I thought for a second you were Cater come to finish the job.”

“That’s stupid. There are protocols in place in the event that Jordan Cater escapes custody. You’d hear the police sirens long before he showed up.”

“It’s Friday. Every time he’s come after us, it’s been a Friday. I got almost all A’s in math, I can put two and two together.”

Mary stared at Frisk before shaking her head and leaning back in the chair. The seats nearby were slowly filled with other children, with Asriel sitting on the armrest of the sofa and Skate slowly circling in a holding pattern above the rest of the children.

“So, the big question is, has anyone been running crazy experiments on you?”

“No. This has not turned into *National Lampoon’s Senior Trip* or whatever it is you were talking about last week.”

“It was *Christmas Vacation!*”

“Same difference. It’s all been math and physics and practice and paperwork. Papyrus is taking over as Ambassador for the summer so I had to get everything handed off to him while also learning all the fundamentals of magic I was never taught because there was no reason to learn and nobody to learn from.”

“So? You’re a math and science nerd.” Mary waved her hand as if shooing away Frisk’s complaints like so many invisible insects. “You go nuts for this stuff.”

“Yes, I *am* going crazy from information overload. Thank you for noticing.”

“Don’t gimme that grass is always greener stuff. I am *stupid* jealous. You and Douglas and Jessie and everyone else gets to learn how magic works and I’m going to miss out. I can’t believe Disney World is a downgrade right now.”

“Me neither.” Douglas crossed his arms and stared at the coffee table like it borrowed money from him and had not paid it back in a timely manner. “I didn’t even want to be in the magic summer school thing. I was hoping for a summer of goofing off but my mom signed me up without even asking. This is almost as bad as Little League baseball.”

Frisk rolled their eyes and pushed themselves up into a sitting position on the sofa.

“So who exactly from school is going to be in this magic course?”

“Your mom is teaching it, you should know.”

“Mom’s been teaching me fundamentals. That’s all I know.”

Mary made an annoyed noise in her throat. “Well. You, Douglas, Jessie, Liam, Shannon, and Zeke from our class as far as I know. And there’s a sixth grader who’s involved. Or, they were a sixth grader this last year, I guess they’re heading to Junior High now.”

“I heard mom say there’s some kids from James Madison involved, but I don’t know who they are.”

Frisk turned to stare at Douglas.
“Wait, how does your mom know who’s coming from the other school?”

“I dunno, my mom just finds stuff out. She probably works for the CIA.” Douglas threw up his hands. “But she still can’t figure out I don’t want to be spending my whole summer indoors, doing math.”

“But you’ll get to throw fireballs and stuff!”

“I don’t want to throw fireballs!” Douglas snapped at Mary. “I want to sleep in on weekdays!”

Dr. Alphys picked up the coffee cup in front of her, took a sip, and put it back down before looking at the humans on the other side of the table. Both of them wore ordinary black suits over white shirts and black ties. And both had closely cut hair in the same styles. The only real difference between the two men was that one man’s hair was black and the other’s was brown.

Well, actually there was another difference; the man with brown hair was hunched over slightly, and underneath the table was clearly trying to balance an ice pack.

“...Mr. Black and Mr. Brown. It’s been a while.”

The black haired man nodded.

“I’m impressed that you remember us after all this time.”

“I’m not,” his companion grumbled.

“Well, I do remember you. And I don’t mean to be rude, but the number of different projects currently taking up my attention is, uh. It’s a fairly large number. So can we get straight to why you are here?”

“Agreed. As you probably inferred from our activities the last time we were in town, our mission was to observe and report. That is the same assignment we have now, only this time instead of observing exactly what is going on in the town, our whole assignment is to keep tabs on the magic angle, now that it’s become apparent that humans can use it.”

“...that’s awfully straightforward. D-don’t get me wrong. It’s a nice change of pace.”

“Yes, well...” Mr. Brown shrugged. “We have tried to be subtle. That didn’t work very well. We, or at least my partner, tried to get some sort of leverage. And that clearly backfired. And we’ve been given a considerable amount of initiative in this mission, and it occurred to me that the only thing we haven’t tried yet is asking nicely. So... Uh. Can we have a duplicate of that machine that was used by Mr. Stanton and Jordan Cater, please?”

Dr. Alphys blinked, then turned to face Joe, who was leaning against the wall of the meeting room. Joe looked at Alphys with a confused expression, then narrowed his eyes and turned towards the government agents.

“No.”

“Alright. Plan B. We understand that you are forming an education institution, school, college or other academic facility based around humans learning magic. Is it permissible for the two of us to enroll in that education program?”
Dr. Alphys blinked again, and then scratched her chin with one claw.

“I see no reason why not. You’ll have t-to, ah, you’ll still have to get all of the paperwork necessary for the program, including enrollment fees. We had a limited number of scholarship slots available but they were used almost immediately for young students from the elementary schools.”

Mr. Brown’s eyebrows shot up.

“You are, uh, teaching children how to use magic?”

“Some subjects are easiest to learn when you start early. Magic is no different. To b-be honest, I’m a little worried that we’ve already passed some important developmental milestones for a lot of the adults enrolled in the course, and that includes you. Monsters obviously learn magic at an early age, and that means a lot of what we teach, and how we teach it, is wrapped up in our culture. Humans haven’t grown up in that culture so there are going to be… limitations. As the old saying goes, ‘Fish in the sea are the last to discover water.’ Or something like that. I g-got it from a fortune cookie so I don’t know who said the original quote.” Dr. Alphys stood up. “But that’s enough about that. You’ll see what I’m talking about soon enough. For now, let’s head into the lobby and get the appropriate paperwork printed out. You can fill it out and bring it back any time before tomorrow at nine in the morning. That’s when the first class is scheduled.”

The cloaked figure sat on the bench in the Arboretum, and the unenlightened observer would likely attribute it to the Riverperson simply enjoying the sights and sounds of nature. On the other side of the path, however, there stood a shadowy figure.

First things first. I’m trying to get Thomas O’Dell out of prison. His distrust of monsters is a liability, but I need his planning skills.

“Tra la la. I would think such actions would anger your existing partner.”

You better believe it. Still, you don’t play both sides as long as I have without getting at least decent at it.

“I shall take your word for it.”

There’s something else. Something. Uhm. Very important.

The Riverperson watched as the darkness walked over and seemed to sit on the other side of the bench.

“...what is it?”

I have, uh… I have made a very, very big miscalculation. Until recently, I was acting under the assumption that Jordan Cater was the Usurper. This assumption is no longer accurate.

“What… what do you mean?”

By definition, the Usurper takes. Takes and takes and takes, and gives nothing back. A black hole with a chip on its shoulder. But in the hospital. After Jordan Cater gained the ability to use magic. He took the time and energy to heal O’Dell’s burns.

“I have heard of this, through gossip and happenstance.”
Yeah, small towns. News travels fast. I think that, or at least, I am worried now, that Cater was simply the Usurper’s host organism. Jumping from person to person like a parasite. But I can’t pinpoint exactly when or how that changed. The only upside is that we don’t have to worry about Cater anymore. That particular threat has been effectively neutralized. Too bad for us that’s the only good news here.

The darkness held out what might have been an arm, which flickered and warped for a second.

After Cater escaped the hospital, he ended up coming here, actually. And it turns out that some of the stuff that the Guardians passed down from generation to generation actually works, provided that there’s enough ambient magic energy. He ended up severing my connection for about a minute. And the Interface hasn’t been working right since.

The Riverperson stood up suddenly, black cloak whirling about them and eyes glowing beneath their hood.

“WHAT.”

Yeah, I’m not happy about it either. I’ve been doing what I can on my end, and I think I’m on better footing right now. I’ve also been thinking that, if push comes to shove, it would be nice to have somebody on our side who could do that.

The dark figure stood up, and while no features were detectable on the perfectly black shape, it was still obvious that the shadow had turned to face the Riverperson.

But we can cross that particular bridge when we get to it. Talk to you later.

The darkness faded away, and the Riverperson shook his head.

“Cryptic asshole.”
The red cube rotated in space above Frisk’s hand, first along one axis, then another, then the third, and finally along an axis that traveled diagonally from two opposing corners of the cube.

“Yooooo! You’re really good at that!” Poncho grinned. “I have a hard enough time just making the pencil go where I want using Blue Magic, so there’s no way I can actually do pictures with bullets yet, hah.”

“The lines aren’t straight and they move around a lot, so I still have to work on that, but the basic principle is sound. From what we’ve already discovered, the biggest bottleneck after actually having magic energy in the world to harness is something that hasn’t been officially named yet but Dr. Aster compares to magnetic field strength. The further you get from a magnet the weaker the field is, but there’s also the whole magnetic field inside the magnet that comes from aligning all the atoms. Apparently most humans are disorganized, and live life just fine that way.”

“I’ll buy that,” Mary commented.

“Yeah. Being disorganized like that means that you don’t really generate a magic field, but magic can still affect you in the same way that a magnetic field can attract iron that isn’t magnetized. But if everything inside you is organized, then you generate a field of your own, and you can affect things within the volume of that field. Whether it’s an inch from your skin or across the room.” Frisk tossed the glowing cube into the dining room area, where it disconnected into red lines that collapsed into motes of red light.

Douglas chewed on a fingernail. “Still wanna sleep in, to be honest.”

“That’s fair.” Frisk leaned over onto the sofa again. “There’s a lot of work involved in practicing this, in figuring it out, and as students we won’t even be involved in the details of actually studying how the magic develops, how to quantify magical power, or figure out any of the physics behind it. Apparently there’s a race on to reconcile the physics of magic with the rest of humanity’s body of scientific knowledge. That’s going to take years probably.”

“Well, at least you know what you’re doing after you graduate.”

Frisk frowned and opened their mouth to respond to Mary’s assumption… then closed their mouth and got a contemplative look on their face. “Actually… that does kind of sound like it would be right up my alley.”

“Surprisingly literally nobody in this room.” Mary turned to Douglas. “Remember, soon as I get back from Florida I wanna see your notes.”

“Only if you stop hitting me every single time I say something you disagree with.”

“That’s not fair, that changes our whole dynamic!”

“What part of that request is not fair?”

“Guys, I told you.” Frisk interrupted. “Keep it down. Mom’s working on stuff in-”

There were the sounds of footsteps and a massive fuzzy boss monster walked into the living room, reading glasses still perched precariously on the end of her muzzle.
“Oh, hello children. I did not realize that we were entertaining guests today.”

“Hello Mrs. Dreemurr,” Douglas and Mary replied in unison. At the same time, Skate, Poncho, and Casey replied with “Hello, Your Majesty,” causing some of the words to trip over each other.

Toriel snickered. “Hello children. I trust that you have been making the most of your summer vacation. Would anyone care for refreshments? I thought I would offer while I give my eyes and fingers a break from paperwork.”

“I’ll help.” Frisk managed to arrange their legs underneath their body and force themselves into a standing position. “Anything to stop me from spinning my gears like I’ve been.”

The office was briefly illuminated by a flash of blue light, and then the only light came from the bulb of the desk lamp. Dr. Aster’s hand reached out to flip the light switch on the wall, making it much easier to see everything that wasn’t a pile of printouts and reference books, then opened the door and marched out into the halls of All Fine Labs.

All the time, humming (somehow) a jaunty tune.

Crossing through an as yet incomplete covered walkway to another building, the scientist made his way to one of the lecture halls in the Educational Annex Building, where a number of humans and monsters were still racing to finish the construction process. A few light fixtures were leaning against unpainted walls, and at least three people were in a heated argument about the order of operations involved when Dr. Aster stepped into the room, and one of the participants suddenly broke off.

“Dr Aster! Hey!” Alphys darted away from the electrician and the painter. “How did everything go at the hospital? D-did you have any trouble? Is everyone at the hospital still really hyped about the m-magic coffee?”

“It’s all hooked up, and we have a lot of good will built up as a result. Did I miss anything while I was gone?”

“Uh. Yeah. Mostly it was more of the same, b-but we had some familiar faces show up later.” Alphys rubbed her claws together nervously. “Uh. This was back when we first got established in the town. So. When All Fine Labs was just a shed Sans and I put together overnight. The human government? They sent. Uhm. Some folks to check on what was happening in town. And one of them tried to b-break in. It, uh. It didn’t work.”

“...okay. I guess I’m not surprised. Go on.”

“Uh. Yeah. Mostly it was more of the same, b-but we had some familiar faces show up later.” Alphys rubbed her claws together nervously. “Uh. This was back when we first got established in the town. So. When All Fine Labs was just a shed Sans and I put together overnight. The human government? They sent. Uhm. Some folks to check on what was happening in town. And one of them tried to b-break in. It, uh. It didn’t work.”

“...okay. I guess I’m not surprised. Go on.”

“Ok-kay. So. We caught them red handed on video tape, b-but I didn’t want to g-get dragged into legal stuff when we were still setting up and just got out of the Underground, so I d-declined to press charges. Well, the same two guys. They, uh. They came back. And enrolled in the magic summer school program.”

Dr. Aster stared at Alphys for a few seconds without speaking.

“Wait. Did I miss a step here, or did you forget to mention something that happened? Because I’m a little confused right now.”

“Yeah, it’s. Uh. It’s one of those kinda things. So, yeah. I’ll, uhm. We’ll. We will make sure all the teachers know in advance before tomorrow. Just to avoid any surprises.” Alphys shrugged. “Honestly, between all the stuff that went on with you and Sans and getting dragged to Washington,
I’m pretty sure the government will step up their game when it comes to spying on us sooner or later. At least this way we can make them pay for the privilege.”

“That’s a good point. And if they go after Joe’s machine they can have fun trying to put it together without blowing themselves up like he did.”

“Heh, yeah. They actually asked if they could have that first, but it’s Joe’s work, and he said no, and they didn’t try to push it. Anyway, enough about that. Did you get to see Dr. Ross while you were at the hospital?”

Dr. Aster stared at Alphys, eye sockets narrowed slightly.

“That is an oddly specific question to be asking.”

“Yeah, it is. So did you??”

“Like, welcome to Joe’s House of Stuff! Can I help you find anything?”

“That would be nice.” Mr. Brown pointed to himself and his companion. “We’re new in town and we’ll be staying for a while. Do you happen to know-”

“Oh, I remember you guys! You were the secret government agents that were looking around! Alphys told us about you!”

“Oh god,” mumbled Mr. Black. Mr. Brown blinked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh yeah, she told me and Bratty all about it, even pointed you guys out when were all trying out human food at the sandwich shop! We got soooo sick, it was awesome!! So like, what brings you back to Ebott’s Wake? Was it Jordan Cater? It’s gotta be Jordan Cater. All that crazy stuff he did. Oh, wait! If you’re secret agents, that means you’re on a secret mission and can’t tell me! Right! Okay, don’t worry, I’ve seen all those movies!” The purple cat monster winked with a conspiratorial grin. “So, can help you guys find anything in the store?”

“Oh… Mr. Brown rubbed his head. “Maaaybe. Mostly we were hoping if you could point us to some place where we could stay in town for an extended time.”

“Oh, we have just the thing!” The cat monster grabbed some sheets of paper that had been folded into thirds, that were stacked in a transparent plastic stand on the checkout counter. “The Ebott’s Wake Tourism Board prints these things out and some of the businesses in town have been carrying them, for people who show up to get like some Nice Cream or Spider Cider or Cinnabunnies because they have like a really bad human disease or something, so once they get better they can go around and see the sights and things like that!”

Mr. Brown accepted the brochures slowly. “Oh. Kay. That’s, uh. That’s something. Thank you very much.”

“Like, no problem! Come on back later if you need, like, clothes and shoes that don’t make you look like secret agents!”

“We will, uh. Certainly keep you in mind. Thanks again.”
The bell above the door jingled, and Mr. Black and Mr. Brown stepped outside. Mr. Brown looked down at the brochure in his hands, which featured a photograph of Mt. Ebott surrounded by a number of bizarre events clearly added by a graphics design student who had just discovered the ability to Blur images in Photoshop; some sort of fanciful soap box derby, a food fight that featured pies as the weapon of choice, a flaming figure tending bar and holding a newspaper above its head that somehow wasn’t catching fire, a theatrical stage with several humans and a skeleton all taking a bow… and in the center, sticking out its tongue and winking at the camera, was a photograph of a golden flower with a face.

And just below it, text that had been italicized, bold, and underlined for emphasis:

**DON’T TRUST THE FLOWER.**

Asriel stared at the rectangular slice of cake, flaking bits of icing off of its surface and onto the paper plate below. The icing covered one side of the yellow cake proper, so it was clearly an edge piece, and there was what looked like a cursive lowercase ‘t’ in blue icing that stood out from the white background. A fork carefully tapped at it, and the layer of icing splintered almost like glass.

“Are you going to actually eat that, or just chisel it into a statue or something like that?”

Asriel looked up at Mary with his brow furrowed in annoyance. “The times I’ve had human food since I got my body back I can count on one hand.” The fork came down again, carefully chiseling off a corner of the cake, lifting it up for closer inspection. Asriel could smell the sugar from the icing. His mouth opened, and the cake and fork disappeared.

A split second later, the children gathered around the table saw the young Boss Monster’s entire face twist and contort, and the fork was dropped onto the table with a clatter.

“Nnnghghhh.” Asriel swallowed. “What in the actual… I can’t believe I’m saying this, but it was too sweet.”

“So… you’re not gonna finish it then?”

“Not sure that I can, and I don’t really want to try. I think it did something to my teeth, it felt like I was eating a battery.”

“Have you ever actually eaten a battery?”

Asriel turned to Casey, one corner of his mouth still twitching from the sugar overload. “I did a lot of weird stuff as a flower.”

“So can the rest of us…?” Douglas let the remainder of the question go unanswered, but Asriel filled in the blanks and walked away from the table.

“You can try, but I don’t really think it’s a-”

A number of forks all descended on the remaining slice of cake, one of them mounted on what looked like a mid-air refueling hose made out of blue magic. A few seconds later, the dining room was filled with sounds of pain, laughter, and disgust. Mary winced and dropped her fork, doubling over in a mix of pain and a fit of the giggles.

“AAAA! The cake gave me instant diabetes!”
“Oh god my head. Ow. Ow. OW.” Douglas rubbed his temples in a futile attempt to overcome the sugar overdose.

“NGGGH. I got the same sugar battery thing.” Frisk rubbed at the lower left side of their face. “It must have hit a filling or something.”

Only the hovering airplane seemed unaffected, while Casey looked around at the rest of the group. “Sooo… none of you want anymore? Can I…?” Without waiting for confirmation, the bat monster pulled the paper plate towards her and practically inhaled the remaining cake.

Mary raised one hand to her forehead, then lowered it. “Today we honor the memory of Casey’s pancreas, and the sacrifice it made today that all our pancreases may live.”

“Yo, what’s a pancreas?”

“It’s the organ in human bodies that lets us eat sugar. But maybe monsters don’t have that.” Mary looked up at the towering figure of Toriel, walking into the dining room with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of some sort. “Mrs. Dreemurr, do monsters have pancreases? Uh, Pancreasi? I don’t actually know what the plural is.”

Toriel stopped in mid step and blinked.

“I… do not think so. Frisk, do you happen to know… Frisk, is something the matter?”

Asriel turned to see Frisk still rubbing the side of their jaw.

“Hal Greene’s cake was so sweet it gave me a toothache.”

“Oh dear. Have you been brushing your teeth each night like you should?” Toriel placed the tray of drinks in the center of the table, and stepped back to walk around the table and the children sitting at it until she was standing next to Frisk.

“First things first, yes. Second, I don’t think any amount of brushing would make a difference.”

Mary nodded. “This is Hal Greene we’re talking about. I heard the Thanksgiving before monsters showed up? He decided it would take too long to roast a turkey, and even frying it was too slow, so he built a military grade laser system to flash-cook it.”

“Well, I heard that some guy from Lone Point brought him his truck to get fixed, then skipped out on paying the bill, so Hal created a hovercraft out of junk lying around and chased the guy’s cabin cruiser up and down the coast until he finally paid his bill,” Douglas added.

“Yo, somebody told my sister, and my sister told me, that Hal Greene can actually keep books from the Librarby without Mr. Van Garrett going after him!”

Mary waved her hand. “Oh, that’s true. They’re like, cousins or something.”

“Wait, what?” Asriel’s confused expression was almost comical. “Hal and Mr. Van Garrett are related?”

“Yeah.” Mary tried to trace a family tree in the air with her finger as a visual aid. “I don’t know exactly what it makes them in relation to each other, but about a hundred years ago there were the Greene Twins, Topaz and Opal, and according to dad the two of them together were almost as bad as Hal is today. Of course, dad has a known bias. But yeah. Opal Greene is Mr. Van Garrett’s grandma on his father’s side. Meanwhile Topaz Greene married Earl Cowrie, and then after she had
kids she divorced him, which was really rare back then, and she took her maiden name back, and then David Greene got married and had Hal Greene. So yeah, they’re totally related.”

“Yo, how do you know all this??”

“My grandma is part of the Ebott’s Wake Genealogical Society. Every time I go see her, I can either get a history lesson filled with family trees, or we can play dominoes.” Mary crossed her arms defiantly. “No words in the English language can express how much I hate dominoes.”

“Wait, does that mean you know why so many humans in this town have Harrison as a last name?” Asriel asked. “Because I’ve been wondering that for a while now.”

“Oh, yeah. There was this doctor who showed up back in the nineteenth century, and he was really forward thinking. He actually washed his hands before and after examining and treating patients, for starters. Also he had eleven or twelve kids, which wasn’t out of the ordinary back then, but what was out of the ordinary was that every one of them survived to adulthood. And those people got married and had kids, and the cycle continued until the present day. I think something like thirty five percent of the human population of Ebott’s Wake is descended from Hieronymus Harrison in some way. They also named the street leading up to the hospital after him. Out of recognition of all the people that he saved from having to go to a hospital, or something like...”

Mary trailed off in mid sentence, turning to look at Frisk, whose hand and part of their face was covered in green light. Frisk’s eyes were squeezed shut in pain, and tears could be seen leaking out of them.

“Frisk? Frisk?! What is wrong my child?”

The human child’s eyes opened, and red glowing irises bathed the dining room in a glow straight out of an old-school photographic darkroom.

“I need to see a dentist. Or a pair of pliers. One or the other.”

“Okay. ‘Fine Dining: Enjoy regional specialties at franchise prices at our local eateries. For Italian-American dining, visit Pizzageddon, and for a taste of the Orient try the Wonton Won Ton All You Can Eat Chinese Buffet. Fans of sandwiches and military history alike will enjoy Das Boot Sub Shop’s wide variety of breads, meats, cheeses and toppings, as well as their famous shoestring fries and dipping sauce. For a South of the Border experience, try Los Tamales Caliente.’ You know, not once has this brochure given me addresses or directions. I don’t think the people on this Tourism Board thing are firing on all cylinders.”

Mr. Black grunted as he unpacked his luggage, stuffing clothing and assorted tools in the drawers of the hotel room.

“Oh, there’s a section on monster food here. ‘The most exotic flavors that Ebott’s Wake has to offer, of course, are the many and varied types of food made by monsters, using the mysteries properties of magic to create food unlike anything humanity has ever experienced. Spider pastries, made by spiders, for spiders, of genuine imitation spider substitute, can be found at Muffet’s Tuffet, right next to the Archaic Arcade.’ Oh, yeah. That really helps, only they didn’t include an address for this arcade. ‘Lapis Lepus Brand Nice Cream can still be bought from the creator Lance Lepus at his food cart.’ See, that’s the only time it makes sense not to include instructions, when it’s moving around... oh. ‘The Nice Cream cart can often be found in or around the grand Ebott’s Wake Arboretum, where fanciful foliage can be viewed year round.’ Good god, somebody take the
thesaurus away from whoever wrote this thing before they kill again!”

“Will you stop talking for two seconds?!”
The Tooth, And Nothing But The Tooth

11:19 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: hey hal

11:19 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: r u ther

11:20 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: dont mean 2 bother u but is kind of emergency

11:20 AM: Who is this?

11:20 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: its asriel

11:20 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: wait

11:20 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: who are you

11:21 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: hal always texts in all caps

11:21 AM: This is Dave Greene.

11:21 AM: I’m Hal’s fatngbmklfg

11:21 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: did you drop the phone

11:21 AM: HEY AZZY

11:21 AM: SORRY

11:21 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: or somet

11:21 AM: ASKED DAD TO GRAB POHNE

11:22 AM: DIDNT ASK HIM TO BE MY SECRETAR

11:22 AM: HOW WAS THE CAKE MY DUDE

11:22 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: o

11:22 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: thats why the call actuly

11:22 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: we split the cake and it was so sweet

11:22 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: it gave frisk a toothcha

11:23 AM Star_Blazing_Platinum: toothache even

11:23 AM: O SHIT

11:23 AM: DAMN

11:23 AM: SORRY

11:23 AM: THAT WAS NOT SOMETHING I WANTED TO HAPPEN
The bell above the door jingled as it was pulled open, and a yellow lizard in a lab coat darted inside, waving at the gem elemental behind the counter.

“Nice to see you, doc. Pizzas are a little backed up so you may have to wait a minute for the last one.”

“Fine! That’s, uh, that’s fine.” Alphys looked around, but didn’t see any empty booths where she could sit down and wait for the pizzas to be finished. It seemed like everyone in town opted to come to the Stop-And-Go at the same time on the same day, including multiple members of the Dreemurr Elementary School teaching faculty-

“HEY! Over here Alphys!”

Alphys automatically blushed as Undyne’s shout drew the attention of every single person in the
building to her like a lightning rod. The amazonian fish woman had slid further towards the side of the booth to make room for her girlfriend, and Alphys scrambled to fill in the space in the hopes that it would stop people from staring at her.

“Sans too lazy to get his own lunch again?”

“Uh. Aheh. It’s. Uh. C-complicated.” Alphys clasped her claws together, looking up at the two humans on the other side of the booth, before averting her eyes and shoving her claws back into her lap.

“So,” Danny said, either oblivious to or attempting to end the awkward atmosphere, “with the school year wrapped up, Brian had this idea that we’d enter the Battle of the Bands contest in July. And we were trying to convince Undyne to join us for the piano accompaniment.”

“Really??” Alphys looked up at Undyne, who shrugged.

“Still not really sold on it. It sounds like fun, yeah, but it also means a huge commitment to practicing with these two goobers on a regular basis for the next few months. Not sure if I’ll have the time to spare.”

“Point of order,” Brian raised one finger, “I am not a goober. The correct term is doofus. You can’t just throw around these kinds of terms interchangeably or everyone will just get confused… I can’t believe I just said that. I’ve been living in this town too long.”

The sign of the Dental Depot, shaped appropriately like a set of dentures or false teeth, rocked back and forth in the slight breeze outside of the building. The various children milling around outside the doorway looked at each other awkwardly, until Casey scratched her nose with one thumb.

“So, uh. Mary, Douglas? Do you know what’s going to happen to Frisk?”

“I’m not a dentist, so I don’t know what’s wrong. And unless Douglas has been holding out on me, I don’t think he’s a dentist either.” Mary frowned at the sign and then turned back to Casey. “So I’m guessing you guys don’t have dentists? Since you have magic and healing stuff.”

“Uh. No, we do. But like you said, we have magic. Humans are mostly water and do everything different, so, uh. Like.” Casey opened her mouth wide, revealing several rows of sharp teeth for a few moments and tapped one of them with her thumb. “If I broke a tooth, and it won’t regenerate on its own or with healing magic, a monster dentist would have to pull the whole thing out.”

“Oh. Yeah, for a long time human dentists did they same thing, then they started making false teeth and implants and fillings and stuff.”

Poncho and Casey stared at Mary as if she had suddenly begun to speak in a completely different language.

“Yo, uh, what were those words at the end again?”

Mary rolled her eyes and sighed.

“I am so sick of being Little Miss Exposition. Okay, if a human breaks a tooth or it gets worn down from chewing or acid or something, most dentists won’t pull the tooth if they don’t have to. What they do instead is take this tiny pneumatic drill and literally grind out all the soft parts of the tooth. Then they pour in some stuff to fill in the gap, make sure it’s the right shape for chewing, and that’s a
Poncho and Casey both had expressions of shock, disgust, and fear mixed in varying proportions, and Skate started to stall out.

“You mean some human is going to jam a power drill in Frisk’s face?!”

“No, it’s not like a big drill like a carpenter or somebody uses. It’s really tiny. And,” Mary added as a light bulb metaphorically turned on above her head, “it’s not just jammed in there all willy nilly. The dentist freezes you up first.”

“...what? Like, with ice, or liquid nitrogen, or…?”

“Not that kind of freeze. Drugs. First they smear this goopy stuff on your gums.” Mary held open her mouth with one hand and demonstrated. “Then they get this needle filled with something like Novacain or another chemical, and they stick it in there for like thirty seconds. Eventually the drugs spread through the jaw and it means all the nerves in that area go to sleep. You might be able to feel the vibrations, or the pressure from other stuff, but you don’t really feel pain. Or if you do, it’s really dull and muted. And by the time the drugs wear off, the tooth is filled and you’ve been at home for like forty minutes trying not to accidentally bite your cheek or tongue, since you can’t feel anything.”

The monsters children stared at Mary in stunned silence. It was Casey that finally spoke up.

“Oh man. I wish I was a human.”

“But that’s just it, if this, if we can figure out how to make Green Magic repeatable on an industrial scale for something like this, we can protect bananas from the same catastrophe happening again.”

“That would be something, but why simply stop there?” The deep voice of King Asgore rumbled calmly, and Alphys thought she could almost feel the vibrations through the metal structure that supported all the different booths, which was a thought that she immediately tried to suppress. “I routinely use Pattern Magic when I test for potential hybrid viability in the greenhouses. There is no reason that we cannot recreate the original Gross-Michel Banana.”

“Oh my God that would be the Holy Grail of botany and agriculture and crop science! Oh God I just yelled that in public.” Hannah clapped her hands over her mouth, pink spreading across her face. “This is very much not great.”

Alphys looked up abruptly as she sensed motion in the corner of one eye, to see the gem elemental holding a stack of pizza boxes.

“Oh my god I’m so sorry I got distracted and how long were you standing there-”

“Oh, I literally just got here a second ago.”

Slowly but surely, the room came into focus. There was a bright light, and beyond that, various tools and instruments recognizable as being related to the dental profession. Beyond even those tools and trappings, the walls were decorated with lassos and lariats, spurs, and paintings depicting cattle drives and scenic sunsets in a windswept desert land.

It took a few more moments for Frisk to realize they were lying back in a dentist’s chair.
Oh good, you’re finally awake again. Mom and Asriel are in the waiting room. The doc’s already done some looking and poking around and they’re waiting on the X rays to finish.’

The pain in their jaw still burned like a torch, and their hand froze as they tried to lift it up to touch their face.

‘Don’t even think about it. That’s what started all of this. I had to pretend to be you for half an hour after you clocked out. I’m pretty sure that Mary realizes what’s going on.’

Frisk’s eyes closed, the corners stinging even more than they had been with the throbbing pain in their jaw.

‘Frisk, I didn’t mean… oh, forget it. Let’s just get through this and go home.’

The dentist’s room was quiet for a few minutes, with only the sounds of muted conversation and occasionally the high pitched whine of a drill. Frisk’s eyes opened of their own accord when they heard footsteps, and they saw a young woman with hair pulled back in a ponytail, followed by an older man with an old style mustache that descended down to his chin, giving him the appearance of a walrus.

“Hmmph. Only one glowing red eye of doom. That’s gotta be a good sign.”

“Pain’s not as bad now. That’s why. Sorry, didn’t catch your names, I was really distracted earlier.”

“Yes, I could tell. My name is Craig Johnson, Doctor of Dentistry, and this is my brilliant and lovely assistant Emily who does all of the hard work around here.”

“Speaking of work,” Emily clipped some X-rays to a sort of box-shaped lamp and turned it on, lighting up photographs of the inside of Frisk’s mouth. “According to Mrs. Dreemurr, you normally see Dr. Biggby, but he’s at some conference in Salem so we can’t confer with him on this or get your records.”

“Eric Biggby is a good dentist, in spite of his obsession with fishing,” said the man with an office decorated within an inch of its life with Western themed doodads and knick-knacks, “and I know for a fact that he threw out the mercury amalgam fillings along with everyone else when the UV polymers came along. Which leaves us with a big old question mark. There’s an amalgam filling in your… yeah, you wouldn’t know the numbering scheme, but it’s in your left lower molar, the one just in front of the one in the back, and we have no idea how it got there. Which is kind of important considering that’s the tooth that’s hollering at you.”

“Uhm...” Frisk swallowed and winced as the change in air pressure inside their mouth actually made the pain flare up for a second, “before Mt. Ebott. I was taken to see. A dentist in Lone Point. I don’t remember who.”

“Where did your voice of the legion go?”

Frisk stared at the dental assistant, and the actual dentist, both looking slightly more confused than they already had been.

“Magic Puberty. There’s no rhyme or reason to it.”

The confused looks evaporated instantly.

“Well, I will leave magic to them what is inclined towards it, and stick with teeth and gums.” Dr.
Johnson pointed towards the filling on the X-rays. “No way to be sure but I’ll bet ten bucks that you used to go to Dr. Zeller. There was a big brouhaha with him a while back, but no sense getting into the details when all we want is to figure out that tooth. There doesn’t appear to be any sign of damage or decay, and the filling itself appears intact. I would say the tooth itself is infected but I don’t see how anything got inside there.”

“Doc. Uhm. Doctor Johnson. Uh, the toothache started. When I ate a real sweet bite of cake. But it didn’t get super bad, like it has been. Until I tried to use Healing Magic on it.”

“...say again?”

Frisk slowly raised one hand up so the dentist could see it, and green light started to glow around their fingers for a few seconds. “I’ve used it before, but this is the first time it’s ever backfired. I don’t know why. We know Green magic has limits, maybe this is one of them.”

The dentist ran his right index finger and thumb over his mustache, in what was clearly some sort of habit.

“Hmmmm. Tell you what. I don’t want to go in there with a drill until and unless we know what we’re looking at, and magic isn’t something that they ever covered in the dental academy. What do you say to opening up, and I’ll keep an eye on what happens when you do that again?”

“Uh. The last time I did that. It really, really hurt. I kinda don’t want things to hurt.”

“I can respect that, but doing it this way means it hurts less in the long run. Sort of like how a filling might hurt, but if you don’t get a filling, you have to have a root canal and those aren’t nearly as fun.”

Frisk sighed.

“I’ll try it. Once. And I better get all of the drugs after I do. The good stuff.”

“Hey, if I’m right about the tooth being infected, you’ll be getting some happy pills anyway.”

“Okay.” Frisk breathed in and out slowly a few times. “Okay. Let me know when you want me to do the thing.”

Asriel stared straight ahead, not seeing any of the decorative trappings of the dentist’s lobby, or hearing the chatter of the receptionists, or noticing any of the fixtures set aside in one corner to occupy the minds of children, or the old periodicals that were left available for older patients to read to pass the time.

He barely even felt Toriel’s paw on his back.

Frisk’s eyes were both glowing red. That meant Chara was in control. Which meant that Frisk was out of commission completely.

And it was his fault.

He was the one who offered to share the cake.

The fact that only Frisk seemed to be hurt by eating the cake, and that he had no way of knowing in advance what would happen, passed through his mind without registering. In fact, it barely registered
to Asriel that the door to the dentist’s office had opened, until he recognized the face and the voice heading straight in his direction.

“Azzy! Mrs. Dreemurr, Your Majesty. I am so sorry. I never, I absolutely did not intend for this to happen and I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Asriel felt Toriel’s paw instinctively grab his shoulder and pull him towards her as a protective gesture.

“Mr. Greene. I do not hold you responsible for what has-”

“Oh my god, he’s so FLUFFY!”

Asriel, Toriel, and Hal all turned to the doorway, where two other humans were standing.

“Asriel, Mrs. Dreemurr, meet my parents, Dave and Wily Greene.” Hal gestured towards the two figures, one of them staring at Toriel and the other at Asriel.

“Hi there,” one figure held out a hand and shook Toriel’s paw. “I saw your face in the paper plenty of times but sure didn’t expect to meet that face to face! David Greene, I’m Hal’s dad, I used to be the top mechanic and musical oddity in town until I passed that legacy on to my son here-”

Dave Greene was interrupted by the sounds of furniture being jostled as Asriel scrambled over them to get away from Wily Greene.

“Hal, what is she doing?!”

“Oh my god mom.” Hal reached out and grabbed his mother’s outstretched arms. “You can’t just pet everyone in this town who looks fuzzy! It’s called personal space! Even I know that!”

Asriel stood on the chair on the opposite side of Toriel, watching as Hal and Wily got into some sort of argument. Dave Greene grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry about that, kiddo. My wife has this thing where she gets an idea in her head, and she has to make it a reality.”

“Oh.” Asriel swallowed. “So that’s where Hal gets it.”

Dave chuckled. “Yup. So I understand that my son went and dragged you folks into some dental shenanigans-”

Before Mr. Greene could finish his sentence, the lights in the lobby abruptly went out, and beneath the receptionist desks could be heard the insistent beeping of a Battery Back Up switching on. For a few moments, the only movement or sound in the room was that of the receptionists trying to save their work and close out of their current software.

“...well, it is summer. Can’t have that many people running their air conditioners all at once and not have a brownout or two.”

Dave Greene’s commentary was cut short as a young woman with a ponytail poked her head into the lobby, then made her way over to a small closet behind the receptionist desk. A few seconds later, there was a loud mechanical noise, and the lights came back on.

“Or maybe it was just this office. Huh, that’s weird.”
Slices of pizza vanished in a swarm of arms the instant that the box was open, leaving one slice left for a distracted, bony hand to reach out and grab. Dr. Aster’s eye sockets remained fixed on his paperwork even as he raised a slice to his jaw and took a bite.

“...vegetarian?”

“Well, you said you didn’t like the meat lovers stuff.” Alphys sat down on the opposite side of the table, a slice of pizza in her own claws. “So I’m basically just going down the Stop And Go’s menu at this point. What are you working on?”

“Experimental metrics. After that near miss with the Asriel Amalgamate comparison tests, I’ve been rechecking my math. As it stands, Alex and Brendan are our only real way to confirm natural development of human magic through experimental and control group comparisons. Hal and Frisk were both exposed to Asriel’s Soul Energy Aggregate Link, and for all we know that left something behind in the human body that serves as an intermediary for magical power.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Alphys understood that Dr. Aster was deliberately omitting one particularly relevant fact about Frisk that could also have a lot of bearing on the child’s magical abilities, since there were a number of ears in the room that were not already aware of that piece of data. “So it comes down to either monster exposure or advanced technology. On the plus side, we wouldn’t have to worry about a bunch of anti monster bigots all getting magic all of a sudden. On the d-downside, we have to worry about people coming after Joe and his inventions even more than we already d-do.”

“Maybe.” Dr. Aster took another bite of pizza, then grumbled as a fragment of olive dropped onto his papers and left a tomato sauce stain. “Even if humans can naturally learn to use magic now that the Barrier is gone, we’ll still have people going after that thing, tempted by the quick and easy path. And that’s hardly a trait exclusive to humans, thinking about it some more.”

“I guess not. So, uh. Are you ready to start teaching humans about magic kindergarten?”

Dr. Aster snorted.

“That’s not what I’m needed for. Her Majesty is handling the main syllabus, and I get called in here and there to expand on specific subjects. Background magic field physics and the variable velocity photon mechanics, spectrum shifting effects, some of the intermediate difficulty Infusion processes. Actually I’m surprised you’re not going to be a more active part of the program yourself.”

Dr. Alphys laughed nervously, her mouth twisted into a smile that was more of a rictus.

“Hahahahaha no. I spend t-too much time as it is trying not to make an idiot out of myself in front of total strangers d-during the investor meetings. And if there are p-people I know then that just makes it worse.”

“...your anxiety notwithstanding, you are definitely a natural teacher. I’ve seen the way you get excited and summarize complex concepts into fundamentals. Don’t confuse being uncomfortable with something with being unsuited for it.”

“Dr. Aster used Flattery! It’s not very effective...”

The skeleton monster blinked. “Wait what?”

“Sorry. I was. Referencing a video game.”

“...okay then.”
The first thing Frisk did after walking into the lobby of the dentist’s office was wrap their arms around Asriel in a hug. One arm came up mechanically, stroking the monster child’s head over and over as he stammered and babbled fragmented apologies.

“Aaaasriel.”

The prince stopped speaking abruptly, and pulled away slightly, looking at Frisk’s dazed expression.

“Frisk? Are you okay?”

“The doc gave me the gooood drugs.” The human child seemed to be lisping slightly, and Asriel was vaguely aware that the dentist was talking to Toriel.

“The tooth was actually growing back all the mass lost from wear and tear and the original cavity and filling. Researchers have been trying to do that artificially for a while now but nothing suitable for public use, and I doubt it’ll ever work as fast. The pain was from the pressure building up because the space that the tooth was trying to grow into already had something there. That filling is now removed, and the tooth appears completely whole, like there was never anything wrong with it. Damnedest thing I’ve ever seen. Even weirder than the lightning coming out of the kid’s hands and throwing the main breaker, and that’s saying something.”

“I have a trophy.” Frisk held up a small plastic container with a fragment of metal inside it, resting on some sort of foam. “I won it in a contest of dental daring.”

Toriel blinked, and Dr. Johnson shrugged. “Frisk asked for the leftover filling and I figured why not. For the record, I have no idea why this particular tooth started growing back, but the two fillings on the other side didn’t. The only difference I can see is that this one is a metal filling but the others are epoxy resin. Anyway, I’ll write this up and send a copy to Dr. Biggby for Frisk’s records over there, with your permission.”

“Oh… of course. And please, let me know what the price is for services rendered.”

“I got that.” Hal rushed up to the receptionist desk. “Hit me with the bill, I have my checkbook right here.”

“That is absolutely not necessary, Mr. Greene-”

“Through a cake forged by my own hand, I have harmed the family of my friend! I must regain my honor, and it’s either this or committing Sudoku!”

“The power of math compels you.” Frisk waved their hands in the air, causing motes of magic to appear and fade away quickly.

“Oh, Mrs. Dreemurr. We had to freeze Frisk up pretty good, what with the whole filling getting pushed out. Topical gel, injections, nitrous oxide, the works. That’s why the kid’s so loopy, it’s called laughing gas for a reason. Everything should wear off in a few hours, just don’t let ‘em eat anything before the feeling comes back on that side of their mouth. That’s a good way to get the tongue or cheek all mangled without realizing it.”

Toriel blinked and looked down at Frisk, then up at the doctor, and finally turned to Hal Greene, her posture shifting into as much regal demeanor as she could possibly manage on such short notice.

“I will not ask anyone to pay for the consequences of a simple mistake, which no one could have
foreseen, and especially not for a gesture of friendship made in good faith. Thank you Mr. Greene, but your remuneration is unnecessary. However, if you will keep an eye on my children while I settle the financial details with Dr. Johnson and his peers, I will be most appreciative.”

“The power of fluffy boys fills me with determination,” Frisk mumbled, one arm still wrapped around Asriel. “Come on, come on, we gotta go.”

Hal followed the children outside, under the queen’s stern gaze, to find that Frisk and Asriel were now in the midst of a crowd of other children, all of whom were staring at Frisk as they hugged Asriel and mumbled incoherently.

“Fried potatoes. Chicken croquettes. Energon, the lifeblood of Primus!” One hand pointed into the sky as one of Frisk’s eyes glowed red. “Tonight we feast like Kings!”

“Oh, the red eyes of doom are back. What is up with those, anyway? I was wondering earlier but I didn’t think when you were in constant agony was the best time to pester you with questions.”

“My eyes go red because I am possessed by a zombie ghost.” Frisk stumbled as they turned to face Mary, their legs tangling up with Asriel’s legs and causing them both to fall over onto the sidewalk.

“I knew the instant I asked the question that you were too out of it to answer.” Mary crossed her arms and kicked at the pavement with one shoe. “I have only myself to blame.”
Oddly Specific

Asriel stared at his paws, hearing some of the sounds from inside the house but not understanding them.

Next to him sat a human in coveralls spotted with oil, grease, transmission fluid and other chemicals of an automotive nature, a pencil in one hand and some sort of number based puzzle in the other.

“...you’ve been quiet for a while, Azzy.”

“So have you.”

“Yeah. Concentrating on this Sudoku thing. Are you, uh... how are you holding up?”

“...I almost killed someone last week.”

Hal put the pencil inside the book of Sudoku puzzles as a bookmark, then placed the book on the step next to where he was sitting.

“Thomas O’Dell? He shot off Joe’s arm, threatened multiple other people, and tried to attack Papyrus. Magic or no magic, you gave him a love tap compared to what I would have done.”

“...everyone keeps saying that. Undyne. Alphys. Sans. Mom and Dad. Even Frisk and- and, everyone keeps saying it was justified. And I was actually getting to where I could believe it. But then this happens.”

“Uh. My dude. Accidental cake-induced toothaches with a side order of unexpected magical dentistry is nowhere near violence for the sake of protecting others. They are not even in the same zip code.”

Asriel held up one paw, looking at the pink paw pads on the inside of the palm and fingers and thumb.

“I have done… in the Underground. I hurt Frisk very badly. I did and said things I can never take back or make up for. And despite all that, they worked so hard to bring me back… and to thank them, I hurt them again.”

Hal brought his hands up, clasped his fingers together, and rested his chin on them.

“...I was the one that made the cake. So really, all the blame is on me. You didn’t want to hurt anyone, so Frisk getting hurt was just an accident of circumstances.”

Asriel shook his head. “Frisk is a human, not a monster. It doesn’t matter if I wanted them to get hurt or not. It doesn’t matter if I wanted it to happen or not. I made a decision. They got hurt. And it’s my fault.”

The young monster sniffed, and when he spoke again, his voice was rough and raspy, like he was trying to keep it from breaking.

“I was the worst thing that ever happened to them.”

Hal turned to look at Asriel for a few seconds, then turned back to face the street again.

“...after we lost Byron. I kept thinking back to what we did. If we made a mistake, tipping our hand
to the Sages. If we got careless. And I thought about the night it happened a lot. Trying to remember if there was some clue we missed. Something that would have tipped us off. But even with hindsight, I couldn’t think of anything that jumped out as a red flag.” Hal sighed. “But Byron and his wife and his kids were still gone. Nobody talks about it. But I know that we all still think about that. What we could have done differently. What we should have done differently. If the reason they’re all gone is because we… you know. Fucked up.”

Asriel looked over at Hal. “Hal, uhm. Is that why you and everyone else came to the school when Jordan Cater attacked it? Because you’d been in that place before?”

“It was certainly part of it. I already lost one friend, I was in no mood to lose any more. So it was like half and half between being protective and wanting revenge.”

“...did you know he had magic before you started fighting?”

“Yup. Joe filled us all in.”

Asriel turned to look at his paws again.

“I saw you try to punch him out.”

“Yeah, that part could have gone better.”

“Maybe so, but. It means a lot that you were willing to risk your life like that.”

Hal grinned at Asriel.

“My dude, I get into life threatening circumstances on a regular basis. Cater was just the next thing on the list. Not the first, and he won’t be the last.”

“...can you get into those kinds of situations less often in the future? I...” Asriel shrugged. “I, uh. I would like for you. Not to die.”

Hal turned to stare at the road again.

“Hey. Azzy. Just because Byron and everyone else in Shop Class… just because we were best friends for life, that doesn’t mean we didn’t hurt each other sometimes. Justin and I got in a lot of fistfights in school. And Eli almost choked Steve to death once, when he spilled Pepsi all over a portfolio Eli was putting together. To this day he bitches at us for not using a coaster.” Hal straightened up and picked the puzzle book up again. “Even the best of friends can fight. Even the best of friends can screw up. You know what I mean?”

“...yeah. I think I do.”

“You guys got here just in time, our special today is two dollar tacos until four!”

Mr. Brown stared at the flaming green waitress. “Uh. That sounds good to me. Two tacos, please.”

“Two tacos it is! And for you, sir?”

“...I think I’ll have a bowl of pork chili.”

“Just to be sure, do you want a bowl of chili by itself, or the pork chili dinner with rice and beans?”
“Just the chili, please.”

“Alright! Do either of you want your food cooked monster style, or would you prefer human style?”

Mr. Brown shrugged. “I… guess I will try monster style.”

“Just normal for me, thanks.”

“Okay then! Two monster style tacos, one human style bowl of pork chili coming up!”

The fire elemental headed back towards the kitchen, and Mr. Brown leaned forward toward his partner.

“This whole town freaked me out when we first came here, when all this was strange and unfamiliar to them too. Now everyone is just walking around, like this is business as usual, that makes it seem worse.”

Mr. Black grunted in agreement.

“…we’re going to need to find a way to record whatever goes on in that class. Any ideas?”

“Button cams and mics while we’re there. I’ll bet you anything they sweep the place for bugs regularly.”

“Yeah. Bait and switch? A big obvious bug they can find, a smaller one better hidden?”

“If they do find anything, we’re right at the top of the list when they want to blame.”

“That’s true-”

“Hey, the queen will let students record notes.”

Both Mr. Brown and Mr. Black froze, then turned to face a man working his way through a basket of chips and salsa.

“Who are you and how do you know that?”

“Kyle Zimmerman. I work at KEBT and earlier this week I recorded an interview with Mrs. Dreemurr about the classes she would be teaching.” Kyle pointed one finger towards the front of the restaurant. “You can use a laptop or tablet or phone with recording software, or just get an old school tape recorder and cassettes if you can find them. I think Wal-Mart still sells some? Probably best to get, like, a digital voice recorder instead, since you can copy that to your computer, mail it to a classmate that got sick, that kind of stuff.”

The flaming green waitress appeared with a tray of food, which was deposited in front of Kyle.

“Here’s your chimichanga, sorry about the wait!”

“No problem, thanks Roastie.”

Kyle immediately started in on his meal, and Mr. Black turned to Mr. Brown.

“So. You want to stop by Wal-Mart after this?”

“I know you mean that sarcastically, but yes. I do.”
Officer Steve stared at the man behind the bars.

The man stared back.

There were other figures within the lockup, ranging from vandals and drunks to those under suspicion or accusation of far more serious acts, but all of them were silent, watching and waiting.

“You haven’t even gone in front of a judge yet, O’Dell. And you’ve already got ink. What the hell, man?”

Thomas O’Dell stared back at Officer Steve for a few seconds before replying.

“Maybe you should ask Asriel Dreemurr.”

“I’m asking you.”

“And I gave you my answer.”

“...who were you talking to when the cameras were off?”

“Somebody with big words and empty promises. Shouldn’t you be asking how she got to talk to me and turn off the cameras?”

“...I don’t think you appreciate how much I’m doing for you right now. Not taking it personally, when you go after a friend, and work with a man who killed another friend.”

“If you have a conflict of interest, then that is your problem, officer.”

Officer Steve snorted, then started walking towards the security checkpoint.

“It took us a long time to get you part of the lockup by yourself, O’Dell. I hope for your sake nobody else gets arrested before your arraignment. Or that anyone else here has a good throwing arm.”

Asriel stared up at the bedroom ceiling.

After talking with Hal, after Frisk’s friends had left, Asgore had come by for dinner. Asriel remembered that his father had been appropriately disturbed by the tooth related misadventures Frisk and Chara had been pulled into. There had been discussion about what Saturday would bring, and who was responsible for what, and when.

Not all of it stuck in Asriel’s head; he was too busy waiting for Asgore or Toriel or Frisk or Chara to turn towards him with a disappointed or angry expression, asking him rhetorically what he was thinking.

Nobody did that, but he still expected it all through the meal, and after the meal was over when Toriel and Asgore discussed their plans.

And before Asgore left to go back to his house.

And after Asgore had left.

And finally, when it was time for bed, and Toriel was tucking her children in.
There were no disappointed looks. No angry remarks. Just the nagging expectation that there would be.

Asriel was so wrapped up in his own thoughts it took him a moment to recognize part of the bedroom was lit up by red light, and a figure was standing next to his bed.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

Asriel sighed.

“I haven’t been okay for a long time.”

“...can you scoot over?”

Asriel shifted in his bed, moving closer to the side nearest the wall, and Frisk climbed in next to him.

“...we probably need to have a conversation.”

Asriel nodded.

“Uhm. Yeah. I didn’t… want today to turn out like it did.”

“Neither did we. But it’s over. And I can’t stop running my tongue over that tooth now.”

“That actually might be me, Frisk. Sorry.”

“Oh-”

“I don’t want to hurt you anymore,” Asriel interrupted with a shaking voice.

“...did you know that the sugar in the cake would react with Frisk’s filling like a battery?”

“No,” Asriel admitted. “I didn’t even know that was something that could happen.”

“And did you know that healing magic would make the tooth regrow even with a filling in it?”

“No.”

“Then you didn’t choose to hurt us. It just happened while you were there.”

“...I could have said no. I should have said no.”

“But you didn’t know what was going to happen.”

“I mean. Before. Before everything. I should have said no to the plan. I should have said no to the pie.”

The bedroom was silent for a bit.

“Even if you had. I would have found some other way to ruin everything.”

“I could have stopped it. I could have dragged my feet, or just refused. You made the pie, but I helped bake it. It was… it was my magic that made it so the buttercups could hurt dad. And all the times you drank the buttercup juice and I knew and I said nothing and I let it happen and I’m sorry.”

Asriel’s voice broke on the last word, and his eyes squeezed shut.
The human lying next to him closed their eyes as well, cutting off the red glow.

“Asriel. If you had said no. Or if you had told mom and dad. I would have just found another way. And I would have hated you for not helping with my self-destruction.”

The bedroom was silent for a while, until there was a quiet whisper.

“I wish you did.”

Chara opened their eye and looked at Asriel, but the monster’s eyes were still squeezed shut.

“I let you suffer and die and I did nothing. I just let it happen. I would hate anyone who let that happen to you. So you should hate me. Everyone should. For what I did, and for what I didn’t do.”

The bedroom was silent for a while.

“Asriel… do you remember what you did at the end, the first time? With the six souls?”

Asriel nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“I don’t know about Chara, or if there’s a distinction when it comes to this. But I had a couple nightmares about that.”

Asriel nodded again.

“…I had a lot more nightmares about other things, though. Like… mom being afraid of me, or angry with me, and getting rid of me one way or another. Or being back in the house with my human parents.” Frisk sighed. “Or dreaming about you being okay, being back, and waking up and you weren’t. That happened a lot more often. And it was a lot worse.”

“Asriel, I got you killed and tried to turn you into a murderer, ruined mom and dad’s relationship, and almost started a war of extermination. If I had been condemned to spend eternity in a time loop being killed over and over by the friend I betrayed, you could easily make the argument that I had it coming.”

“…before the reset, I tried to kill my human dad because I was angry and frustrated. So. You know. We’re all really in the same boat here.”

The bedroom was silent again, until Asriel opened his eyes again.

“Frisk. Chara. What about. Two weeks ago. When I connected with Hal and his friends and turned into… that. Again.”

“…I don’t know what happened, unless it was some sort of panic attack.”

“Same here. I was so scared it didn’t even occur to me to try to take the wheel. Even after it was clear you were out of it.”

“I’m so sorry. All I could think of was that Cater would get away, and.”

“Asriel, don’t ever apologize to me for that. I killed myself to try to destroy that man.”

“I’m with Chara on this. He’s tried to kill me multiple times, caused a bunch of nightmares, and made me afraid of Fridays.”

“…I’m still sorry, though.”
Frisk’s left hand reached up and stroked Asriel’s ear.

“Asriel. Maybe I’m not… totally over what happened. In the Underground, or on the Surface.” Frisk shifted in the bed and their right hand grabbed one of Asriel’s paws. “But you’re still my brother. You’re still my best friend.”

“Same here.”

Asriel sniffed again, squeezing his eyes shut.

“...thank you.”
“I do not understand why you can keep your room clean for a year and a half and suddenly this place turns into a pig sty.” Toriel’s muzzle was wrinkled as though she was actually smelling some foul odor. “And saying that is an insult to pigs. Look at this. Clothing. Half eaten food. Tools. Piles of cardboard. That will attract insects and spiders!”

“I know-”

“Do not interrupt me!” Toriel started picking up random bits of debris. “Kitchen appliances, old toys, Dimensional Bridge components, how can you possibly live surrounded by all of this trash!”

“It’s not trash! It just needs a little work and-”

Toriel picked up a doll from the floor with a striped shirt, chaotic brown felt going every which way for hair, and one black button and one red button for eyes.

“And what about this, Frisk? It can’t even use Pattern Magic. What could you possibly do to fix that? What possible purpose could it serve?”

Frisk could not come up with a response, and just watched as Toriel carried everything out of the bedroom, heard her dump everything in a trash can. There was the sound of metal scraping, glass shattering, electronics shorting out-

Frisk’s eyes opened.

There was a hint of sunlight coming in through the windows, but it was enough to confirm that they were not at the Dank Memehaus. Next to them in the bed was a fluffy boss monster with long ears, one of them dangling over Asriel’s eyes like a built-in sleep mask.

He was snoring.

Snoring certainly beat crying, or whimpering, or in one terrifying instance that had brought Toriel running full tilt into the bedroom, screaming at some terrible thing that only he could see.

Frisk wrapped one arm around Asriel, pulled him closer, closed their eyes, and tried not to think about their dream.

Toriel’s eyes opened, and she stared at the ceiling in her bedroom for a few seconds.

Outside the bedroom, there were only the ordinary noises of a town slowly starting its day.

Toriel climbed out of the bed, pulled on her bathrobe, and opened the bedroom door. Stepping as softly as she could, she walked down the hallway, paused outside of the children’s bedroom, and slowly opened the door.

Frisk’s bed was empty, and Asriel’s bed featured two children as a consequence. As was so often the case, Asriel’s ears flopped over Frisk’s head, leaving a white stripe against the dirty brown. For a few moments, Toriel just stood outside the doorway, watching the two children sleep, before closing
the door as quietly as she had opened it. Walking downstairs, plans for the day filled her mind, followed by plans for breakfast.

Inside the fridge, a carton of eggs drew Toriel’s gaze, along with a number of other items. Turning away to check the clock and performing some rapid calculations in her head, the queen pulled out the eggs, along with some butter. From the freezer section, Toriel removed a bag of shredded potatoes, and from a cabinet she pulled out a cylindrical cardboard container filled with oats.

With a mix of efficiency that came from ages of experience, and an artistry that came from a true passion for cooking, Toriel placed a skillet and saucepan upon the stove. The saucepan was filled with oats, water, and a measuring spoon’s worth of salt, before the queen snapped her fingers and a pair of fireball formed. Each one floated down beneath a burner, and Toriel added a generous amount of butter to the skillet. A second saucepan was filled with water, and Toriel left it above a third fireball while she opened the bag of shredded potatoes.

In between stirring spices into the oatmeal, Toriel removed some eggs, separated the egg whites and yolks from some of them, and began to beat the yolks. Some of the melted butter was poured into another bowl, and the remaining butter was then covered with shredded potatoes. The water in one saucepan was set spinning with a spoon, and then an egg was carefully cracked into the water. To the bowl of beaten egg yolks, Toriel slowly added the melted butter while whisking; after the entire mixture had come together into a sauce, Toriel put it down and removed the poached egg with a spoon. Another egg was broken into the water, and Toriel hummed as she turned over the potatoes with a spatula.

Before long, oatmeal, hash browns, and poached eggs with sauce were ready for the children’s arrival. Toriel looked at the clock, turned to the oven to remove the fireballs, then turned back to face the clock with a frown. The moment she stepped out of the kitchen, she heard the rattling of a door latch. A few seconds later, two children in striped shirts appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Hey mom.”

Toriel stared up at tired faces, heard Frisk’s raspy voice, and understood.

“Good morning, my children. Breakfast is ready.”

“Thanks mom.”

The two children slowly shuffled down the stairs and into the kitchen. Bowls and plates were already in front of three chairs, and Toriel sat down behind one as Frisk and Asriel did the same.

“...this is really good.”

“Thank you, Frisk. I did not have the ingredients for traditional Eggs Benedict or Florentine, but the essential details were easy enough. And it is important for both of y-” Toriel stopped abruptly. “I mean. It is important for all three of you to start of today on a good footing.”

Frisk nodded, still making their way through the food. Their eyes remained free of any red glow, indicating that Chara didn’t feel like adding anything to the conversation.

“How long is the class supposed to be?”

“One hour is planned, with the possibility of up to two hours, depending on how quickly we can manage the fundamentals,” Toriel replied in automatic Teacher Voice. “We are attempting to accommodate a number of different schedules, so some subjects will be addressed multiple times.”
“Okay.” Asriel nodded. “After the class is over, can we stop by the Librarby?”

“I was actually planning on doing exactly that. If you are to join Frisk’s class this upcoming year, there are some subjects that you must, ah, spam, I believe is the correct term.”

“Close enough.”

The kitchen was filled with the sounds of eating and drinking, and Toriel drained her cup of coffee.

“...Frisk, is there anything you wish to discuss, before we head to All Fine Labs?”

Frisk stared at Toriel for some time, long enough for some egg to completely slide off of their fork.

“...nothing really serious. I do need to clean up the bedroom when we get back so I can tackle the. The uh. The magic school stuff without distractions, but I can do that by myself. Thank you for asking though.”

“Well, do let me know if you do have anything you want to talk about. Chara, what about you?”

“I’m fine.”

Toriel blinked, then turned to Asriel. “My son, do you have anything you would like to get out of the way?”

“...there’s some stuff I want to talk about, but we don’t have the time this morning. I’ll take a rain check.”

“Of course. Please let me know when you feel ready to discuss matters.” Toriel smiled and finished her coffee.

“Well. I guess we should have expected this.”

Asriel didn’t respond to Frisk’s commentary. The crowd in front of the lab occupied all of his attention. Granted, there was often a crowd of protesters in front of All Fine Labs, but this particular crowd was… different. Fewer signs and angry slogans being chanted should have been a good sign.

“There she is!”

“Mrs. Dreemurr! Your Majesty!”

“Just a few questions please!”

“Are you worried about the political fallout from human magic use?”

“Are there concerns in the monster community about the creation of another Barrier?”

“Why are there so few scholarship slots available? Doesn’t this create a form of artificial scarcity?”

“Oh no. Not again~” Frisk groaned; the child’s words were rapidly drowned out by the incoming crowd of reporters, whose questions could barely be heard over each other.

“Is it safe to teach children how to use magic?”

“Why have you agreed to teach Hal Greene how to use magic?”
“Have you been teaching the Ambassador in secret all this time?”

“Did Dr. Gaster perjure himself before congress when he claimed that?”

“Will you be adding magical education to your school-”

“What about the technology built by Josef Stanton-”

The endless questions were suddenly overwhelmed by an even greater cacophony. The reporters turned almost as one, and some of them moved out of the way as the source of the noise came even closer; Hal Greene walking out of the All Fine Labs building, carrying a tuba, playing a jaunty tune. Or at least, as jaunty as a tune could be when played on a tuba.

Asriel saw the mechanic twitch his head towards the door, as much as he could without taking his mouth off of the mouthpiece, and understood. One paw grabbed Frisk’s hand, the other Toriel’s paw, and the trio made their way as quickly as they could towards the Lab entrance, almost stumbling inside the building as the doors opened.

“Well, that’s one way to handle crowd control,” somebody said, and Asriel looked up to see a man in a security uniform looking out through the glass.

“Told you. Hal is the personification of Fog of War.” Asriel recognized the second voice as belonging to Justin.

“Wonder what he could have done in the service.”

“I’m pretty sure introducing Hal to enemy combatants constitutes a war crime.”

Toriel and Frisk had walked up to the receptionist desk while Asriel was listening, and the monster followed them, holding up his badge. A human scanned him in while a bunny monster started printing out badges for Frisk and Toriel. Behind him, he heard the door open again, and the tuba made one last musical encore before Hal spoke up.

“How you guys holding up?”

“Quite well. Thank you for your timely interruption, Mr. Greene.”

“Consider it part of my honor debt for Frisk’s dental misadventures.” Hal walked up to the receptionist desk, dropped the tuba on the surface, and held up his own ID to be scanned.

“Your Majesty! Good to see you survived the media blockade.” Asriel turned to see Dr. Aster approaching, clipboard in hand. “Asriel, are you ready?”

“One moment, Dr. Aster.” Toriel got down on one knee and hugged Asriel, smoothing over the tuft of fur on top of his head with one paw. “We will see you right after class, Asriel.”

“Uh, mom. People are staring.” Behind Asriel’s fur, it was possible to see a pink glow on his cheeks.

“Let them stare.” Nevertheless, Toriel let her son go and stood up, and Frisk waved as they followed Toriel down one hallway.

“…don’t feel bad about being embarrassed. It’s a parent’s job to embarrass their offspring. Can’t tell you how many times Semi pulled the rug out from under my social life in school.” Dr. Aster shrugged. “Anyway, the sooner we start, the sooner we’re done.”

“Yeah… that’s true.”
Frisk looked around the makeshift classroom with open curiosity. The room was still unfinished in sections, and several of the overhead lights were not functioning properly, but it had marker boards and an overhead projector and various long tables to function as desks, which many, many humans were already sitting behind. Frisk recognized a few faces immediately, like Officer Steve, Douglas, and Jessie. Others were more generally familiar, like some of the All Fine Labs staff, or completely new.

Hal rushed into the classroom behind them, prompting Frisk to find an available seat. After a few seconds deliberation, they headed towards an empty chair next to somebody who clearly worked at All Fine Labs, if the lab coat and All Fine Labs ID Badge was anything to go by.

“Welcome, everyone, to the first class at the all Fine Labs Educational Annex. My name is Toriel, but you may refer to me as Mrs. Dreemurr if you prefer to do so.”

While Toriel was writing her name on the marker board, Frisk shrugged off their backpack, placed it on the table, and pulled out a spiral notebook and a pencil. Opening it up, Frisk looked around. The man in the lab coat (Alex Carson, according to the ID badge) was taking notes on a clipboard, while the child could also see legal tablets, three ring binders, digital recorders, and at least one laptop.

“I would like to welcome you all to the first class of Magic Fundamentals. Before we actually begin, I would like to go around the classroom, to learn everyone’s names and also if everyone would explain a little about what they do and why they are here.”

There were a few confused whispers and muttered responses, but before Toriel could do more than raise an eyebrow, there was a ruckus from the row behind Frisk.

“Ooh! I’ll go first! I’ll go first! I’m Hal Greene, I’m the best mechanic in town, and I want to know how to use magic so I can combine it with music theory! I’m going to go around town accompanied by my own theme song!”

The classroom was silent in response to Hal’s revelation, until a uniformed figure coughed.

“I’m Officer Steven Ward of the Ebott’s Wake Police Department, and I’m here to learn magic because somebody has to be able to stop Hal from doing whatever the heck that was.”

“You are such a buzzkill. Your name is now Steven Buzzkill Ward, Esquire. The Third. PhD.”

The tone of the classroom seemed to relax slightly, and slowly the pace picked up as student after student volunteered their names and goals.

“My name is Greg Cole, and I want to learn how to use Blue Magic so I can make hilarious pictures of me doing stuff that I can put on the internet as a form of entertainment.”

“I’m Jessie Donaldson. I want to make my eyes glow so I can read under the covers at night without using a flashlight.”

“I’m Douglas Carmichael, I’m here because my mom signed me up.”

“My name is Tim Rathburne. I want to be the very best, like no one ever was.”

“My name is… John Brown. I want to, uh. Learn how to make gold. If that’s an option.”

“My name is, uh. John Black. I would like to learn how to fly.”
“I’m Cori Rosewater, I want to learn how to use healing magic because Caduceus literally saved my life and I want to pay that forward.”

“My name is Frisk Dreemurr. I would like to understand the science behind magic.”

“I’m Alex Carson, I work here at the lab and I am here as half of an experiment. So kind of the same thing as Frisk.”

“My name is Devin Dugan, and I wish to learn the magical arts so that I may once and for all give my brother his long overdue comeuppance!”

“John Skye here, I’m a nurse at Rita Belle Thurman and I want to be ready once magical healing has been approved as a form of medical treatment in the United States.”

“Jeremiah Harrison be mah name, and by goshen I want to learn me some magic so I ken show everybody that durned thing in mah closet when I was a youngin was real!”

“I’m Bradley Parsons from BrenCorp Investments and I think I’m in the wrong part of the building, to be honest.”

“My name is Danielle Cobb and I want to go around shooting beams of light and saying ‘Pew pew!’ all the time.”

“My name is Liam Bacon. I want to fly, like the government agent guy said.”

“I’m Shannon McMasters, I want to know how to make monster food!”

“I’m Zeke Walton. I, uh. I also want to learn how to make monster food.”

“Excellent.” Toriel clapped her paws together and smiled. “I do not know that all of you will achieve your stated goals, but I will do my part to make certain that, if you are diligent in studying and practice, you will learn something that will make this class worthwhile. Now… let us begin.”

Toriel turned so that she was half facing the board, and half facing the rest of the room, in a traditional teaching stance. One arm reached up and she began to write.

“The most fundamental rule of magic is simply this. It is a function of will and intent. It responds not only to the impulses of the moment, but reflects your nature and personality.”

Toriel finished writing WILL AND INTENT on the board and underlined it.

“Magic for monsters is as natural as breathing, and monsters learn to control it as they grow, in much the same way that they learn to communicate, walk, swim, or fly. Which raises an interesting obstacle for teaching humans, under the circumstances. Fortunately, we have devised what I hope will be an effective curriculum to introduce you to the basic principles of magic use. This will consist of a mix of magic theory and practical training exercises. Now, get out your writing utensils, or double check that your recording devices are operating. This will all be on the final exam.”

Asriel squeezed his eyes shut, but the purple light still managed to get to him. Several more flashes followed, and the whine of the equipment shut off.

“Okay, you’re done Asriel.”

The boss monster opened his eyes and stepped out of the targeting box. A goopy, melty figure
slithered over, leaving a trail of slime that followed the larger figure and rejoined its body after a few seconds.

“Scanning, and… hold still.”

The figure of Lemon Bread grumbled in eight part harmony but managed to limit the amount of rippling and quivering while some sort of arm with cameras attached lowered from the ceiling and rotated around them. Asriel saw two coils of wire glowing with purple light, and saw as shapes appeared and disappeared on what, for lack of a more precise term, was called Lemon Bread’s skin. After a few seconds, the device stopped.

“You’re good, Lemon Bread.” Dr. Aster looked at the monitor, scribbled some notes onto a clipboard.

“Find anything?”

“We just did the scan less than a minute ago, Asriel.” Dr. Aster tapped the clipboard with a pen. “It’ll take us a while just to analyze the data, and we have to analyze it before we can use it.”

“Oh… didn’t you say you needed samples of something?”

“Yeah, we decided against it, for safety reasons. Obvious in hindsight. Non-invasive scanning for the foreseeable future.”

“Okay.”

“…I need some white noise to focus. Can you do me a solid and turn on that radio?”

“Sure.” Asriel walked over to the table that Dr. Aster was pointing at and turned on the volume knob, wheeling it up until the sound of voices could be heard.

“…so if there is anyone out there listening who has a hankering for hash browns made with tequila, I guess you’re out of luck. Moving on to our next item, the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals have once again made their way to Lost Eagle County, this time holding a massive protest outside of the Build-A-Bear Workshop in Quarterhorse Fields. Listeners may remember the last time the PETA organization made their presence known in this county, when they came to Ebott’s Wake last year and protested… everything in general, I guess? A representative of the Tailings Pond Mall, where the Build-A-Bear Workshop is located, states that they have contacted law enforcement and emergency services in the event of vandalism or assault.”

“Brett, I have a question.”

“You and me both, but go ahead.”

“What exactly is a Build-A-Bear Workshop?”

“Oh. It’s a toy store dedicated to stuffed animals where kids can actually customize a number of details.”

“I see. Brett, I have a follow up question.”

“I knew you were going to say that.”

“Why is PETA complaining about the Build-A-Bear Workshop?”

“There’s a statement, if you can call it that, right here… Uh… The People for the Ethical Treatment
of Animals object to any industry that would indoctrinate children into thinking that animals exist purely to serve them.”

There was a longer than normal span of dead air over the radio, until there was a sound like a cat monster coughing.

“Brett, uh. I have one more-”

“Hit me, Burgie.”

“The people in PETA, they do realize that stuffed animals are not… you know… actual animals, right?”

“Given the events of this morning, that is open for debate. Now for some local news, the talk of the town and a sizable part of the whole country, today is the first day of the All Fine Labs Educational Annex being open for business. The Annex has been under construction for the past week in response to the revelations that humans can, in fact, still use magic; the facility is currently serving as a sort of crash course in magical theory and basic concepts. Dr. Alphys went on record saying that this would eventually be the foundation of a post-secondary educational facility built not only for human education, but as a replacement for Home University and New Home University in providing advanced education to monsters.”

“Oh good. Maybe soon I can get the last two credit hours I needed for my degree in Human Cultures.”

“A degree in what now?”

“Yeah, we had a whole thing where we tried to analyze human culture by the stuff in the garbage dump.”

“Is that… something that is particularly useful at this time and place?”

“Well, it’ll give me something to put on my wall to impress visitors.”

Asriel heard Dr. Aster snort in muffled laughter. “That’s not how it works...”

“Well, good luck to you then, Burgie. And good luck to all of our aspiring… Burgie, is there a specific word that applies to humans using magic? All I have to draw on are pop culture and literature examples. So like, wizard? Witch? Warlock? Mage, Magus, Magician?”

“Thaumaturge.”

“...what?”

“It was the first thing that popped in my head alright?!”

“...it doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue… what? ...Okay then! Hey everyone, according to Jeff, the closest pop cultural or literary term that applies is actually Sorcerer. So yeah. Good luck to all of our aspiring sorcerers at All Fine Labs today. Burgie do you want to tackle this next story?”

“Don’t mind if I do. The Ebott’s Wake City Council voted unanimously last night to approve a bond issue to expand the roadside ditches in the southern half of the township, citing multiple flooded roads that contribute to the water-logged gridlock the city as a whole faces during heavy storms. This follows the abrupt end to a storm sewer expansion project on the basis that it would undermine the foundations of several registered historical buildings in Ebott’s Wake.”
“And on that note, we need to pause for station identification, but we’ll be back in a minute with more Morning Rush and, if the phone gods are smiling on us, some call-ins from listeners! Stick around!”

Chapter End Notes

This was a bit of a long walk, but I had a couple of other projects requiring time and attention at the same time. Also another story I hope to have finished on the 25th, for thematic reasons.

Special thanks to everyone in the Fanfic Paradise Discord for their suggestions for reasons people in town would give for wanting to learn magic. They were so good I had to increase the size of the class by six people just to use them all. :D
The Three Laws of Magic

First Law: The Law of Incidence. The end result of magic is a function of the Will and Intent of those who use it. Its effects on the world, and on others, mirror the thoughts and emotions and desires behind their manifestation.

Corollary to the First Law: Conflicting emotional states produce unstable magical effects, reducing both control and effectiveness of the resulting magic.

Second Law: The Law of Reflection. The manifestation of magic in the world is an expression of the thoughts and personality of those creating the manifestation. This includes the shape of magic bullets, and the patterns that they make.

Third Law: The Law of Congruence. The physical properties of magical energy are analogous to electromagnetic radiation in general, and visible light in particular. Magic energy can be focused, diffused, refracted, polarized, and reflected.

The Magic Spectrum

Magical energy is organized in a system defined by seven colors, with each color corresponding to a specific set of properties. These properties in turn define the applications of that band of the magic spectrum.

Red: Communication. Magic used to transfer information over difference in space (analogous to technological telecommunication) and time (as in the preservation of records) and even between minds without the use of intermediary forms of language.

Orange: Force. Magic applied to the physical properties of objects in motion, whether laterally, through axial rotation, or reciprocating.

Yellow: Energy. Magic pertaining to differences in physical energy potentials, including but not limited to temperature, electrical charge, radioactive decay, and acoustic vibration.

Green: Healing. Magic utilized in the recovery from injuries, the improvement of personal attributes, and the protection of the body through defensive shields.

Cyan: Wave. Magic applied to the physical properties of objects not in motion, relative to their surroundings.

Blue: Dimension. Magic that is applied specifically towards the augmenting of momentum and the velocity of physical matter.

Magenta: Pattern. Magic that follows the physical and energetic relationships between different phenomena, especially when used for analysis and study.

The Elemental System

To facilitate the categorization of matter and phenomena before a rigorous scientific understanding
of physics and chemistry was developed, monsters codified a system of elements. This system was derived from the properties of different forms of otherwise inert matter when subjected to magic energy. This system is now more cultural than practical but remains in common use due to its convenience as a training and educational tool. Humans may or may not develop their own, different elemental system in the future; for now, the five element system used by monsters will be used.

Important Point: Magical Elemental Attacks are not always constrained by the properties of their non-magical counterparts. A water elemental bullet can run uphill, a fire elemental attack can survive without consuming oxygen or fuel, magical ice can exist in high temperature environments for prolonged spans of time with no sign of melting, and so on.

Air and Wind: Elemental attributes defined by difference in air pressure and the apparent suspension of particles or vapors in the atmosphere.

Lightning and Electricity: Elemental attributes defined by difference in electrical potential, and the bright discharges typified by thunderstorms.

Water and Ice: Elemental attributes defined by fluid media, a decrease in temperature, and preserving the properties of matter.

Fire and Heat: Elemental attributes defined by increased temperature, dynamic shape in the form of flames, and transformational properties of matter.

Earth and Stone: Elemental attributes defined by stone, soil, sand, clay, and other mineral compounds.

Magical Application

Monsters currently classify all uses of magic into three broad groups; Combat Magic, Recovery Magic, and Utility Magic. These groups are more for convenience of reference than actual limitations on their actions or effects.

Combat: Magic that is used in a confrontation or altercation, including formalized ritual combat. This very clearly involves the creation of bullets and patterns with hostile intent to harm, but also includes the strategy and tactical framework behind their use.

Recovery: Magic that improves or protects something or someone. Healing magic is obviously included for its innate restorative properties, but the use of magic to supplement existing attributes also qualifies.

Utility: Magic applied towards the solving of practical and technical issues. By far the widest category of magic, it includes everything from travel and locomotion to food preparation to the creation of magical tools and materials through Enchantment and Infusion.

Glossary of Terms

Bullet: A distinct potential of magical energy that occupies a specific volume of space, with a specific shape corresponding to the desires of the mind that produced it.

Bullet Pattern: The trajectory of one or more bullets once they leave their creator.

Cast: The act of releasing controlled magical energy into the environment. Alternative terms include attack (which has connotations that imply combat or aggression even when there is none present) and spell (which is associated with an incomplete understanding of magic in human media).
Frisk’s eyes slid over the papers they had been scribbling on, torn between boredom at rehashing fundamentals they already knew and concerns about missing something they hadn’t noticed before. Looking up and around, they saw most of the other humans in the room continuing to take notes. Including the man who claimed to just be an investor or representative for an investor group.

“As you can see, seven colors multiplied by five elements gives a bare minimum of thirty five possible combinations of phenomena even without accounting for individual preference in bullet shape and pattern.” Toriel traced one fuzzy finger next to the marker board. “Of course, before you can be expected to perform tasks such as infusion and enchantment, you must demonstrate the ability to marshal these forces yourself. To that end, we will begin with exercises intended to bridge the gap between the physical and the energetic.”

The marker was capped and dropped in its tray, and Toriel held up her paws. One was held palm pointing up, pointing in one direction, and the other palm side down above the first, in the opposite direction.

“This is a very simple exercise that monsters are taught to use at an early age. It is not yet clear exactly how effective it will be for humans, although it certainly is useful in some scenarios. Concentrate on the space in between your hands. You may close your eyes or keep them open, whichever is more helpful. Visualize a current, a potential difference, a connection between your hands. Most important of all. Do not be discouraged by a lack of observable activity between them. Humanity has not been exposed to magic for ages and you will not know precisely what it feels like right away. This is what these exercises are intended to do.”

Frisk took a deep breath, held up their hands in the appropriate positions, and closed their eyes as much to block out any outside reactions as to aid in focus. Judging from the way the ambient noise in the classroom changed, more than a few students had noticed what they were doing.

“Everyone’s progress will be different. This is true for monsters as well, and has always been so. Do not use the progress of anyone else as any foundation for comparison,” Toriel commented.

There was a high pitched giggle behind Frisk, and the level of background conversation suddenly jumped above the whispering level. Frisk opened their eyes and turned to see Hal Greene, grinning and staring at the sparks of orange light trying to bridge the gap between his palms.

The mechanic looked up at the people staring at him, his expression unwavering.

“The journey of a thousand theme songs starts with a single step.”

Frisk held up their left hand in a thumbs up, nodding in approval. The red light they had gathered together continued to shift and warp above their right hand, until they turned around and faced the front of the classroom again.

‘He doesn’t really need the confidence boost, I don’t think.’

Frisk shrugged, rotated their hands to be level with each other, and concentrated on marshaling the magic energy into a recognizable shape.
“Mr. Cater.”

The man in the middle of the room did not respond to his name, and the newcomer slowly sat down on the other side of the table.

“Mr. Cater. I am your court appointed attorney. Oliver Abbot.”

No response, but sitting closer to the man, Mr. Abbot was able to see more than he had from outside the holding cell. Jordan Cater’s eyes were focused on something only he could see.

“I don’t mean to be unduly pessimistic Mr. Cater, but under the circumstances our options are limited. We are looking at a substantial list of charges, the most serious of which are multiple counts of attempted murder. The fact that several of these attempts involve children is extremely volatile both legally and socially. It is my professional legal opinion that while we can push for a change of venue on the grounds that there will be no unbiased jurors in Lost Eagle County, the media attention surrounding the events of the past month makes it effectively impossible to find unbiased jurors anywhere. And while it might be possible to contest the attempted murder of monsters under the law as currently written, the attempted murder of human beings has no such obstacles. If we tried that, I could see them dropping the former to be sure of pursuing the latter.”

Mr. Abbot pulled a paper out of his briefcase and inverted it so that Cater could see it right side up.

“The upside, such as it is, lies in the fact that there are no charges of actual murder. Aggravated murder being the only crime in the state of Oregon where capital punishment can be invoked, there is no chance of the prosecution seeking the death penalty.”

Cater did not respond in any noticeable way, and Mr. Abbot returned the paper to his briefcase.

“Mr. Cater… are you alright?”

The man made neither sound nor movement.

“Mr. Cater, I am here because you are entitled to legal counsel. Not out of any particular preference or distaste for your ideological position. If we cannot formulate a legal strategy now, then my words are waste effort and I should return at a later time.”

For the first time since Abbot walked into the holding cell, Cater moved, staring right at the public defender with dead, empty eyes.

“Why are you here?”

“…I thought I explained that. I am your court appointed legal counsel for-”

“I thought I knew why I was here.”

Cater’s response was not loud, but something about his voice completely derailed Abbot’s train of thought.

“I was here… to protect people. To defeat the enemy. To save the world. And I. Was. Right. About so many other things. The monsters. The machine in the volcano. The return of magic. The child, protecting them all. How could I be right in every other case but this one, and this alone?”

The cell was silent, and the lawyer cleared his throat.
I don’t particularly recommend any attempt to claim that you are not competent to stand trial, Mr. Cater. If that’s what you’re trying to lay a foundation for.”

“My daughter is gone, Mr. Abbot. There is nothing any mortal man can do to harm me more than what has already taken place.”

“...I guess we’re done here, then. At least for now.” Mr. Abott collected his papers in his briefcase, walked over to the door, and rapped on it. A few moments later, the door opened and the uniforms of guards could be seen beyond.

Mr. Abbot left. The door slammed shut behind him.

Jordan Cater was lone with his thoughts once again.

Tweezers rotated in the purple light, with a single white hair trapped between the metal, suspended in the beam. There was the dull, mechanical noise as a relay switched, and the purple light was replaced with yellow.

Asriel stared at the image of a skeleton, wearing thick goggles over his eye sockets, peering closely at the hair through a series of magnifying lenses, occasionally moving one into position or removing another.

Dr. Aster huffed through his teeth, causing the hair to flicker in the motion of air… somehow.

“Alright, sooo… framework is intact for an extruded material residue sample. I doubt we’d get any different results from the others, or any differences from your parents for that matter.”

Asriel turned to look at the hairbrush he had been presented with, still filled with loose fur, sealed in a plastic bag with a complex series of numbers and letters on the label.

“Does that mean it’s a dead end, or is there another step?”

“Little bit of both.” Dr. Aster turned away from the tweezers and pulled off the goggles protecting his eye lights. “The fact that there’s no obvious differences in morphology based on this sample immediately means whatever process caused your body to regenerate is functionally identical to how monster bodies normally form. At least, to the limits of the precision of our instruments here.”

“...when Frisk is done with mom’s class, can you repeat that to them so they can translate for me?”

Dr. Aster snorted and managed to smother a laugh before it got too far along.

“Okay, okay, fair’s fair. I’ll step back a bit. These lights help study the shape of the fur after it leaves the body and doesn’t rely on magic to hold its shape anymore. What I was looking for was anything… different. Out of the ordinary. Something that definitely set you apart from other monsters.”

“And once you found that, you could figure out what it was, and use it to help Chara.”

“Precisely.”

“...so, if that plan didn’t work, what’s next.”

“Well,” Dr. Aster held up his hands. “I wouldn’t say it didn’t work. It just hasn’t worked yet.”
“There’s a difference?”

“Actually yes. So… okay. Object lesson time. Roughly a hundred years ago, human years, not monster years, there were some experiments that human scientists were performing in order to study and account for the properties of light. They postulated the existence of a medium that could account for the waves of light in a physical vacuum:”

“The ether, right.”

“Exactly. So, two human scientists set up some experiments in order to detect something they expected to find that would prove the existence of the ether. Ether drift, they called it.”

“Wait, what?”

“The idea was that as the earth moved through space, some of the ether would be carried along with it and some would not, and differences between the two would create distortions. Hence the term ether drift.”

“Oh, Right! They can’t fly! I mean. They can make machines that fly, but they’re always using rockets or propellers or something. Like the radio traffic helicopter.”

Dr. Aster grinned and the pen flew back into his pocket.

“And there you have it. They have extensive systems designed to measure gravity, trying to detect gravity waves in space, but no consensus on a theoretical framework to engineer it directly. And so far it doesn’t seem like anyone has managed to trial and error their way into something that can be...
refined into a theoretical basis. And I think it can all be traced back to that one experiment. They were looking for something and they were on the right track, but they didn’t recognize it when they found it because it didn’t look like what they expected it to look like.”

Dr. Aster pointed at the lights, still shining on one of Asriel’s hairs in the tweezers.

“That’s what I’m trying not to do here.”

“...okay. So... like I said before. What’s next?”

“Well... I have a few more ideas of scans to run on this sample. If those don’t pan out, we’ll have to move on to other stuff. The ichor thing is what concerns me the most. We need something that’s a part of you and alive, but also something that’s apart from you, which means it’s no longer influenced by your Soul, and—”

Dr. Aster stopped talking as he heard a grunt of pain, and saw a white furry fist hold a tuft of hair in front of his face.

“It’s not the same as fur that just gets shed on its own, is it?”

Dr. Aster blinked his sockets, then immediately grabbed a set of tweezers from the rack of equipment on the table he was leaning against. One hair was separated from the rest and he carried it over to the lights.

“For the record, you just threw about eighteen different conditions for experimental rigor and scientific ethics right out the window.”

“Science now, lecture later.”

Dr. Aster snickered again as he replaced the tweezers and their samples.

There was a beeping sound, and a hydraulically driven door slowly opened. Two men in uniforms stood on the other side, aiming rifles at the people who had opened the door.

“Verify,” one guard said.

The second one nodded and lowered his rifle, holding up some sort of electronic device. Slowly, each of the three people that had opened the door held out their hand, and in each case, the device flashed a green light.

“Clear, sir.”

“Understood.” The first guard lowered his rifle. “Welcome back, ma’am.”

The woman nodded without sign of annoyance or concern, walking into the chamber with her two companions. Around the perimeter of the chamber, several other guards in defensive positions relaxed slightly and resumed standing watch as the woman walked towards the center. Men and women in camo-patterned fatigues, white lab coats, and heavy duty safety gear were building...

Something.

Arc welders buzzed and sprayed sparks. Impact wrenches whined as bolts were tightened. Micrometers were held up against the completed structure, then compared to tables of measurements.
“How long?”

“How long?”

“Four days. Five or six if there are any more problems with the welding equipment.” The man behind the woman spoke up immediately. “With respect, ma’am, you didn’t need to come down here to learn that.”

“No.” The woman sighed. “I guess I didn’t. I just needed to see that it was real.”

Next to the man, a younger woman coughed. “We are having some people upstairs ask some pointed questions about funding. Those who don’t know want to know where the money is going. Those who do, want to know what they’re paying for.”

“Of course they do.” The older woman shrugged. “I’ll go up and talk to them after this. See if I can’t smooth things over.”

“There’s something else ma’am. We got the word just before coming down here.” The man swallowed. “Our presence in Ebott’s Wake was noted. That policeman, Officer-”

“Steven Ward, of course.”

“Yes ma’am, that was him. He knows somebody sabotaged the cameras and talked to Thomas O’Dell.”

The older woman nodded.

“Of course.”

The man cleared his throat. “What if O’Dell tells him about you?”

“Thomas O’Dell doesn’t know what he knows. And like his… mentor. He doesn’t know what to do with what he does know. He’ll keep quiet, either to spite the forces that have arrayed themselves against him, or because he’s still expecting a rescue.”

“Uhm.” The woman stuttered slightly. “Are we going to-”

“No.” The older woman’s voice was casual and almost tired in its tone. “Thomas O’Dell made a choice. He picked the wrong side. Not once, but twice. No force on this earth can save him from the consequences of-”

The woman suddenly turned to face an oddly-shaped arrangement of equipment in the form of toolboxes, crates of parts, and a mobile computer desk. Striding forward, she stared at the odd gap in between them, where the shadows from the work lights and the welding equipment overlapped.

“Ma’am? Is everything alright?”

“…fine. Almost. I definitely need new glasses. Thought I saw something moving.”

“I’ll call for the chief of security to sweep the-”

“Don’t bother.” The woman shook her head. “They won’t find anything.”

All the parts are set up. Tomorrow morning, I’ll set things in motion and warn you just before they start. Tap with your left index finger once if you understand.
Thomas O’Dell, still staring straight ahead and trying very hard not to look around at where the not-voice was coming from, raised his left index finger slightly and let it fall on his arm again.

*Good. Try to get some rest, though under the circumstances I wouldn’t blame you if that was out of the question.*

Thomas tapped his index finger again.

*Also I noticed you’ve been using some of those exercises Cater taught you. Good plan, I just want to offer advice on technique. Instead of imagining yourself putting your hand in sand and leaving a shape there, like he did, imagine yourself as a needle in a compass. Let yourself feel the magnetic field of the world around you. Whoops, gotta go. I think that skinhead guy can hear me on some level. See you.*

Thomas did not respond in any way, even as a large, burly man with a shaved head walked over to the bars separating one part of the lockup from another.

“*You ever fucking move, huh?”*

Thomas didn’t give any indication that he heard the man speak. He also gave no indication that he noticed the man picking up something. Or that he was winding up to throw whatever it was through the gaps between bars.

*‘Imagine yourself as a needle in a compass.’*

*‘Feel the field of the world around you.’*

Thomas did not feel anything hit him.

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up, most if not all of the stuff pertaining to how magic works in Ebott's Wake will soon be compiled in a companion work. Definitely taking inspiration from The Magus Compendium by Sophtopus, but I have to admit I love epistolary storytelling for its own sake.
Dr. Aster stared at the computer monitor, tapping at the mouse with one hand. The video restarted, slower than it had played the previous time.

When the video was finished, Dr. Aster slowed it down again, and replayed it again.

The cycle repeated one more time before Asriel couldn’t hold in the question anymore.

“Did you find something?”

Dr. Aster sighed.

“I have found… nothing. I was just being absolutely sure. When your fur finally died off from being separated from you, it crumbled into dust and the rest of the hair followed, since it was all connected and hadn’t solidified like the shed hairs did. There wasn’t… I expected it to linger. Between the DT and the human Soul, I expected at least a small delay, or a slowed down disintegration effect, but that’s not what happened. On the positive side, I feel a little less trepidation about the ichor extraction, if you’re still up for it—”

“What do I have to do?”

Dr. Aster turned and stared at Asriel.

“…no cold feet, no trepidation, no hesitation at all?”

Asriel swallowed.

“I don’t think you really grasp how much I want to help Chara.”

If Dr. Aster noticed that Asriel’s voice was a little choked up, and broke on a few words, he did not say or do anything to indicate that he did.

“Alright then. I’ll go get the Ichor Extractor, and you need to head to the break room. Get some sort of snack that is magically infused, to make up the difference. Meet you back here in about five minutes.”

Magic, Photons, And The Ether

From a standpoint of physical science, magic can be quantified and qualified as phenomena produced by photons with energy levels exceeding that of the speed of light in a vacuum. It is these properties that allow the “exotic” phenomena associated with magic to take place, ranging from sending information almost instantly regardless of distance, to teleportation without traversing the intervening space, to analyzing causal relationships between physical objects.

Magical phenomena may otherwise appear to be limited by the speed of light, simply because the visible light produced by magical bullets is itself within the energy level and speed ranges detectable by the eyes and various scientific instruments. This also appears to be a recurring limitation in human scientific research; in the same way that a net or mesh will only capture objects or debris
larger than the spaces in the net, no faster than light phenomena can be readily measured because all measuring instruments use the properties of light to function.

The underlying phenomena that allows the manifestation of magic from apparently nothing relies on different model of empty space; rather than particles traveling in a pure vacuum, electromagnetic energy and signals are the result of particles exchanging energy. In the same way that physical motion in water produces waves, agitation of the ambient magic field produces the phenomena of visible light. This concept of space being filled with photons exchanging energy, both above and below the energy levels of visible light, is referred to in monster terminology as the Ether.

**Magic And The Soul**

The connection between magic and the mind of the caster is, to a certain extent, defined by the Soul. The attributes of the Human Soul are currently being studied and qualified, but one correlation discovered so far is that all known Human Souls exhibit a “chromatic” attribute when analyzed. This attribute appears to correlate, one for one, to the Magic Spectrum, as only seven such colors have been discovered so far and they all match the bands of the Magic Spectrum exactly. Evidence tentatively suggests that this attribute is a sign of an affinity for that specific band of the Magic Spectrum.

More generally, both human and monster Souls have been demonstrated to affect the ambient magic field, with or without actually using magic. The closest analogy in physical terms is that of a magnet; it creates distortions and deviations in the ambient electromagnetic field by virtue of its presence. These distortions are strongest within the mass of the magnet itself, with strength diminishing over distance. Souls appear to have a similar range limitation, based on the strength of their native field. This strength appears to be a function of coherence (all the physical and mental processes in the body and mind of the caster aligned with the same intent) and this is why confusion or conflicting impulses limits magical ability.

Frisk stared at their notes for a few seconds, and began to underline the words “confusion” and “conflicting impulses” when the door opened suddenly. They looked up to see a man in thick glasses, gasping for breath and clutching some books and papers to his chest.

“Sorry I’m late, I… I had a schedule conflict, and… and I couldn’t straighten it out.”

“That is fine, Mr. Forsythe.” Toriel motioned to the various seats. “Please have a seat. We will be having a quick review at the end of the lesson.”

Behind Frisk, there was the sound of bumped furniture and whispered conversation as Quentin Forsythe managed to navigate his way to one of the empty seats. Toriel returned to the marker board and began writing again.

“With the fundamentals of magic established, we can now turn to a more nuanced and complex subject. That is to say, we must examine magical conventions in human myths, legends, and contemporary media. Some of these ideas will parallel actual magical characteristics or effects, while others will be complete fiction, and still others will be somewhere in the middle.”

Toriel scribbled the word *SPELLS* on the marker board.

“Human culture appears to define magic by its end result as much as through any other characteristic, and this is especially true in games used for entertainment. While I myself am not a programmer of computers, I know enough about puzzle design to understand that the more versatile the interaction
with the puzzle solver, the more complex the puzzle itself must be in order to account for all the variations in attempted solutions. It certainly would decrease the workload on the programmer to simply have magic reduced to a series of buttons to press, or perhaps a menu of discrete effects, in the same way that such games also reduce the acts of talking, jumping, and interacting with the environment to the same buttons and menus. In practice, the word spell is not used in any significant manner by monsters, and has only recently adopted as an alternate term for the creation of magic in the world, to facilitate communication with humans. More practically, you will not learn, for example, a Flying Spell, a Telekinesis Spell, and a Teleportation Spell in this class. You will rather learn to manipulate Dimensional Magic, and then use that to float above the ground, to move objects out of reach, or bridge your way across distances, as necessary or desired.”

Toriel added a dash after the word SPELLS and scribbled the phrase Convenient but Inaccurate Shorthand for Magical Effects after the dash. Beneath SPELLS, the queen wrote INCANTATIONS.

“The concept of words that possess magical properties in and of themselves is inaccurate. However, words themselves can and have been used as a training tool, a focal point, or even a medium for magic energy to follow. This extends to the act of singing and playing musical instruments.”

Frisk heard a hushed “Yes” from behind them.

“The details for combining magical effects with musical instruments are beyond my personal sphere of experience; no doubt that will be a specialized course elective that will be made available to you later. In the meantime, I will simply remind you that magic is a function of will and intent, not language or pronunciation. You can imbue your words with such power, but to do so, you must truly mean what you are saying. It matters not what you say, only that you say it with conviction.”

The word INCANTATIONS was followed by a dash and the words Medium For Magical Effects; Not Inherently Magical. Toriel followed that entry with TRUE NAMES.

“As this ties directly into the idea of magic with a vocal or verbal aspect to it, or otherwise connected to the faculty of communication, it makes sense to mention this now. The idea of a True Name, which has an absolute connection to a person or phenomena, is inaccurate. However, names themselves do have power, because to speak a person’s name is to draw their attention. If this classroom was filled with conversation, and another student here said your name, there is a very real possibility that you would recognize it even above the resulting noise. Both in magic, and in social scenarios, you can force an acknowledgment from another person by using their name, or names if they have more than one. After all, it is not uncommon in various media for human children or teenagers who have heard their full names spoken aloud to immediately come to a halt.”

There was some laughter in the classroom, but Toriel immediately moved on, adding Identifies Target Of Magic after TRUE NAMES and then immediately following with CURSES.

“Which unfortunately leads directly into the subject of Curses. Phrases or words spoken aloud that can cause magical harm to someone. While the media or literature depictions of grandiloquent statements and litany of catastrophes that will be heaped upon the heads of those cursed is far more dramatic than necessary, the fundamental principle is sound. An epithet or slur, an embarrassing or humiliating nickname, or using somebody’s name in such a way as to draw attention to them in a negative manner, can and does cause harm and can serve as a medium for hostile magic.” Toriel turned to face the class, her eyes narrowed. “It should go without saying, but I will say it anyway; there will be no such activity in this classroom, or in any course that I teach.”

Toriel returned to her list and added Hostile Magical Communication after CURSES, and then added PROPHECY to the list, causing the previous stunned (or possibly frightened) silence to transform into various muttering and confused remarks.
The act of analyzing the past and predicting the future is an intermediate to advanced function of Pattern Magic, but the term itself can be defined now. Prophecy is the use of Pattern Magic to study possible outcomes of a scenario or set of scenarios before they happen. By way of analogy, you may consider Prophecy a form of statistical or actuarial study that draws directly on the repeating Patterns of phenomena in real time, rather than extrapolating future trends from previous data. The Prophecy of the Angel in the Underground, for example, was the result of monsters attempting to locate possible means of escape shortly after the creation of the Barrier. The end result was the knowledge that there was a possibility, not a certainty, of an entity known only as the Angel who had seen the surface and would cause the Underground to go empty.”

Toriel tapped the marker board for a moment. “This is important to know well in advance of actually studying Prophecy itself; the further ahead the future event to be predicted or prophesied, the more difficult it is to make out fine details. Just as it would be very difficult to make out fine details on the summit of Mt. Ebott from down here in town, while the details of the actual town would be easier to perceive because of their proximity. The more immediate the event, the more precise the prediction will be. Note that I used the term precise, not accurate. Sometimes the purpose of a Prophecy is to fulfill a prediction, but other times a Prophecy exists as a warning. Looking back into the past is both more accurate and precise, as it is a search for what has happened, not what might have happened. Those of you who may show talent in Prophecy related magic may well find that you can scarcely see ahead to tomorrow, while being able to recall parts of last year with perfect clarity. Keep in mind, also, that the sooner an event is expected to happen, the less time there is to change it if it is undesirable.”

Toriel scribbled Pattern Magic Analysis of Possible Futures / Past Events next to PROPHECY, and turned to face the classroom.

“Now, everyone pair off for lab partners. Those of you who demonstrated any amount of success with the earlier practice exercise, please attempt to team up with a partner who did not. Your experience may prove invaluable to them. Mr. Forsythe, in light of your tardiness and the necessity to bring you up to speed, I will be your partner for this exercise.”

Joe stared at the combination of metal, rubber, hinges, wire, sensors and circuits on the table.

“Damn, Doc. You work fast.”

“Hah. Yeah. Did you know that if you don’t sleep you can get twice as much stuff done in a day?” Dr. Alphys laughed nervously. “We’re still waiting on Dr. Ross’s schedule to get this installed properly.”

“Robot arms come to those who wait. And I’d much rather trust her than anyone else at the hospital. She has the Hal Greene seal of approval after sewing his thumb back on.”

“…this is gonna be one of those things I never question.” Dr. Alphys sat down on one of the chairs. “That guy from BrenCorp Investments was supposed to be here at least half an hour ago.”

“Probably got leaned on by somebody with their fingers in the company pie. Which is all the more reason not to give them plans for the Phase Integrator. Last thing this world needs is bullies who have access to magic, in a world that doesn’t yet have access or understanding. We’d be blamed for every single time it was used to hurt somebody until the heat death of the universe.”

“…uh… that’s probably going to happen anyway.”
“Yeah, but if we don’t give them the Integrator, then they have to learn magic the old fashioned way. And that will take time. So we’re delaying the inevitable and if it happens after we die, then technically we win.”

Dr. Alphys stared at Joe.

“I don’t… think your math checks out.”

Joe’s reply ended before it began as the lab door opened and Dr. Aster marched in, looking around.

“Have either of you seen the Ichor Extractor?”

“Y-yeah, it’s in the Physics Support Workshop. I was going to upgrade the power supply b-because you said we wouldn’t need it.”

“Okay, Physics Support Workshop.”

“Did something happen?”

“No, nothing, and that’s why we can use it.”

Dr. Alphys blinked.

“Are we talking about the same thing right now?”

“Probably not. I’ll let you know how the test goes.”

The skeleton disappeared as suddenly as he appeared, and Joe sighed.

“I remember a time, in days gone by, when such an exchange would leave me flummoxed and bamboozled.”

“Hold your hands thus, Mr. Forsythe. Now concentrate on a connection between the two. You may be able to feel some sort of tension or pressure difference between them.”

Frisk shook their head and tried to tune out Toriel’s voice from where she was helping Quentin Forsythe catch up, and held up their hands towards Alex Carson.

“Uh, this isn’t going to hurt, is it?”

‘Of course not. We won’t feel a thing.’

Frisk snorted and then slapped their left hand over their mouth. “Sorry about that. And no. We should be just fine.”

Frisk held out their left hand, where a small flame ignited and grew until it was the size of a golf ball. The child tossed it from their left hand to their right, staring at it the whole time. Tossing it back to their left hand, their brow furrowed, and the fireball stopped in mid air.

“What the actual ffffuuuuuuudge,” Alex caught himself, his eyes darting to where Toriel was standing. The midair fireball dwindled to nothing, and Frisk produced another one.

“Okay, rather than actually try to throw these things around, let’s start with you just holding onto this.” Frisk held out the fireball, still resting on their palm. “That way you won’t be tempted to flinch
because you expect to get burned.”

“Alright.”

Alex didn’t reach out towards the fireball.

“...I can’t help but notice that the fireball is still in my hand-”

“Yeah yeah yeah, just gimme a second.”

Slowly, Alex reached out and tapped the fireball quickly with one fingertip, then wrapped several fingers around it and picked it up.

“...okay. That’s weird.”

The fireball evaporated into motes of light, and Frisk held up their hands.

“Okay, you try.”

Alex held up one hand, and some motes of light seemed to be flickering in and out of existence for a few seconds, before he dropped it.

“Nope, not happening.”

“Try your other hand. I have different results with left and right.”

Alex sighed and held up his left hand, and the display of infinitesimal motes of energy repeated itself.

“Same difference.”

“It’s still something. If you keep doing that, it’ll get easier and easier, and then you can start working on refining it. I find if you break down the process into distinct steps, it’s easier to work on a bit at time.”

“Yeah,” Alex nodded. “Most things are like that.”

Globules of fluid, or what appeared to be fluid, floated up and down, separating and recombining into each other. Dr. Aster scribbled some notes onto a clipboard, looking up at the ichor sample so frequently that Asriel wondered if his skull was going to fall off.

“Okay, this is interesting. Sort of like the Amalgamate residue, but stabilized.”

“It doesn’t look that stable.”

“It is in comparison to the residue.” Dr. Aster put the clipboard and pencil down on the table and stared at the containment cylinder. “It’s... something. I’m not certain that we’ll find exactly what we’re looking for here, but it’s another place to look.”

Asriel turned to stare at the sample bags, one with the hairbrush he had used to get some shed fur for Dr. Aster to analyze, and another with the minute amount of dust left behind from the tuft of not-shed fur that he had yanked out.

“...there might be some other stuff that could help. Or at least, that set me apart from the Amalgamates. And knowing that might help you help Chara.”
Dr. Aster turned to stare at Asriel.

“What do you have in mind?”

“...how much do you know about when the Barrier was destroyed?”

“Just what I’ve heard from other people.”

Asriel clasped his paws in his lap, staring at them.

“...I think there’s some stuff you don’t know, but you need to.”

Chapter End Notes

This took a bit longer than planned, but in my defense, having my dad end up in the hospital out of the blue threw a wrench into just about everything. And I'm not feeling peachy keen myself, to be perfectly honest. Future chapters should happen on a faster schedule, if I live.
“I think that will do.”

Around the classroom, the various attempts to produce magical energy, successful and otherwise, came to a halt as Toriel began to organize her papers.

“I think we do have a little time left to us, and I imagine that for many of you these exercises have been more frustrating than enlightening, so… if you have any questions which have not yet been addressed, I will do my best to provide an answer.”

One hand shot up almost immediately, and Toriel pointed towards the child. “Yes, Liam, what is your question?”

“Uh, I uh. I know it’s like the first day. And maybe it will get handled later. But I still want to know more about flying with magic. Like, is there something I need to focus on if I want to fly, or…?”

“Ah. That is a complex question, so pardon me if the answer is also complicated. There are numerous means of magical flight, and different methods are employed by different monsters according to their morphology and magical skills. The most common would of course be the use of Dimensional Magic, to impart a directional change to the body in contrast with the force of gravity. Like so,” Toriel held out her paws, which were surrounded by a blue glow, and floated several feet away before the teacher dropped back down to the ground again. “Other means include the use of wind elemental magic against wings and airfoils to create aerodynamic lift, the use of Wave or Force magic to augment the effective mass of the body, which can make it effectively float, or the use of magical energy discharges to repel against the body, not unlike a rocket engine. So to summarize, young Liam, you would be better served by casting your net as wide as you can, rather than narrowing your focus to one aspect of flight.”

The child nodded, either thoughtful or intimidated by the scope of the task in front of him, or possibly both. Toriel turned to another raised hand. “Yes, Mr. Black, what is your question?”

“Uh, I’m a little bit curious about the whole difference between monster food and human food, and what differences there are in nutrition between the two. Like, if a human living on only monster food will get scurvy or something like that.”

“Fortunately, that does not appear to be a problem. When it comes to human bodies and food the emphasis is always on the physical and the chemical, the specific composition of the ingredients and the way they interact. Even the process of cooking itself is a chemical reaction, making certain substances more compatible with human digestion, or at least more palatable. Magical cooking follows a parallel development. The materials in the food are saturated with magical energy, which induce physical and energetic changes in the material of the food. The specific type of magic used makes a difference, but in general the result is a form of food where the material content and the energy potential are… what is the best word for this…”

Toriel tapped the end of her muzzle for a few seconds with one finger, before looking up at Mr. Black once again.

“I suppose the best term to apply to magic food is that it is *eager*, Mr. Black. Upon being consumed, the magic in the food seeks out the impulses of whoever consumed it and follow their will, just as all magic responds to the will. To the extent that the body is made of physical matter, the matter in the food is quickly and rapidly distributed to whatever parts of the body have need of it. Likewise the
energetic content of the food seeks out the vital organs to add its potential energy. This is naturally useful when dealing with injuries, but also performs the same functions that the body normally would, simply faster. Having said that, I do not know that there has been any study, formal or informal, regarding the nutritional limitations of monster food in the human body. I simply have not seen any examples myself.”

Toriel had scarcely turned away from the not-so-secret agent that another hand was thrust in the air.

“How precisely can somebody control magic? Like, down to a millimeter? Even smaller than that?”

Toriel nodded at Mr. Parsons.

“If you are referring to the personal accuracy and precision of magic use, that varies from person to person. Certainly the use of magically augmented technology takes some of the guesswork out of many magical tasks and processes, increasing range, precision, accuracy, efficiency, and the like. However, we will be discussing such technology in a later class, when it is time to discuss Infusion.”

“Can people use multiple types of magic at the same time?”

Toriel frowned slightly at the lack of classroom etiquette in the form of a raised hand, but nodded.

“That is possible and in fact the rule rather than the exception. Many of the scenarios and exercises that will be included in this class will deal with magically distinct operations for the sake of simplicity and ease of reference. However, there are limitations to what kinds of magic can be combined safely and effectively. For example, Wave and Force magic are fundamentally incompatible, and can only be safely combined in specialized conditions. I do not expect this to be a problem in the classroom for some time, though when it is, you may rest assured we shall go over proper safety measures and incompatible combinations repeatedly. Does anyone else have a question?”

“I do!” Frisk saw Tim Rathburne’s hand shoot into the air. “How is magic energy stored?”

“I am afraid I cannot effectively answer that, as magical energy is quantified in the same way that purely non magical energy is. That is to say, heat, electrical charge, mass traveling at a specific velocity, and so on and so forth. Likewise, the properties of magic energy often cause it to behave in ways that its non magical counterparts do not, the most obvious example being the way that frozen desserts made with ice magic do not absorb heat from the environment at the same rate, and so take forever to m-.”

“AHA!”

Frisk flinched and scrambled to grab hold of the table as they almost fell backward in their chair. Next to them, Alex Carson was holding a shifting, warping, but semi-stable rubber duck made of light blue light.

“...is there something you would like to share with the class, Mr. Carson?”

“This duck!”

Claws scraped against the aluminum can, peeling away the paint in tiny shavings. Asriel barely noticed, bringing up the soda to take a sip and then putting it back on the table.

On the opposite side of the table, Dr. Aster did the same thing with his own soda, minus the scraped off paint where his finger bones dragged against the metal.
“...that’s a hell of a thing, Asriel.”

“Yeah.” Asriel’s voice was barely a whisper.

“...it does, well… it doesn’t actually answer some questions. But it gives us more options on the multiple choice part of the quiz.”

Asriel nodded.

“Your… you coming back. Probably got set in motion by Frisk’s soul shattering the way it did. One of the fragments ended up in you. It might have been right then and there, with the Barrier gone. Or it might have been later. I understand that you and Frisk spent a lot of time together.”

“Yeah.”

“...and then something prompted them to regenerate, and all the parts came back together. And later, the part you still had regenerated into a complete soul.” Dr. Aster nodded, mostly to himself. “I’m not certain how we could possibly reproduce that effect, let alone if we should make the attempt. The ethics were already murky.”

“Right.” Asriel took another drink, and the can hit the table a little harder than it had before, with a loud clunking sound. “And… even if we could do that. We would have to get… Chara… into that new soul, or soul fragment… when I was, in Frisk’s head. In the hospital thing. I saw Chara there. I thought… well. That doesn’t matter. I know it was them now. I just… don’t know how or why.”

“That probably makes dinner conversation a little awkward.”

“It hasn’t come up yet. I’m not sure if I really… well. Neither one of us has brought it up yet.” Asriel raised the soda to his lips, but changed his mind and put it down at the last second. “The golden flower got changed into this body. If we wanted to make a new body for Chara, we’re starting from scratch.”

“Well, yeah. I said as much last weekend.”

“Yeah, but now it actually hit me, what that means.”

Dr. Aster tapped his soda.

“...also, there’s no way to be sure that Frisk’s soul would survive another fracture like that. We don’t know why or how it was holding together when it was shattered.”

“No, we don’t. Is… is this what it’s like being a scientist? Just constantly bumping into the fact that you don’t know what you need to know?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Dr. Aster nodded. “I mean, at least with this particular problem we don’t have the whole kingdom of monsters holding on by the skin of their teeth. The situation’s not great, and we know the people affected, and that makes it worse. But the situation as a whole isn’t catastrophic.”

“...guess there’s that.”

There was a musical beeping noise and Dr. Aster pulled a phone out of his pocket, staring at the screen.

“Oh, the Queen’s done with the class. Alright, guess I’ll see you later then.”
“Right.” Asriel hopped off of his chair. “Uh. Dr. Aster?”

“Yeah?”

“How are you, I mean, how do you feel about the whole humans learning magic thing?”


“I, uh. I didn’t mean as a scientist. I meant, like. Are you worried about something happening?”

“We have Frisk and we have Joe and Justin and the rest of Shop Class. I think we’ll be okay. That said I’ve been checking KEBT every hour on the hour since last Friday for news of Cater escaping.”

“Same. Frisk hasn’t, they uh. They feel the same way.”

“I’ll bet.” Dr. Aster drained his soda, lifted the can into the air with a blue glow, and compressed it down into a small metal sphere. “Well, let’s get you and Frisk on your merry way, so you can get back to summer vacation celebrations and building elaborate machines and mechanisms.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Papyrus and Joe showed me this human cartoon. Something about two brothers building elaborate technology every day for summer vacation. Also something about an egg laying mammal fighting a pharmacist… I’m not sure I got that right but I’m also wary of learning any more about it.”

Dr. Alphys flinched at the loud knocking noise on her office door, scrambling to take off her headphones without pulling them out of the headphone jack and prompting her computer to play the audio over the speakers, then flailing at the keyboard to pause the video and minimize the browser, before finally jumping out of the chair.

“Who is it?!”

“It’s Justin, doc. Got a guy here to see you. Something about an investment company.”

“Invest… oh! Just a moment!” Alphys sprinted over to the office door, unlocked it, and pulled the handle to reveal Justin Carrow standing next to a man who looked like he had been handed a winning lottery ticket.

“Doctor Alphys, thank you for meeting with me and I apologize for my tardiness. My name is Bradley Parsons, I represent BrenCorp Investments, and I just spent the better part of an hour getting my whole world turned upside down.”

“Uh-”

“Let me explain, I got lost after the reception booth and ended up sitting in on a class where magic was being taught by this large white goat woman and it opened up some amazing horizons that I’d like to discuss.”

“Uh… that’s… that’s…”

“That’s great,” Justin stage whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

“That’s great!!” Alphys agreed. “Uh, d-do you want to, uh, wait, we should, right, I c-c-can show you the meeting room!”
“If you guys are all set up, I’m going to go check in with Graham and Paul,” Justin pointed down the hallway. “Somebody on twitter said they saw PETA show up in town.”

“Right, right,” Alphys nodded. “You go ahead and take care of that, thanks Justin!”

Mindy stared at the front doors of the Library; outside, a huge figure stood in front of the double doors, with scarred and burned arms crossed over a chest covered by a lime green sweater vest, despite the heat.

Slowly, the monster opened the door and looked up at the human.

“Uh… Mike?”

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

“Standing guard against my ancestral enemies.”

“…that human that runs the Arboretum??”

Van Garrett shook his head. “No, Robin’s one of my personal enemies. My ancestral enemies are the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.”

“…I’m sorry?”

“My great-great-grandfather was a navigator on a Norwegian whaling ship. Since then, all of my ancestors have helped other people throw pointy things by performing complex calculations. It’s in my blood.”

“Well that’s great, but what does that have to do with PETA??”

“It’s a matter of honor.”

“…it’s almost a hundred degrees, and you’re wearing a sweater vest.”

“Yeah, well, laundry day… oh, we have some customers.” Van Garrett pointed to the queen and her children walking down the sidewalk. Frisk and Asriel took the steps up to the front door two at a time.

“Hello Mr. Van Garrett. What are you doing outside in the heat?”

“Standing watch for PETA.”

Frisk nodded. “Right. Can’t be too careful. May we enter the chamber of knowledge?”

The Librarian shrugged. “Knock yourself out, kiddo.”

Inside, Frisk took a deep breath before setting out through the shelves, a smile on their face. Asriel followed along after a moment’s hesitation.

“What are you looking for?”

“No idea. I’ll recognize it when I see it. That’s how it usually works.”
“Okay… uhm.” Asriel cleared his throat. “Uh. When we get home. I think we need to. To talk about… stuff.”

“…okay.”

“Right. So. Now you know that. And. I’m going to go browse.”

“Right.”

Asriel nodded, started walking away, and bumped into a shelf that he was too distracted to notice. Frisk looked up, but the shelf barely budged and all the books above the monster made no sign of falling. After a few seconds, Frisk returned their attention to the books that were closer to eye level.

“Good. The last thing we need right now is some sort of omen.”
“And those monsters are keeping me up at all hours of the night with their screeching and their
yelling and their fighting. And they aren’t even married and they’re living together, and what kind of
element is that setting for the children? This used to be a respectable neighborhood, I tell you, when
I was a little girl we didn’t have any of.”

“Just the facts, ma’am,” Agent Black interrupted.

“Oh, well, that’s all I have to say. I’m not the prying type, I always say leave well enough alone-”

“Yes, I can tell,” Agent Black interrupted again, before the old woman picked up steam again.
“Thank you for your assistance.”

The elderly woman began to shuffle her way back to her house, and Agent Black turned to look at
the building where two monsters were living before pulling out his phone.

“Brown here.”

“This is Black, just caught some local gossip about the owner and operator of the monster science
lab.”

“Anything we can use?”

“Maybe, but the way things seem to go on this job it might just blow up in our faces like everything
else.”

“Right… I’ve been thinking about that-”

“Not over an open channel,” Agent Black hissed.

“It’s not that, ugh. Whatever. I’m going to grab us some lunch and head back to the hotel room. You
have a preference?”

“Chinese food.”

“Do you have a more specific preference?”

“I don’t know. General Tso’s Chicken. And a soda.”

“What kind of soda.”

“I don’t care.”

“The devil’s in the details-”

“I don’t care. Just grab something carbonated. I’m going to see if I can’t make contact with those
protesters or activists that were making all the noise before.”
“Did you find everything you were looking for?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Frisk held out an old, blue book with a title that read *Light, Velocity, And Relativity*, which the monster accepted and scanned along with their library card.

“And how can I help you, Your Majesty?”

“This will be adequate for the foreseeable future,” Toriel replied, holding out a book titled *Timetables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events* to be scanned.

“Alright, there you are. And you, Your Highness?”

“Uhm.” Asriel held up a book with the title *The Code Book: The Science of Secrecy from Ancient Egypt to Quantum Cryptography*. “Just this today.”

“There you go, you’re all set! Everything is due back in three weeks! See you around!”

The trio navigated their way out of the Library doors, past the massive figure of Michael Van Garrett still standing guard outside, and down the steps to the sidewalk.

“I dare say, we are making excellent time today. A bare minimum of obstacles outside of All Fine Labs, scant interruptions during the class proper, and we were each able to find-”

“Yoooooo!”

Frisk automatically turned to see a somewhat saurian face running up the sidewalk after them. “Oh, hey Poncho.”

“Hey Frisk! Hey Azzy! Oh, uhm. Hello Mrs. Dreemurr.”

“Hello, young one,” Toriel replied. “How is your weekend?”

“It’s pretty neat, met up with Skate and Casey at the Arcade! Douglas was supposed to show up later but he called and said he was going straight home to sleep it off. Uh.” Poncho’s eyes widened in understanding. “I think he meant the magic class.”

“Well, he never really wanted to be in the class in the first place, like he said.” Frisk nodded. “So he’s probably heading home to make up for lost time.”

“Right.” Poncho matched his pace next to Frisk as they walked down the sidewalk. “So, uh. How did the class go?”

“Not too bad. Maybe six people in the whole room could do anything at all, and two of them were just, like, sparkles and stuff.”

“Which is still very impressive, under the circumstances. Every expert was once a novice,” Toriel remarked. “I feel genuinely privileged to see so many students take these first, stumbling steps to understanding.”

“Hey, uh. Frisk.” Asriel leaned forward slightly to look past Toriel. “How did Hal do in the class?”

“I don’t know exactly, he was behind me in the seating arrangement. I did see him having an easy time with mom’s exercises at one point. And I heard him giggling a few times, so I think he was having fun at least.”

“Okay. I was wondering about that.”
'What is with Asriel and Hal Greene, anyway?'

Frisk frowned at the sudden question, and turned to Poncho to ask their own question—

“Yo, what’s with you and Hal Greene anyway?” Poncho stared at Asriel. “You’re always talking about him, and he’s stopping by and giving you slices of cake? What’s up with that?”

Asriel shrugged and looked down at the sidewalk. “I don’t know. What was with you and Undyne in the Underground?”

“...oh.” Poncho nodded. “Now I get it.”

“Hey Poncho, do you think I should copy my notes and send them to Mary? Something to keep her spirits up while she’s at Disney World?”

“Hey, that’s a good idea! She was super mad that she didn’t get to join the class.”

“If Mary is truly passionate about learning,” Toriel interrupted, “let her know that I will be more than happy to tutor her upon her return.”

‘Ugh. Kids disappointed to go to a cartoon theme park and eager to go to school over the summer. Maybe the tourists and news anchors are right and we really are insane here.’

Frisk valiantly attempted to muffle their fit of giggles.

Lars stared at the drawing in his claws featuring a rather unrealistically proportioned anthropomorphic wolf woman.

“You know that, uh, wolf monsters don’t look like this right?”

“I do now. But I didn’t when I drew that.”

Elijah brought a soda up to his mouth while Lars shuffled through drawings of a voluptuous fox, a very buff and muscular cat, a scantily clad purple dragon that prompted Lars to raise one eyebrow ridge, and several other drawings of similar subjects and tones.

“This explains a few things.”

“There was a huge market for this stuff before you guys showed up, and it exploded after. I literally got a message somebody who wanted an art commission two hours ago. Also, those are the tame ones. There’s some real weirdos out there. I mean, I’m not passing judgment after their niche interests paid off my student loans. I’m just stating a fact.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the internet up here. What’s with the humans dressing in those suits, anyway?”

“No idea. Not my jam. A lot of people can’t tell the difference, so I don’t exactly advertise the one lest people start bringing up the other.”

“Oh.” Lars held out the papers and Eli took them back, sliding them into a manila folder that was returned to a spot in the drawer of a filing cabinet. “Didn’t realize that.”

“Yeah.” Eli pulled open another drawer on the file cabinet and pulled out another folder, which he handed to Lars. “Now take a look at these.”
Lars opened the folder and began to flip through drawings of buildings, battleships at sea, bipedal mechanical figures bristling with weapons, and even plane diagrams of armor and vehicles.

“Well, this is different.”

“Yeah. I didn’t get nearly as many commissions for this stuff. There’s a sort of dichotomy between furry artists and mecha artists, and I guess I got typecast as the first.”

“Huh. Learn something new every day.” Lars held up his claws around his chest. “You do realize that female dragon monsters wouldn’t look like that, right?”

“Well, I didn’t know that for certain, but it doesn’t surprise me to learn it. To be honest, this entire art genre was founded in fantasy to start with so that’s probably not going away even if monster physiology becomes common knowledge.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah.” Elijah motioned his head towards the filing cabinet holding his portfolio. “If we ever go out and meet aliens like on Star Trek, that’s gonna be what humans or known for in the Galactic Federation or Interstellar Council or whatever. Just like Vulcans are all logical and Klingons are all warriors, humans are all horndogs.”

“...I could see that happening.”

The garage was dark, with the windows covered by cardboard to block prying eyes and only a single incandescent bulb swinging from the ceiling, causing the shadows on the edges of the light to shift and pivot with the moving light source.

There was the sound of shuffling, and the occasional whisper, but mostly the garage was quiet.

“...what do we do now?” somebody finally broke the silence. The man closest to the center of the garage, sitting at a card table under the light, shook his head.

“No idea.”

“...Dwayne’s gone to the other side. He’s hanging around with that skeleton with the scarf often as not. Martin’s the same, he rolled on us for the cops. And Cater’s in jail.”

“Jordan Cater was never on our side in the first place,” another voice barked. “He was just using us to restart his cult.”

“...was he really trying to get Mt. Ebott to erupt?”

“Does it matter?”

The garage was silent again as people gathered their thoughts and chose their words. Eventually, the man sitting under the light looked up again.

“About how many people were in that push towards the hospital?”


“Right.” The man nodded. “We don’t have the numbers. We don’t have popular support. And now the monsters are giving their allies magic. There may be a way out of this but I sure can’t see it right
“...what if we got magic too? I don’t mean that machine that everyone’s talking about. They’ll have that shit locked up tighter than Fort Knox. I mean, we send somebody in to that class the monster queen is teaching. And when it’s done, that person teaches the rest of us?”

“We’d have to wait till fall. Heard on the radio that the class was full up. Also, Fort Knox is the Army Base. You’re thinking of the Bullion Depository.”

“...what?”

“I heard a doctor talking about it when I was getting my ankle x-rayed last week.”

“...okay. Not sure how that actually helps us though. How is your ankle, anyway?”

“It’s fine. I just sprained the hell out of it. Felt like I tore my ACL though so I was kinda freaking out.”

“Well, yeah. That’s some bad shit. My cousin Dennis, he-”

The man sitting under the light rapped on the card table for silence.

“Back before Cater showed up, Dwayne said we were supposed to be fighting a war of hearts and minds. Or a battle of hearts and minds. Something about hearts and minds. That stopped being the focus when Cater showed up. Even if we went back to that, we’d still get tarred with that asshole’s brush-”

The man stopped talking at the sound of the doorbell.

“That better be my Amazon order. Everybody stay here and stay quiet, I’ll be right back.”

The man disappeared through a doorway, and the garage was silent once more; some figures in the shadows looked around at each other, to the extent that they could really see anything.

“What do you think Greg got off Amazon?”

“I dunno, Guerrilla Warfare for Dummies? Who gives a fuck?”

A third person made a “Shh!” noise, but a split second later the silence was broken again by a scream from inside the house.

“CHEESE IT ITS THE FEDS!!!”

In a fraction of a second the garage was utter chaos as people scrambled to escape the building; objects were knocked off shelves, and the garage door was pulled open, spilling men and a few women out into the driveway and the street.

On the lawn outside the front door, Agent Black hissed in pain and pulled his phone out of his pocket, holding it close to one eye and peering through reddened eyelids as he tried to navigate his contacts.

“Brown here.”

“Brown. It’s Black. Some fucker hit me with pepper spray as soon as he opened the door.”

“What??”
“Need you. To come by with the car. 107 West Cavendish Street. And bring some milk.”

China clattered slightly as Asgore placed a cup and saucer in front of the human child.

“Here you are, Chara.”

“Thank you.” Two glowing red eyes looked down at the tea, but Chara did not reach for the cup. “And thank you for letting me come over.”

“...Chara, just because you and Asriel and Frisk do not sleep here does not mean my house is not just as much your home as Toriel’s. You are always welcome here.”

Chara stared at the tea instead of looking up at Asgore, and slowly reached for the cup. It clattered against the saucer as they picked it up, concentric ripples spreading across the surface.

“So,” Asgore said, either oblivious to or wanting to distract Chara from their nervousness, “how did the class at All Fine Labs go?”

“It went better than expected. Some humans actually made decent progress on day one. For Frisk and myself everything was simply a refresher course. And Frisk was actually quite bored because there was no new information to learn, which may have played a part in them wanting to take a nap after the Library. In the end, I suppose it worked out for both of us.”

“It would seem to.”

“Also, Asriel told me that Dr. Aster said that the tests he wanted to run went better than he expected. What that means for the long term goals of those tests is too soon to tell.”

“That stands to reason.”

Asgore watched as Chara brought the cup to their mouth and sipped the tea.

“I really… missed this, Chara. Being able to sit down with my children with a nice cup of tea.”

Chara opened their mouth, then closed it again and swallowed.

“Is something the matter?”

“...I remember. When Frisk would sit here and drink tea.”

“...you are not Frisk, and Frisk is not you, Chara. It is not quite the same.”

“No, that’s not what I...” Chara hesitated for a second. “It felt. Like. It felt like. I was trespassing. Stealing cups of tea, and cookies, when nobody was looking.”

Asgore stared at Chara, then slowly nodded, and the child pressed on.

“I felt like that. A lot.” Chara started to blink, and squeezed their eyes shut, trying to keep the rest of their face blank and without expression. “For a long. Long time. I’m not...”

Chara shook their head. “I should not be here. I should not be at all. And I was afraid of what would happen. If anyone realized that I was here.”

The king’s living room was silent for a minute.
A few days ago.” Chara’s voice was hoarse even while their face was stoic. “Frisk. Started to feel bad. Because they felt. Like they were dragging me along. To do all the nerdy stuff they love. Like a hostage or a prisoner. Even though I’m the one. That’s taking over their life. And their body. And their voice. And Asriel. Was healing. And when I started talking to him. I ripped that wound open again.”

“Chara. Believe me when I say that when you lose somebody you love, you do not ever heal. You simply learn to live with the pain. Only now that you are back, can Asriel… and Toriel, and myself… only now can we truly heal. And I know that Frisk does not, could not begrudge you a life of your own, no matter how long it takes for All Fine Labs to find a way to grant you a new body.”

Chara did not respond right away, but eventually looked up and out the living room window. Moisture gathered on the edge of their eyelids and glowed like rubies in the magical light, until it streamed down the child’s face and became transparent.

“Even if it had worked. My master plan was six counts of murder. And when it fell apart it took… everything with it. What kind of a world. Could ever have a place for someone like me?”

“This one, Chara.”

The child looked down at their tea again, making no move to drink the cooling beverage.

“. . . I just wanted to do something NICE…” Chara stopped talking, ducking their head and running their fingers through their hair. The teacup rattled in its saucer as their elbows landed on the table. Asgore quietly stood up and walked around the table, resting one paw on the child’s back.

“It is alright, Chara. The past is in the past.”

“It’s not. It’s NOT.” Chara’s body shook with the strain it took to keep their voice somewhat steady, instead of turning into gross sobbing. “It was supposed to be a gift, it was supposed to make you happy, but it made you SICK.”

“Chara.” Asgore got down on both knees next to the table, to make it easier to look the child in the eye. “I am here, and I am fine. Everything is going to be alright.”

Chapter End Notes

All three books that the Dreemurr family checked out of the Librarby are real. I actually have Light Velocity and Relativity on my bookshelf.
Chara ran their fingers over the surface of the hallway floor; while it didn’t have the same rich, golden color as the floors in Home Castle, it was still smooth, even slick. How much of that was a result of the skill of the artisan that made the floor, and how much of it had to do with magic, was beyond their ability to tell. But that didn’t matter at this point.

The human child stood up again and turned to Asriel, looking down at the socks stretched over his feet. The way he kept wiggling his toes gave away that he was not used to any sort of footwear, least of all one that completely wrapped around them.

“Alright. Here we go.” Chara turned towards the doorway to the foyer of the castle, some distance away, and tried to break into a run. It wasn’t easy, with their socks sliding on the floor and keeping them from gaining too much traction too fast, but by shifting their body weight in time with their steps they could mitigate the results some what. Eventually they stopped, leaning slightly backwards and locking their legs in position, which proved to backfire as their momentum wasn’t evenly distributed over their body and they fell backwards.

“Chara! Hold on, I’m- uff!” Chara twisted their neck to see that Asriel had tried to sprint towards them and immediately lost his balance, and pushed themselves up into a standing position.

“I’m fine. Let’s try again.” The human child stood up and started to slide their way to where Asriel was pulling himself to his feet, shifting their weight and trying to slide with one foot in front of the other. While control was better, it anticlimactically slowed them to a stop several feet away from their brother.

“This might have been easier at the Home Castle, but honestly I didn’t ever think to try it before the move.”

Chara shuffled back toward the end of the hallway, and tried another sprint. The third time was not the charm, as they somehow managed to get more drag on one foot in the other, causing them to spin slowly as they slipped past Toriel’s bedroom. They had only a second to recognize that Asriel was right behind them and catching up fast; the two children collided, spun two and a half times, and tripped over.

Chara’s giggling was only partially muffled by Asriel’s fuzzy arm, which somehow ended up on top of them. They were distantly aware that their shoulder had hit the floor pretty hard when they fell, but that was unimportant compared to how funny everything was.

“Come on, come on, let’s do that again! First one to make it all the way out of the hallway wins!”

“Wins what?”

“Bragging rights, I think.”

Frisk felt their own body heat reflected by the bed covers and mattress first, before it occurred to them to open their eyes. Asgore’s spare bedroom was sparsely decorated, telegraphing the fact that nobody really lived there, but it was comfortable at least. Frisk managed to slide out of the bed and stand upright despite the headache that was starting to take all of their attention; combined with waking up in the bed itself, it was a sure sign that Chara had opted to cry themselves to sleep.
“Are you there?” Frisk whispered.

There was no response, either in their head or with their voice, or even a gesture from their right hand. Chara was still asleep.

Or maybe they just didn’t want to talk.

The door was opened a crack, and Frisk narrowed their eyes against the much brighter world outside. The color and angle of the sunlight meant that a lot of the day had passed. Part of Frisk automatically began going through their schedule and determining if adjustments needed to be made and where, but most of Frisk made their way from the spare bedroom to the kitchen.

The child practically gulped down the glass of water, staring out of the window at the back yard garden. It was possible to see Asgore’s horns over some of the foliage, and Frisk abruptly put the empty glass down and made their way out the back door. The heat and light hit them like a very bright hammer (that was also uncomfortably hot) but they made their way out into the garden anyway.

“Hey dad.”

“Oh, hello Frisk! One second, I am almost finished watering these flowers.”

“It’s cool, no rush.” Frisk sat down on one of the decorative benches and closed their eyes against the sunlight and bright floral colors. “How goes the gardening?”

“It goes, such as it is. The heat is definitely worse for some plants than others.”

“Right.”

Frisk felt movement, saw the shadows cast on their eyelids, and heart the steps as Asgore walked over and sat down next to them on the bench.

“...how are you doing?”

“I’m okay. Chara I think is still sleeping.”

“Ah.”

The garden was quiet except for the occasional buzzing of insects and rustle of wind.

“Uh. Did everything go okay earlier? When I woke up, my head hurt and I was really thirsty.”

Asgore sighed.

“I am afraid not.”

“...right.”

After a few seconds, Frisk scooted over on the bench towards Asgore. The king automatically raised his arm, and the human child leaned into his side.

Slowly, Asgore let his arm drop until he was resting his paw on Frisk’s back.

“...I must confess. When I understood that Chara had… that they were still here. A part of me saw it as a chance to make up for what happened before. The warning signs I did not recognize. But. Chara is still…” Asgore sighed.
“It’s only been a week since we found out. You’re doing great, dad.”

“...I know that patience is necessary. But to know that my children suffer. Every part of me demands that I fix everything now, this instant. To stop it from hurting.”

Asgore stared at the flower blossoms and leaves rippling slightly in the breeze.

“...Frisk.”

“Yes?”

“If... if you are comfortable discussing it. I wish to talk about. What you and Sans and Toriel discussed. The time loop.”

“...okay.”

“...did the two of us ever fight? Without anyone to stop me?”

“Just once. My first run through the Underground. You tried to put it off, and get me to put it off, for as long as possible. Just like the next time.”

“I see.”

Asgore stared at the garden, seeing none of it… and then he felt two arms try to wrap around him in a hug.

“You could have won easily. You had fire magic and a trident and if you wanted to, you could have danced around me like I was an eight year old child with a frying pan. Because that’s what I was. But you didn’t move. Or flinch. You gave me a chance to go home.”

“...I see.”

“And in the end, you just... gave up. And…”

Asgore let his arm rest on Frisk’s back.

“...pathetic, isn’t it? I declared a war of vengeance, but in the end I couldn’t bring myself to defeat even one child.”

Frisk felt Asgore’s posture shift where he was sitting, almost as if a great weight resting on his shoulders had suddenly become a little bit lighter.

“Frisk… even if I could remember it. I do not blame you. And… when you came back, what you were willing to do, for the sake of peace. I am so glad that Toriel stopped us, and we did not have to fight.”

“Uhm.” Frisk opened their mouth, then closed it. “It’s. A little more complicated than I made it sound.”

“Matters like these always are,” Asgore sighed. “Time loops or not.”

“All of these are simple enough toys. Human have been making them for ages. All we’ve done is commit to 3D printing on a large enough scale.” Alphys waved at the gift shop’s dazzling array of tops, gyroscopes, low powered microscopes and telescopes, and moire pattern booklets. “What we
can offer that other companies can’t is actual magic. Not just illusionist magic kits, but technology incorporating magic as an operating component. We recently started a line of Soul-themed accessories that respond to a human’s Soul Chromatic, but there are more practical possibilities too.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Power supplies jumped right at the top of my list recently.” Alphys opened up a cabinet and pulled out a metallic cube with a few lights and ports, some of which looked like USB ports and others that looked like electrical wall sockets. “This is a miniature nuclear generator. No waste, no radiation. It runs on commonplace light elements. And as you can see it fits in your hand. I’ve been trying to make them even smaller to keep my cell phone at 100% all the time, but I couldn’t make them cost effective on that scale. But this is the kind of thing that people could carry around in their bag or coat pocket or something to keep their phone or tablet or laptop running.”

“I can kind of see the appeal myself, although the fact that it’s nuclear makes me nervous. Not the radiation part, the legal part. There’s a LOT of legal issues with radioactive materials.”

“Oh, the materials aren’t radioactive!”

“…they’re not?”

“It’s just lithium, boron, aluminum and some iron and copper in the framing and circuitry. All stable isotopes when it’s turned off. It actually works by a phenomenon that could best be described as cold fusion, but apparently there was a big scandal about cold fusion research in the past so we’re trying not to use that phrase in the documentation or promotional material.”

“That would probably be for the best.” Mr. Parsons picked up the cube that Dr. Alphys was holding out. “I mean, I don’t think it would be inaccurate to market it as a long term, high capacity, non-rechargeable storage battery. Low battery life for electronics is a pretty big market issue so whoever, uh ‘solves’ that part of the supply and demand cycle will be sitting pretty.”

“I was thinking exactly that when I started working on them! Uh. M-maybe not in exactly those words.”

“Right. Any other magical toys you have waiting in the wings?”

“Well, there was some stuff we have planned for using Blue Magic for floating toys. Anti-gravity and stuff. But we haven’t finished the reliability or safety tests yet, those will take at least until August to be sure. Dr. Aster and Sans were working on applying their dimensional physics knowledge towards computing, but that project had to be put on indefinite standby a week or two ago, after some anti-monster bigots got into the Underground and caused a lot of damage to the C.O.R.E. facility in Hotland. The Dimensional Modem for ultra fast communication is still a possibility though.”

“Plenty of competitive gamers out there willing to pay a pretty penny for something like that.” Mr. Parsons handed over the power cube back to Dr. Alphys as he looked around the gift shop again, freezing as he noticed what looked like a wooden food stand with a roof above it… a roof covered in what looked like snow. “I’m sorry, was that there when we came into the gift shop?”

“nope.” A white skull appeared from beneath the stand, followed by arms holding some appliances, a power cube, and a packet each of hot dogs and hot dog buns. “wanna buy a hot dog in a minute?”

“...I want to say no, but now that you mention it, I am kind of hungry.”
Asriel picked up the index card with the holes in it, and slowly moved it over to the open page of the book. The holes lined up perfectly with the size of the letters and the line spacing in each paragraph.

It was so simple, and the impulse Asriel felt to slap himself in the head multiple times while muttering “you idiot” over and over again was very hard to resist. But then again, it made sense that Chara would keep the “key” needed to decode their message with the message itself, if they were leaving something that they hoped somebody might find one day.

Whatever it was.

Asriel rubbed the top of his muzzle with his free hand while his eyes squeezed shut. The strain from trying to read through three chapters of the book on codes had teamed up with the strain of Toriel’s first lessons on human history and geography when they got home, and it felt like they were negotiating with the none-too-pleasant feelings left over from retelling the final battle with Frisk to Dr. Aster in order to work out some sort of trio. But the moment the thought crossed his mind to take a break, he dismissed it out of hand. He hadn’t come very far, but the amount of effort and time it had taken made it even more important that he make some progress before he stopped.

The child’s eyes opened, and he started to move the index card around.

“That star is called Polaris. The North Star. The earth spins on an axis that lines up with the direction of that star. So it barely moves in the sky. In a world that is constantly spinning, constantly changing, even during the day when the sun is the brightest light in the sky, the North Star is always there. Always.’

Polaris was part of the Little Dipper or Ursa Minor, not the Big Dipper like Chara had told him in that strange dream sequence before he woke up with his old body back. Which meant that, whatever the puzzle-code thing was, it had to do with either one of the constellations, or the star itself. Maybe all three. Still, that narrowed things down considerably, given that *Introduction to Astronomy* was over five hundred pages long counting the index.

According to the Index, Page 11 was the first mention of Polaris, so Asriel flipped forward, putting down the card. Trying to line up the word Polaris with various holes in the card did not result in any words, or even combinations of fragments of words, that Asriel could recognize right away. Page 39 was different: Lining up one of the holes at the top of the card with Polaris led to other holes isolating the words *sun*, *moon*, *consequent*, *back and forth*, and *complex*. Asriel scribbled them down on a sticky note, barely noticing that his breathing was speeding up with anticipation.

That anticipation was short lived; doing the same thing with Polaris in the chart on Page 369 didn’t give him any new information. Rotating the card isolated columns of letters instead of words, and the arrangement of the print on the paper did not result in clearly organized columns anyway, but turned the card upside down or flipping it over seemed to offer more promise. In the end, though, nothing more was added to the note.

Asriel sighed, searched for Ursa Major in the Index, and found that it and Ursa Minor were both mentioned only once on Page 7.

“...ugh. Maybe I should ask Chara for a hint after all.”

As offices go, it was neither spartan nor ostentatious. The few decorations and accents present did more to indicate the potential for wealth and influence than more aggressive features like gold plating or rare textiles could have said, making it a case study in the philosophy of less is more.
The occupant of the office did not look up from the papers on the desk, even to verify the identity of the person coming in, which was itself another subtle demonstration of power and influence.

When the last paper had been signed, stacked, and placed in the corner of the desk, the man sitting behind the desk finally spoke.

“You’ve been keeping busy.”

“Yes, I have.”

“Traveling across the country, it seems.” The man pulled a sheet of paper from the pile on the other side of his desk, still looking at it instead of the person in front of him. “I didn’t think you’d ever want to go back to Ebott’s Wake. Especially not after the monsters showed up.”

“It wasn’t my first choice. But it was necessary.”

“And the, uh...” the man pulled another sheet of paper off of the stack on the corner of the desk, “The one-point-two million dollars we’ve spent on this boondoggle were also necessary?”

“Absolutely vital, unless you want all of those very important men with very deep pockets to start answering monster telephone calls and stop answering yours.”

The man sighed.

“You are aware, I hope, that going after a person’s livelihood is a basic scare tactic and not likely to do you any favors?”

“I am as aware of that fact as I am of the fact that those two papers you pulled off of that stack had nothing to do with my expense budget or the costs for the containment system. I know that you memorize information and then pretend to be reading it off of papers. It makes you look like you have a wider range of influence than you really do, while also concealing your admittedly impressive personal faculties so that anyone who doesn’t fall for it will underestimate you.”

For the first time, the man looked up and stared at the woman standing in front of his desk.

“...it appears that I have been the one to underestimate you.”

“It happens. But I’m not here to make a power move. I’m here to explain why everything is taking so long and costing so much.”

“...and?”

“And it’s taking as long as it has to, and costs as much as it needs to.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It is the only answer I have that doesn’t require me giving you a five hour crash course in a metaphysical cosmology that you will either disbelieve, or accept as real and spend the rest of your life jumping at shadows when you realize the implications.”

The man and the woman stared at each other.

“...supposing that I pull support. No more funding. No more black site access. What then?”

“Then I try to find others who will support me. Failing that, I go back to Ebott’s Wake and most likely die trying to save the world.”
“You don’t seem very concerned about the prospect.”

“I’ve been living on borrowed time since the monsters first appeared. You get used to it.”

The two figures stared at each other for a few seconds.

“I’ll take your word for it.” The man leaned back in his chair. “If you can’t provide results by the end of the month, I don’t think this partnership can continue.”

“The way things have been going, I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised, then.”

The woman turned around, walked over to the officer door, and turned to face the man as she opened it.

“Honestly, I’m a little disappointed that you didn’t take me up on the offer of a lecture on metaphysics. It’s been a while since I got to do that.”

The woman disappeared and the man stared at the closed office door for a few minutes. Even if he had looked up, he might not have seen the dark silhouette in one corner of the room where the indirect lighting didn’t reach all the way.

They never look up. Even when they should know better.

The man behind the desk frowned and stuck a finger in his ear, as if he was attempting to dig out some earwax.

In the corner of the ceiling, the darkness faded away.

Frisk scrubbed their head with a towel and tried to pull away from the towel that Toriel was holding.

“Mom I’m fine, the rain didn’t start until like thirty seconds before we got home.”

“Thirty seconds was more than long enough to soak you through to the bone!”

“That’s not how it works. Human skin has this layer of oil and lipids that repels water.”

Toriel took the now soaked towel from Frisk and handed them a dry one. “That may well be true, but that does not change the essential issue. Now, heat up to the bathroom, wash up, and get into some dry clothes.”

Frisk wrapped the towel around themselves and looked at where Asgore was holding a fireball in his hands, the moisture steaming off of him while Asriel managed to collect all of the towels that Asgore had previously used to soak up the excess moisture and place them in a plastic tote from the laundry room.

“I could have just cut out the middle man-”

“You do not have a Boss Monster’s fire resistance, Frisk.” Toriel’s voice was slightly softer than it had been. “If you attempted to do that, you would run the risk of giving yourself burns, either from the steam or from the charring of the fabric of your clothes.”

“...I could heal it,” Frisk replied, although it was clear from the change in tone of voice that they were clearly re-evaluating the entire strategy after being reminded of the possible dangers.
“Actually I am fine with not getting steam burns so I vote for the shower option,” Frisk’s voice said, with an echoing overtone that wasn’t there before and a red light from their right eye.

“Perhaps we will practice later, if you are truly insistent. We certainly have enough wet towels to work with after this,” Toriel stared at the tote as Asriel picked it up and started carrying it with him to the laundry room. “In the meantime, you must get cleaned up and warmed up before you catch some sort of illness.”

“Ugh. Rain and cold don’t cause disease mom. Those ideas went out the window with germ theory—” Frisk stopped talking abruptly and sneezed.

Toriel stared at the child with an expression that was half motherly concern, half motherly I-told-you-so.

“...that doesn’t count. A hair tickled my nose.”

“Upstairs.” Toriel pointed.

“Alright, alright.” Frisk began to make their way up the staircase. “Still doesn’t count though.”

Toriel watched the child climb the stairs, turned to check on Asgore’s attempts to dry off and Asriel’s return without the laundry basket, and then walked into the kitchen. Practiced hands pulled cups and mugs and a saucepan from cabinets, followed by ingredients from the cupboard, and the queen began the familiar process of making hot cocoa.

Several minutes later, the cocoa was poured out into mugs, and Toriel carried them out into the living room, where Asgore had taken a seat at the dining room table.

“Asriel followed Frisk upstairs. I think he was planning to get their clean clothes while they were cleaning up, but I do not know for certain.”

“I see.”

“...Toriel. We did leave as soon as we realized the weather was changing. And I did what I could to shield Frisk from the rain once it started—”

“Gorey.”

The king subsided into silence, and Toriel carefully pushed a mug of cocoa towards him.

“The first time I realized that Frisk had been hurt somehow, that they needed some sort of help. I was at All Fine Labs. And… I realized how they always went out of their way not to break any rules, or to even attempt to challenge me on a personal level. When Frisk disagreed. They never spoke openly about it. They made their case by invoking some other source of information. Books, usually. I thought… I used to think… that it reflected a natural tendency towards formal debate and logical reasoning.”

Toriel shook her head.

“That is not happening as often. I am not angry about Frisk getting soaked in the rain, though I am concerned for their health. That was why I was so insistent earlier that they dry off and get into warm, clean clothes as soon as possible. But more and more, lately, they have been trying to speak with their own words, instead of those of others. I have thought about this subject a great deal, in light of what we have recently learned. I believe that we can see it as a step forward. That Frisk does not feel that they need to hide behind the authority and experience of others. That Frisk feels safe in
saying ‘no’ to us, rather than contorting themselves to fit some artificial image of a hypothetical perfect child.”

Asgore slowly nodded, staring at his own mug of cocoa without picking it up.

“...I remember a time. When I would come back to the castle after hours of planning and meeting with everyone, trying to keep the kingdom running and hopeful and alive. And hearing the patter of little feet, or seeing Asriel riding on Chara’s soldiers as they ran around the courtyard pretending to… well, I never understood it even when they did explain it. But I understood that they were happy. It was… something that I began to look forward to. I love Frisk. But I have missed that. The energy of youth, which cares nothing for decorum or propriety or anything but imagination and adventure.”

“...I have missed that as well.”

A red glowing eye panned over the sticky note left on top of the dresser: Sun, Moon, Consequent, Back And Forth, Complex.

“Nice work, Asriel. You solved my secret astronomy book puzzle.”

“Did I?” Asriel was lying on his side, facing the wall so he couldn’t see Frisk get dressed, the paw pads on the bottom of his feet drawing the human child’s eyes with their color contrast. “All I did was write down a bunch of words that lined up in the holes in the index card. I still don’t know what any of it means.”

Frisk turned back to the dresser to pull out clean clothes and pulled them on as fast as possible, their mouth still moving under the direction of another mind.

“Well, you got to where I wanted people to go. I didn’t realize it wasn’t a very good puzzle until, like, I fell down in the Underground and started learning the fundamentals.”

“...say what?”

“The other stuff in the book pocket, you remember that, right?”

“Yeah. It’s still there.”

“You read it though?”

“Yeah. A list of colors and… other words. And the other card had some star chart data.”

“Right. You can look now.”

Asriel rolled over to see Frisk sitting on their own bed, one eye glowing red.

“One of the first things I did at the Librarby was Google my own name. A lot of people do that, but I ran into something interesting. After a few pages of results, I discovered that ‘Chara’ was also one of the names for a star. And given that I was already pretty interested in stars and the sky and astrology, that really had an effect on me. So… I wrote that information down on a spare index card when Mr. Van Garrett was not looking. And I put it in the back of a very old book. I couldn’t be sure I could bring that information home with me, or if I’d be allowed to keep it if I did bring it home. But when I came to the Librarby, I could find that book and read that card. It was… it was sort of like a watershed moment for me, an anchor. Proof that I existed outside of the Guardians, outside of Jordan’s world, Jordan’s rules.”
“...so you made that first.”

“Yeah. The other stuff I didn’t make until later. When... things got worse in the compound. The list of colors and attributes I wrote down because it was something I found in Jordan’s notes, in his office. There was a lot of stuff and of the information I understood, that was what would fit on the checkout card. I thought it would be suspicious if too many index cards disappeared, and I didn’t want Mr. Van Garrett to have a reason to stop being nice to me, since hanging out at the Library was always the highlight of my day when I could manage it.”

“Doesn’t he just… leave that stuff and scratch paper out for people to use? Like, for free?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know it at the time. And by the time I felt it was safe to get more paper, I was paranoid about somebody from the compound figuring out what I was doing. So that was why I used the holes cut in the card to isolate words already in the book. It was obviously a way to hide information but it wasn’t clear what information. And if somebody who wasn’t a Guardian stumbled across it, they might need it in the future. It was a good idea, or so I thought.”

“So… what do those words mean?”

Chara sighed.

“And that’s why I just thought it was a good idea, rather than it really being one. It took me three sheets of scratch paper to prototype the holes and I realized I couldn’t cut holes accurately enough to make sure individual letters were always lined up right. So I had to use the words and sentences that were already in the book. So I was encoding a message two different ways, and one of them was astrology metaphors.”

“Right, that’s the part I’m not sure I understand.”

“I would have been amazed if you did. Or if anyone did, if they didn’t already know all about the Guardians.” Chara held up Frisk’s right hand with two fingers outstretched. “The Sun and the Moon mean Man and Woman in the astrology system that keeps showing up in the Guardian mythos and cosmology. Consequent means something that follows after, a result. Which is a baby. I mean, I don’t know exactly how it works, but I know the general idea.”

“With you so far.”

“Right. So. Do you know what an arranged marriage is?”

“Yeah.” Asriel sat up on the bed, feet dangling over the side. “It’s one of the ways monster families would maintain political power before the war. They’d be linked together and pool their resources. We had to stop in the Underground because if people didn’t marry for love, then it would just make them more likely to Fall Down sooner.”

“Right. Humans did it for a long time too. And some of them still do. Like the Guardians.”

“...what?”

Chara sighed.

“That’s what Back And Forth was supposed to mean. Like trading favors between families. Only the Guardians didn’t do it to tie the families together. They did it because of some larger plan. I didn’t know what that one was exactly. All I knew is that before I was even born, I was supposed to marry Forty Harrison when the two of us got old enough. And the last word, Complex, was another word for Compound.”
Chara leaned back until they were lying on Frisk’s bed.

“Like I said. It wasn’t a very good puzzle. The only way to know that you solved it was to have certain information already, and if you had that information then you didn’t need to solve the puzzle in the first place.”

Asriel shrugged.

“Well. As a first try, it wasn’t bad. I’m sure Papyrus would be glad to share pointers.”

“No thank you. I no longer have a reason for hiding that kind of information away. Not that I really want to go through the trouble of remembering everything they taught me and writing it down for others.”

“I guess I can understand that.” Asriel leaned back over on his bed, still lying on his side to stare at Chara. “So… if you don’t want to talk about the past, what about the future?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, when All Fine Labs gets you set up with your own body, what kind of body are you hoping for?”

Honestly I haven’t really thought about it. And it’s not like I really have a choice, right? Unless I end up as a ghost monster. Then instead of, like, choosing clothes for the day, I choose a body to possess.”

“So, do you want to be a ghost monster?”

“I don’t really know what I want, to be honest. It would be appropriate if I did end up as a ghost monster though. I died and then I came back. That’s been the human idea behind ghosts for literally ages. Oh, that means I could haunt Jordan! That could be very therapeutic. Jump scaring him late at night, making objects fly around his prison cell and hit him. I feel better just thinking about it.”

“I don’t think mom or dad would be really happy about that. Not because he doesn’t deserve it, but because they wouldn’t want you anywhere near him.”

“True, but that temptation would always be there if I was a ghost. If we rule out that as an option, I guess… any elemental form would work, not that I feel drawn towards or pushed away from any particular version of them. Although if I was a water elemental or a slime I’d probably get in trouble for water damage to the house.”

Asriel opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say anything, he heard a familiar voice without the otherworldly echo.

“The house is already infused against fire magic. We could do the same thing with water, or with any other form of elemental magic. Call it two days for the house and maybe another two days for all of the furniture. Easy peasy.”

“Oh, hello Frisk. You’ve been quiet for a while.”

“Yeah, well, you were busy.”

“That’s true. I don’t suppose you have any ideas?”

Actually I do, what about being a skeleton? You could still scare the unenlightened by using the
association with death. Plus skeletons are super cuddly.”

“That is not a factual statement.”

“Papyrus would never lie to us! You have besmirched his honor! As soon as we have separate bodies, you and I must duel. Water pistols at ten paces.”

“That is absolutely not going to happen.”

“I demand satisfaction!”

“Not happening.”

“I have a coupon for satisfaction and you must redeem it. It is the law.”

“That is not how anything works and you know it!”

In his own bed, Asriel covered up the end of his muzzle to try to muffle the snorting laughter that was trying to escape.
Behind the bathroom door, it was possible to hear a mixture of falling water and cursing. Agent Brown rapped his knuckles on the wood veneer.

“Hey, you alright in there?”

“What do you think?!” The words were muffled, but there was no mistaking the tone.

“Just letting you know, I did some shopping and got some monster food. It supposed to heal physical damage, in case that pepper spray left a mark or some inflammation or something.”

The swearing resumed, and Agent Brown walked away from the door, pulling out a laptop from his bag and booting it up. After a few minutes spent verifying that the hardware and software had not been tampered with, Brown began typing with one hand while another reached into the paper sack he had brought with him, biting into a donut covered in a series of lines of white icing arranged to look like a spiderweb.

Agents were able to enroll in a magic education course at a monster-owned business, All Fine Labs. Neither Agent was able to manifest magic during the initial course. Six other students in the classroom exhibited signs of magic, not including subject code name Pandora-1. (Attaching classroom notes taken to this report, along with receipts for reimbursement of travel expenses and tuition fees.)

Opportunity to locate and acquire Black Box did not present itself. Will make further attempts during future magic classes.

Town defies conventional counterintelligence analysis. Monsters have completely integrated socially and economically. Most normal leverage points for division exist, and the monsters’ biggest political supporter is not present so political influence may be possible. Anti-Monster group still extant, but paranoid and isolationist. Unable to make contact and organization is likely of little strategic value if contact is made.

May be possible to divide town along cultural lines, if not racial ones. Owner of All Fine Labs potentially involved in some form of domestic dispute. Unconfirmed rumors indicate several prominent public figures are pursuing relationships with monsters. May provide leverage privately, or as part of a larger media campaign. Will pursue leads in the next few days and concurrent with further magic reports.

Agent Brown stopped typing as he heard a loud clattering noise from the bathroom, along with a series of high volume curse words that eventually trailed off.

Agent operational status is nominal. In absence of new instructions, will proceed with original information gathering plans.
Frisk stacked up the plates and carried them into the kitchen, hesitated for a moment, then put them on the countertop. They could wait to wash them later, surely Toriel would understand under the circumstances.

“Hey.”

Frisk turned to see Asriel standing in the kitchen doorway, and they skirted around the kitchen table towards him.

“...I missed you so much.”

“Frisk, you hardly even knew me.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Asriel smiled and looked down at the floor.

“Everyone’s so happy to have me back. Even after. The things I did.”

The monster child slowly stopped smiling.

“It’s not fair. It’s not right.”

“Don’t say that.” Frisk rushed the last few feet to Asriel and wrapped their arms around him. “This is your home. This is your family. You belong here.”

“...no I don’t. You know more than anyone else that I don’t.”

“Yes you-”

“Frisk.”

Frisk felt Asriel’s paw on their head.

“I never wanted to break their hearts again. Mom and Dad. But I can’t stay. Even if this body is stable. I’m not supposed to be here. I got to say goodbye. A real goodbye. To everyone. That’s more than I could have asked for.”

Frisk redoubled their grip on Asriel, but they could still feel their grip on him slipping as he pulled away.

“Goodbye, Frisk.”

“Don’t go.”

“Frisk, wake up.”

Frisk’s words caught in their throat as they heard Asriel’s words, and they watched him walk out of the kitchen and towards the front door. Frisk managed to grab the doorway with one hand and pull themselves upright, watching as Asriel pulled the door open.

Around them, the house began to distort and fall apart, and the child felt themselves start to wake up. It had all been just another dream. In a few seconds, they would wake up in their bed, still sick and hurt from the attack at the Auditorium, and Asriel would still be trapped as a flower, just like all the other times before.
It wasn’t fair.

Frisk reached out, but they couldn’t reach Asriel. They never could.

“It’ll be okay, Asriel. Please. Don’t leave.”

“Frisk. Come on. It’s Asriel.”

Frisk opened their eyes, then immediately shut them again against the bright light. Narrowing their vision to a thin slit, they twisted their head to look around at-

‘Asriel!’

“It’s real. The dream is real.”

Frisk opened their eyes, staring into the darkness. There was a snuffling noise next to them, and something warm and fuzzy trying to burrow under the covers.

The child let out the breath they had been holding in.

“...so is this real?”

Outside, there was the soft sound of summer rain falling on the roof, on the branches of the tree, rushing out of the gutters. A little light began to shine through the window, traveled across the walls, and disappeared, accompanied by the sound of an engine as a car drove down the rainy street.

“...okay then.” Frisk rolled over, pulled up the bed covers, and wrapped an arm around Asriel as if he was a particularly large, fluffy teddy bear.

A few seconds later, their eyes opened again.

“Figures...”

Slowly and carefully, Frisk crawled out of the bed, trying not to disturb Asriel in the process, until their feet were on the floor and they walked out of the bedroom.

Across the hallway, they blinked and shielded their eyes from the bathroom lights, staring at their reflection in the mirror.

No pithy thoughts or commentary occurred to them.

“Yay,” Frisk muttered under their breath. “I get to use the bathroom without an audience for once. My life is a grab bag of ridiculous right now.”

Toriel’s eye opened, and she took in the details of the room around her; the fireplace, burning low, Asgore’s horns sticking out over the sofa armrest, the library book on the floor-

“Aha,” she mumbled to herself, leaning over to pick up the book.

“Is everything okay?”

Toriel flinched in surprise, her reading glasses falling off of her muzzle as she turned to see Frisk standing on the top of the staircase.
“Oh! Frisk, you gave me quite a start.”

“Sorry. I heard a loud noise and was worried.”

Toriel waved her paw, reaching down with the other to grab the book.

“It is fine. I think it is the book falling which woke me up.”

Frisk slowly made their way down to the ground floor as Toriel stood up from her reading chair.

“Dad’s staying the night again?”

“Yes. It seems that the rain shower was both longer and more intense than the radio station predicted.”

Toriel’s commentary was interrupted by a noise not unlike a saw being pulled through a wooden log, and the queen pressed one paw to her mouth to stop from giggling.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

“Is that why you and dad had separate rooms in the Underground?”

“Indeed it is.”

The queen walked over to the dining room table, placed the book on it, and sat down. A few seconds later, Frisk sat down on the other side of the table, staring at the book.

“Trying to stay one step ahead for Asriel’s lessons?”

“Yes and no. I was… intrigued by the parallels. My own education regarding the history of monsters was a very long time ago, and interrupted by the war and all that came after.” Toriel opened the book at random and frowned at the result. “Perhaps only Asgore, Gerson and myself remember that monsters were far from inexperienced when words failed and only violence could speak for us.”

“…what did monsters fight over?”

“The same things as humans, for the most part. Land. The justifications were always different, just as they were for humans, but in the end it always came down to territory and natural resources.” The queen sighed. “Our excesses never reached the extremes of cruelty that human armies perpetrated on their prisoners and conquered populations, but monsters are just as susceptible to the insulating force of Execution Points and the Level of Violence, and it was all to easy to ignore and justify lesser cruelties and inequalities, until they became enmeshed in monster cultures.”

“Uhm. Do I want to know specifics?”

“I doubt it very much, but… for Alphys and Undyne to even be friends, let alone partners seeking to marry, would have been unthinkable once. Likewise, my friendship with Sans would have been unforgivably scandalous, for a Boss Monster to interact with a scribe or archivist in any manner other than purely professional.” Toriel tapped one large finger on the table for a few seconds before speaking again. “The war was terrible, and cost us much. The Barrier and all that followed cost us so much more. But some of what we lost, what we were forced to discard because it was contrary to our very survival, will not and should not be missed.”

“…what was the world like back then? Before the war?”

“It was… it was not that much different than the world now. Families growing, moving, living.
Merchants peddling their wares. Travelers bringing news of distant lands. Amusements and entertainments to occupy the mind and confound the senses. Of course, the essential details were different, especially with magic being so common, but sometimes I think I can close my eyes and listen to the sounds of this town, and almost imagine that I am back th-”

A particularly loud snore from the sofa stopped Toriel in mid-sentence, and she and Frisk stared at each other for a few seconds before they both began giggling.

“Hee hee hee… it is getting rather late, my child. And this week shall be very busy.”

“Right. I’ll get back to bed now. Thank you for the history lesson.”

“Good night, Frisk. See you in the morning.”

Rain rolled off of the black cloak as if it was made of rubber or plastic instead of cloth, as the hooded figure stared at several grave stones.

“Sometimes you make it very hard for me to trust you.”

Next to the cloaked figure, a hole in space, a shadow with nothing casting, made a motion not unlike shrugging its shoulders.

Sorry. Force of habit. If there’s one thing I’ve learned firsthand, it’s that you never know who might be watching and listening.

The cloaked figure shook its head, sending a spray of water drops back and forth.

“That is not what I meant. I meant that you said you wanted to try to save everyone. But everyone seems to include dangerous enemies, while leaving out people who died through no fault of their own.”

If I had the power to change things on that scale with a snap of my fingers, I wouldn’t need help from you or from Thomas.

“So you two are on a first name basis, now?”

Of course not. He doesn’t know my name.

“Neither do I.”

For some time, the only sound was the fall of rain on the grass, through the tries, and onto the grave markers and headstones.

I wasn’t lying. I’ll do everything I can to save everyone. I promised myself I’d do that before I even met you. No challenge too great. No puzzle too complex. No battle too difficult.

“…and which one are you doing right now?”

Technically all of them at the same time. For the record, I don’t blame you for being impatient, or frustrated with me. Occupational hazard.

“…tell me one thing. No lies, no half truths, no strategic omissions.”

Okay. Shoot.
The hooded figure turned their head.

“Why do you hate the Usurper so much?”

*I don’t hate it, it’s just working contrary to my goals.*

“I asked you not to lie to me. Just because I can’t see you doesn’t mean I can’t see right through you.”

*I wasn’t lying when I said the Usurper was working contrary to my goals. And I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t hate it. It just made different choices than I would. And there was a time… a long time ago. When I almost made the same choices. Almost walked down a path that, if I wanted to retrace my steps, and go back to where I was, that I wouldn’t be able to. Because I didn’t see any other way forward. So maybe this all hits a little close to home. But yeah, I don’t hate the Usurper. It’s the choices it made that I hate. And the reminder that I can fuck up just as badly if I’m not careful.*

“...thank you for telling me the truth.”

*It’s the least I can do.*

“True. It is, indeed, the bare minimum.”

*Heh.*
“Good morning, Ebott’s Wake! You’re listening to The Morning Rush on KEBT FM, I am your master of ceremonies Brett ‘The Brett’ Brinkmann with the one and only DJ Pantz!”

“Accept no substitutes.”

“And we at the studio hope that all of you listening accept nothing less than a fantastic Sunday here in Scenic Ebott’s Wake, Where Nothing Is Off The Table!”

“That might be the most optimistic and most threatening tourism slogan I’ve heard yet.”

“Yeah, I kind of want to say the Tourism Board is scraping the bottom of the barrel, but the last time I said that it turned out they had another, completely different barrel underneath it. But that’s not here or there. What is here is the news! Last night Lost Eagle County got a fair bit more rain than we originally planned for, which has resulted in a few mishaps. Road washouts have been reported on Ridge Road between Ebott’s Wake and Lone Point, as well as the outskirts of Triton near the older mine shafts. Triton has issued a Sinkhole Warning for the first time since 2006, so stay safe out there.”

“On a more positive note, the All Fine Labs Magic Annex opened yesterday with no problems, attacks by anti-monster protestors, or any more than the typical level of hysterical accusations of evil schemes on social media. We were not able to reach Queen Toriel for comment, but Dr. Alphys did send me a smiley emoticon when I texted her to ask how things went. So based on that it seems like things are going pretty well, especially since all that construction has half the folks at All Fine Labs working twenty five hour days for the past week.”

“Is that why Gunther spent half an hour talking to the freezers at Wal-Mart on Thursday?”

“What? That’s not… oh! Oh. Yeah, no. Sans told me about this, there was some sort of update problem with the phones Dr. Alphys makes. I can’t remember or understand exactly what it was but it did mess with reception until she could put out a hotfix.”

“Well, alright then. Not exactly sure how cell phones are connected to freezers, but I don’t know anything about magic, so… all’s well that end’s well, I guess.”

“Oh, he’s not well. He burned himself out and now he’s managed to get Stoned.”

“...uhm-”

“The monster illness, Brett. I actually brought a card, I was wondering if anyone wanted to sign it? I’m not a hundred percent sure how this Get Well Soon stuff works but I would like Gunther to get well, so, you know.”

“Uh. I’ll take a look at it after the show. Speaking of the show that we are supposed to be doing, let’s move on to the updated event calendar, which has been taken for a ride in light of recent events, both weather related and otherwise. Our first major change is the Running of the Pitbulls has been delayed in light of the PETA presence in Quarterhorse Fields this week. Nobody wants to risk a possible attack, least of all the many pitbull enthusiasts of Lost Eagle Country, who originally organized this event to push back against the idea that pitbulls are an intrinsically dangerous and violent breed of
dog. Second major change is that the No-Legged Race has been delayed, with a new date To Be Determined. Presumably after the ground dries out. On the other hand, the Go Duck Yourself Costume Party has been moved ahead to take advantage of the sudden free time. The new time is this the ninth of June, this coming Thursday, from four to eight in the evening at the Knights Of The Road Who Say Ni Mission. And remember, all proceeds from the raffle tickets go to the Dalton Trust and their endless fight against Cancer.”

“We’ve been asked… multiple times… to remind all listeners that the key word in that phrase is Duck. As in, the aquatic barnyard fowl. Not… something that rhymes with it.”

“Sad but true. And speaking of extremely unfortunate miscommunications, it’s time to check in with Gary Welkin, bringing us the traffic report! Gary, how’s it look up there!”

“Brett, vindication has never looked so sweet! From my higher vantage point, both literal and moral, I look down with scorn upon the premises of the Ebott’s Wake Tourism Board! May God salt the earth, that nothing may grow there again!”

“Yeah, we’re happy about the settlement too, but we were hoping for news of a more, you know. Automotive nature.”

“I’m afraid such news will be few and far between, with ditches overflowing and many streets following! Kelly Plaza itself is now the largest wading pool I have ever seen! Not necessarily the largest ever made, I believe that the Guinness World Record for that particular achievement belongs to somebody in Nova Scotia! I may be remembering that incorrectly!”

“Okay, so, stay away from Kelly Plaza until everything drains away. Thanks Gary. We actually just got a breaking news bulletin during Gary’s traffic report, Helping Hams Pig Farm in Gemini Roads experienced a massive flood-related fence breach earlier this morning and roughly six hundred… am I reading this right? Head of hog? Heads of hog? Heads of hogs? Whatever. Six hundred hogs are now running loose in and around Gemini Roads, so even if the roads aren’t underwater, that doesn’t mean that everything is clear sailing.”

“Unless you’re going down the roads in an actual boat. Not that we are encouraging or condoning anything of the sort as an alternate means of transportation. Unless you’re the Riverperson.”

“And on that note, we’re going to pause for a few more Public Service Announcements and when we come back we’ll have a special guest in the studio; Lilian Broadmoore will be explaining all of the new innovations and safety features that have been added to the municipal swimming pool. So stick around, more Morning Rush coming your way!”

Chapter End Notes

Foreshadowing powers ACTIVATE!
The Catch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They are numb.

Asriel is dying.

There is no fear.

Not from them, not from Asriel.

Toriel is there, green light shining from her fingertips.

In his mother’s arms, he knows that he is safe.

They are not safe. They nearly murdered the king. Now they successfully murdered the prince.

They were afraid, but they cannot be afraid anymore. Almost like fear was money, and they spent it all on the way back to the Underground.

They can’t even be afraid of what will happen to them after Asriel is gone.

If they will remain together, for good or ill, or if they will split apart just like Asriel is breaking apart.

They see their old body, already sprinkled with Asriel’s dust.

They have just enough anger left in them to rage at it, for slowing Asriel down as he ran away, for spooking people in town so that they attacked first, for cutting up the buttercups that made Asgore sick, for weird eyes that made all the other children mean, for not being what HE wanted in the first place...

But like a match, it flares for only a second, and then it goes out.

They are numb.

The bedroom was tinted by red light as Chara opened their eyes, looking around to check where they were. The child sighed and relaxed slightly when they understood that they were in a room in a house on the surface, even if the body they were steering wasn’t actually theirs. Next to them in Frisk’s bed, Asriel grumbled and scooted closer to them, rather than waking up from the movement. Chara brought a hand up and ran it over Asriel’s head, fingers sliding through his fur.

“I love you, Asriel.”

Chara’s whisper echoed in the room even more than it normally would have from the peculiar effect that their influence had on Frisk’s voice. Asriel stirred some more, but did not wake up, and Chara turned to look out of the window. The sky was dark and overcast, making it impossible to be certain how early or late it was. Chara turned back again and reached toward Frisk’s cell phone in its charging station, before withdrawing their arm and wrapping it around Asriel instead.

Whatever the time was, it was Sunday. No magic class, or other obligations they could think of right
away.

All that mattered was that Asriel was there.

“Undyne, c-could you help me for a minute?”

Undyne looked up from the kettle on the stove top, glanced back at it, did some quick mental arithmetic, and ran to the bathroom.

“Sure, what do you need?”

Alphys was blushing but slowly turned around and reached up over one shoulder.

“There’s some. Ah. Some skin that’s not molting off right. And it’s, uh. I can’t reach because I’m so… um…”

Undyne’s hand reached out and Alphys squeezed her eyes shut, apparently bracing for the sensation of pain. Slowly and carefully, Undyne peeled away the older patches of scales, her eye constantly scanning Alphys for any sign of discomfort.

“That looks like the big patches. Going after the little spots that stuck now. Are you doing okay?”

“Yeah. Uh… sorry it’s so. Um. Gross.”

“You know molting isn’t anything to be embarrassed about, right? I shed scales all the time.”

Alphys made a dismissive noise.

“Yeah, but when you shed, it’s like a sequin or rhinestone coming off of something pretty. When I shed, it’s like the wrapper coming off of a candy bar that’s been left in a hot car.”

Undyne shrugged as she scraped off the last patch of stuck skin.

“I’m not totally sold on your metaphor there, honey.”

Joe stared at the cup of coffee in his hand, inhaled the aroma slowly, and downed the entire thing in a single gulp. A few seconds later, he shook his head, awkwardly picked up a pencil with his left hand, and started scribbling on a legal tablet in front of him.

After less than ten seconds, he huffed in annoyance, put down the pencil, and held out what was left of his right arm. There was a purple light and the pencil began to glow, dancing over the paper.

Out of the corner of his eye, Joe could see two young monster children, one of them with a gemstone shaped head and the other with a bulbous head and a mouthful of tentacles. Both children were staring at his magical display.

Before he could seriously consider whether to look directly at them or to ignore them, the bell above the door rang and he looked up to see a familiar face heading his way.

“Well, this weekend started strong, but I get the feeling that it’s not going to last.” Justin slid into the booth on the opposite side. “What are you working on?”
“Lab stuff. Where’s Hal?”

“Trying to fix the windmill again.”

“Mmm. Steve’s supposed to be busy all day.”

Justin raised both eyebrows in surprise, although the rest of his face didn’t follow up, so instead he looked like some combination of amused and very tired.

“Probably something to do with O’Dell.”

“He didn’t say but that doesn’t seem like a bad guess from where I’m sitting. You alright? You look exhausted.”

“I had that dream again.” Justin rubbed his eyelids one with one hand. “The one where Steve Buscemi was elected Pope and started running people down with the Popemobile.”

“...wait, how would that even work?”

“Well, the Popemobile is designed to protect the Pope from assassination, so it’s probably tough enough to shrug off hit-and-run attacks from other cars-”

“I mean, how would Buscemi end up as pope in the first place?”

“I don’t know, I’m not Catholic, I have no idea how it works.” Justin blinked his eyes, trying to clear the sleep and haze from them. “Is that a new shirt?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know you liked the Chili Peppers.”

“I don’t, it was at Joe’s House of Stuff for a buck fifty and I needed a new shirt to replace the one that the EMTs ripped up after my big boss battle with O’Dell.”

“Right.” Justin frowned for a second. “Huh.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing, I think. Was just remembering after Cater cold cocked me. I think he was gloating, but I couldn’t hear what he was saying because my ears were ringing. Also the rest of my head. I think he cut me with that freaky knife or something. There’s some holes in my shirt that weren’t there before.”

“...I’m not complaining but if he had you dead to rights, why didn’t he stab you then and there?”

“Hell if I know. He’s never been shy about his kill count before. Maybe he was in a hurry. But if he was in a hurry, he could have just made a run for the school as soon as I was on my back. And if he wanted to be double sure that I wouldn’t get up and chase after him, or tag him in the back, he could have just slit my throat.”

Joe brought the pencil up to his mouth and started tapping it against his teeth.

“...Mike, Hal, and Eli all said that Cater was holding this freaky glowing knife. And in those videos that the kids and teachers took of the fight, Frisk blows it to smitheroons after Cater’s down for the count. Maybe it’s some sort of, I dunno, enchanted weapon? Something the Sages passed down that finally worked in the hands of somebody with magic?”
“...I could see that. Not sure where he was hiding it all this time but that’s not really a deal breaker for this idea. And if he only cut me a little, it was probably designed to use blood or something.”

“Yeah.” Joe nodded. “And he didn’t use its supercalifragilisticexpialidocious magic power on you because he was saving it for fighting Frisk.”

“Makes sense.”

The bell above the door rang again, and Justin turned in his seat in time to see Hal Greene walking towards the booth with dark circles under his eyes… and a duck clutched in his arms.

“Ugh.” The mechanic slid into the booth next to Justin. “This has been the worst Sunday.”

Justin’s eyes darted toward the duck, which seemed remarkably nonchalant about being carried around.

“Do you want to talk about-”

“No.”

“So, my children, do you have anything in particular planned for today?”

Frisk looked down at their bowl of oatmeal and picked up a spoon; on the other side of the table, Asriel had already started on his bowl with enthusiasm.

“Well, we were going to do some stuff in the back yard, but I checked and it’s pretty muddy again. So that doesn’t seem like the best use of our time.”

“We could… go out on the sidewalk.” Asriel paused with the spoon in mid air, long enough for some of the oatmeal to drop off of the spoon and back into the bowl. “As long as the water isn’t over that we should be fine. We can stay on the concrete.”

“Right.” Frisk looked around the table; Asriel was still going through his oatmeal at a reckless pace, while Asgore was proceeding slowly with his own bowl and Toriel had just sat down with her own bowl. “What about you guys?”

“Well, I’m heading to the school grounds to make sure that the lawn is coming in evenly.” Asgore frowned. “All that fire and ice magic was not kind to the grass, and all this heavy rain and poor drainage could undo all of my efforts to reseed it.”

“And I intend to double check my lesson plans for this coming week, in light of what we have learned from our initial class.”

“Okay.” Frisk dug their spoon into the bowl. “On that subject, I got some ideas from the class, and from the Librarby after, so I want to try some stuff with Pattern Magic. If Asriel’s up for it.”

“Sure thing,” Asriel said around a mouthful of dissolving oatmeal.

“Asriel, do not chew with your mouth open.”

“Sorry mom.”
“...earth to Steve.”

Officer Steve blinked and looked away from the transport holding Thomas O’Dell; somehow Officer Carmichael had climbed into the passenger seat of the cruiser and was holding something wrapped in paper in front of his face.

“Whoa, what?”

“Breakfast Burrito. The Iron Waffle’s running a special promotion.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Officer Steve grabbed the burrito, unwrapped it, and bit into it. “...not bad. Kinda spicy.”

“Yeah, a little bit. Not sure if it’s peppers or what.” Officer Carmichael nodded at the transport. “You sure we’re not going at least a little bit overboard with O’Dell here?”

“If those words ever applied to this town, they sure as hell don’t now. All the evidence points to Jordan Cater treating O’Dell like a sort of apprentice or protege or whatever you wanna call it. Now he’s got all those things drawn on him, and after I took that class at All Fine Labs, I recognized a few of those symbols and patterns. I’m not worried about going overboard right now, I’m worried about not doing enough.”

“...fair point. So how was that class yesterday?”

“Confusing, with a little mortal terror when I saw Hal had a head start on everyone.”

“Hey, do not joke about that.” Officer Carmichael snapped. “Cater and O’Dell and the Sages and Anti Monster League guys were aggressive and violent, but at least that made them predictable, with or without magic. But who knows what the hell Hal Greene will do.”

“I wasn’t joking. That’s where the mortal terror comes in-”

There was a static-laden burst of noise from the radio inside the cruiser and Officer Steve dropped his half eaten burrito into a cup holder and started the engine.

“You heard the lady. Buckle up.”

“Yooooo!”

Frisk turned to see a number of familiar faces running down the sidewalk, or at least, two of them were running and two were flying. Casey landed awkwardly next to Douglas while Skate ended up hovering in place.

“Hey guys. What are you up to?”

“Yo, Douglas’s mom heard on the radio that there’s a bunch of pigs loose and they’re heading to Ebott’s Wake! So his mom told him and Douglas told Casey, who called me, and we went and got Skate and we came here to see if you wanted to go to New Tem Village and see when they show up!”

“Are you… a hundred percent sure that’s what’s going on?”

“Is anyone in this town?” Douglas snapped, before pointing at Frisk. “Wait, what were you doing before we got here?”
Frisk looked down at the baseball bat in one hand and the pocket mirror in the other, then turned to look at Asriel who was still holding a fireball in one paw while magic vines grew out of the other, and finally turned to look at Douglas again.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Thomas O’Dell had his eyes closed, but he could still see everything.

The motion of the vehicle.

The currents of air caused by the breathing of the guards in the transport with him.

Now.

O’Dell’s eyes opened and he looked up to see that the roof of the vehicle was covered in darkness that was already fading away again.

“Holy fuckballs!”

Too late, O’Dell realized that the inside of the transport had taken on a light blue glow, which had to be coming from his eyes. One guard was reaching for a radio, while two others were trying to reach for something else.

O’Dell didn’t stick around to find out exactly what.

He closed his eyes and fell through the floor of the transport.

“What in the SHIT?!” Officer Steve slammed on the brakes as a figure fell out from underneath the transport, tumbling over the asphalt. Cyan light darted around the figure as it scrambled upright and began to run, and there was the rattle of metal on metal as fragments of broken restraints fell onto the hood of the cruiser.

“...Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“You remember what I said about overdoing things?”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“I take it back.” Officer Carmichael pulled out his sidearm and rolled down the window. “Let’s go!”

Officer Steve slammed on the gas, and the police cruiser surged after O’Dell as he ran down the street. The radio began to make noise again and Carmichael grabbed the microphone.

“Officers Ward and Carmichael, in pursuit on East West Road! He can use magic! I say again, Thomas O’Dell can use magic!”

Ahead of the cruiser, O’Dell sprinted off of the road, jumping and vaulting over a fence and dropping down on the other side, sprinting across the back yard and stumbling over a child’s tricycle toy before managing to climb to his feet again. On the other side of the yard, a dark figure was waiting next to the fence.

Right this way.
O’Dell vaulted the fence into another back yard, this one inhabited. Two slime monster children were flailing at each other with toys of foam and plastic, but froze at the sound of opposing footsteps.

*If you stop to fight, your odds of escaping drop to nearly zero.*

O’Dell altered his route, passing around the children and vaulting over the corner where several fences all met. The third back yard had no fencing on the other side, but O’Dell could hear the sirens getting even closer, so he dropped into the yard on the opposing side, *where a shadowy figure was waiting.*

*Vehicle response coming together at the next intersection. If you can make something like a spike strip or caltrops from wave magic, that will slow them down.*

O’Dell slammed through the fence gate on one side of the house, clenched one hand into a fist and swung it at the crossroads. Shapes of cyan light slowly formed, landing in the street, and several vehicles that did not stop in time rocked and then slowed to a stop as their tires were blown out by glowing pyramids, nails, and even what looked like over-sized Lego bricks.

*Across the street, other side of the houses. There’s a flooded culvert.*

“I can’t… breathe… underwater.”

*In that case, I have good news! You don’t have to!*

O’Dell swore under his breath, and then swore much louder as he saw the transport that had been carrying him make the corner without hitting any of the wave magic traps, most of which had faded away. The architect sprinted around several buildings, jumped over a decorative shrub like it was hurdle at a track meet, and skidded to a stop next to an overflowing ditch where a shadowy figure stood waiting.

*The water’s moving fast here. A big blast of wave magic energy will set up a chain reaction. Try not to tire yourself out, we’re still a few blocks from the river.*

O’Dell held both hands up, trying to slow down his breathing-

“Hey, what in the heck are you-”

O’Dell spun around to see a middle aged man open up his front door and pull on some glasses, then immediately freeze.

“Aw shit.”

The man retreated back into his house and O’Dell shook his head, trying to concentrate. Eventually a flickering cyan light formed between his hands, and he threw it down into the water.

There was a wave, a fizzle, and several bubbles.

*You’re gonna have to hit it harder than that.*

“Oh, really? Thanks. There’s. No way. I would have figured that out myself,” O’Dell said while panting for breath. Another orb of cyan light was formed and thrown into the water, immediately resulting in a spray of water up in the air, one that surged up and down the ditch, through the culvert, down the street, and spreading along the other streets.

“Alright, where too now?”
Back. If you hop into that guy’s pickup bed and hug the corner closest to the intersection, they won’t see you.

O’Dell ran for the truck, vaulted over the tailgate and scrabbled to get up next to the corner. Closing his eyes, he could sense the motion of the vehicles on the road; several police cruisers shot through the intersection, with two cruisers breaking off to go down the side streets.

*The thing about small town police forces is that they’re small too. Even knowing the town the way they do, they still miss spots.*

“Yeah, that’s really fascinating. What the *hell* do I do now?!"

This guy has one of those magnetic boxes on his truck with a spare key. Passenger side, the corner of the front bumper. If you can get that without being seen, you can make it to the river. Oh, that guy’s calling 911 right now, so any time would be good.

Thomas O’Dell scrambled over the side of the pickup, fell out and onto the driveway, and managed to crawl up to the bumper, feeling around for a box.

“...it has a code lock, what’s the code?”

*It’s broken, just push buttons randomly. The guy has no idea, he’s never accidentally punched in the wrong code.*

Thomas tapped on the ‘one’ button on the keypad over and over, and the small box popped open. Pulling the key out, he pulled himself to his feet and limped to the driver’s side door, unlocked the truck, climbed in, slammed the door shut, and started the engine.

In the passenger seat, a dark figure coalesced and raised what might have been an arm.

*You can avoid any police if you go straight, right, straight, left, and then floor it to Cordwood Bridge.*

“...okay. Ugh. I feel like I’m gonna hurl.”

*You’re sweating like crazy and the sweat is causing the ink in your magic sigils to run. They’re shorting out and leeching energy.*

“Oh. Okay. So, no more magic then?”

*I wouldn’t recommend it until you’ve had a shower and a good night’s sleep.*

“Right.” O’Dell pulled on the steering wheel and the truck skidded through a corner. “Hey, should I be playing it cool or going all out?”

*Go all out. If you play it cool, they’ll ID the truck before you get to the river. Don’t worry, it’s insured.*

“That’s a weird thing to be concerned about right now.”

*It probably does seem like it. All things considered.*

O’Dell turned another corner and slammed on the brakes. A police cruiser several blocks ahead skidded into a bootleggers turn.

*Just to check, you went straight, right, and then you turned left instead of going straight?*
“...fuck. I think I did.”

“Alright. Switching to Plan B. If you floor it, you can just scrape by them and reach the levees before the rest of the cops show up.”

“I hate this plan.” Thomas slammed on the gas, rushing towards the police cruiser. Inside, O’Dell could see two police officers with expressions of confusion rapidly turning to concern, and the cruiser suddenly began to reverse.

“Once I get to the river, then what?”

Alternate transportation has been arranged. You’ll have to get into the water to reach it though.

O’Dell looked up to see flashing lights in the rear view mirror.

“PULL OVER O’DELL! YOU’VE HAD YOUR FUN NOW STOP THIS BEFORE SOMEBODY GETS HURT!”

“I don’t think they’re going to let me just climb up there.”

True. You could always drive the truck into the river.

“...what?!”

I’m just saying it’s an option.

The police cruiser ahead of the truck fishtailed into a flooded ditch, and O’Dell surged ahead. In the cruiser behind the truck, Officer Steve and Officer Carmichael watched as the vehicle turned directly for the levee.

“He can’t possibly be that stupid-”

The truck barreled up the slope, carried more by its inertia than its traction on the waterlogged ground, until the front wheels tipped over the top of the earthworks and the truck rocked to a stop, balanced precariously on the center of mass.

Inside the cab, O’Dell slammed on the gas pedal over and over. The wheels spun and scattered mud a fair distance in every direction, but they couldn’t reach the ground.

Wow. I planned this escape five different ways, but I didn’t see THIS coming. Oh, looks like they’re coming. Better run.

The truck door swung open and O’Dell dove to the ground in case any of the police thought he’d make a good target. No gunfire met him, but he could hear footsteps, and without thinking about it, he rolled down the slope into the rushing waters.

“O’DELL STOP!”

Thomas O’Dell heard several voices yelling, but couldn’t make them out as he was pulled under. Filled to capacity by the rainwater, the river had transformed from a scenic public space where ducks could be fed and pictures taken to a raging force of nature. O’Dell was slammed into the bank, into the river bottom, pushed up to the surface barely long enough to catch his breath, and the cycle continued.

On the levee, four uniformed figures ran down the top of the barrier, trying to keep O’Dell in sight.
“This is Officer Bradley, we need search and rescue at Cordwood Bridge and we need it right now!”

“Dammit! God fucking dammit!” Officer Steve kicked at a rock and almost stumbled as he ran, barely staying upright. “O’Dell you moron! What were you thinking?!”

Frisk stared at the table, one eye glowing red.

On their right side, Asriel was clutching their right hand in his paw. Fingers had meshed with each other, and the sensation seemed to keep the child grounded.

In the other seats around the table, the other child shifted nervously in silence. Toriel’s voice could be hear from her office.

“Young lady is perfectly fine, Mr. Bat. I am looking at her right now.” Toriel’s face briefly appeared, then vanished into her office again. “I am sorry, I must make additional phone calls- no, she is not in any danger- I can and will and have protected your child with my life. You know that. Yes. Thank you. Goodbye.”

The phone beeped as Toriel dialed another number.

“Hello, Mrs. Carmichael? This is Toriel Dreemurr. Your son is presently at my home… yes, the children heard the sirens and came inside. Douglas is fine… yes, I will be happy to watch them all until you or Mr. Carmichael can arrive…. You are welcome, and I understand completely. Yes. Goodbye.”

“Yo,” Poncho whispered. “Are we in trouble?”

“I don’t see how,” Douglas grumbled. “Some guy arrested by the police escaped. We didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Since when have adults ever stuck to logic and facts?” Skate whispered. “They break their own rules as soon as it’s convenient. For all we know, we could be headed to jail right now.”

“Ahem.” Toriel walked up to the table, cell phone still clutched in her hand. “Nobody is going to jail. Your parents will all be arriving to pick you up as soon as they are able. Under the circumstances, everyone agreed that this was the safest course of action.”

“So when will they be here?”

“Between the flooding of streets, that bizarre happenstance with the standing water in the ditches, and the police search, that is not clear. Suffice to say, I am more than willing to prepare both lunch and dinner if it should prove necessary. Douglas, I cannot remember, do you have any allergies that I should be aware of?”

Cold.

Thomas felt the cold first, even before he had woken up.

As the blackness in his vision receded, it was filled with the sensation of pain across his body, and he groaned before realizing it.

“Tra la la. The Prodigal Son returns. He who has been dead, and is now alive again.”
“Wha… wait. I was dead..?”

“I was simply paraphrasing a human religious text. At the request of our mutual friend, I was waiting beneath the waves to spirit you to where you cannot be followed.”

“…mutual friend? Who are you talking about?”

“Tra la la. Let me jog your memory. A figure of darkest night, a hole in the world, a shadow with nothing casting it?”

“Oh. That guy.”

“And leaves only the memory of sound and spoken words, which only some may remember at all?”

“Yeah, I always thought that was weird.”

“Last but not least, an enigmatic figure who says little, shares less, with a hidden agenda even its allies can only guess at?”

“You know you made your point the first time… hey, wait a second. Are you the monster ferryman?”

“Tra la la. It doesn’t really matter. But there are some who call me Tim, for ease of reference.”

“…why… are you helping me, exactly?”

“You have aligned your interests with the Anti-Monster position. I asked our friend the exact same thing when the plan was explained to me.”

Thomas made an annoyed grunting noise.

“Did we both get played by somebody with a hidden agenda? I hate when that happens.”

“A distinct possibility. I am sure we will find out soon enough. Even if we learn nothing else… here we are.”

Thomas felt something give way, and he fell a few feet onto what was, at least, a shock absorbing layer of snow.

“Ow… you did that on purpose.”

“True.”

Slowly, Thomas got to his feet, and in the process, noticed a few important details.

“…this isn’t what I was wearing earlier.”

“The jumpsuit was needed to misdirect the people looking for you. It was also soaked. You would have frozen to death before we got here.”

“…even so. Not cool.”

“I share your opinion of the situation.” The cloaked figure of the river person vanished into a cave, and Thomas looked around; between the snow and the dim lighting from a rocky ceiling high above, it was clear the only place he could be was the Underground. After a few seconds, he followed and made his way into the cave.
“How did you know my shoe size?”

“Tra la la. I did not, but our mutual friend informed me so that I could make purchases at Joe’s House Of Stuff.”

The Riverperson had stopped in front of what seemed to be a massive stone door, covered in the same insignia that the monster royal family seemed to favor.

“In all the history of the Underground, it is said that this door had never been opened. Some even said that the reason it was never opened was because it was not a door at all. A puzzle with no solution, meant to stall humanity in the event of invasion and attack.”

After a few seconds, there was a grinding noise and the door split in half, the part with the triangles descending into the floor and the winged circle receding into the ceiling.

“...well, I think we can rule that out at this point.”

The two figures walked forward into the room, which seemed to be cut from the rock like many of the rooms in waterfall, right down to the color and texture of the walls. With the exception of a desk against the far wall with an old desktop computer on it, the room was completely empty.

“Oh, yeah. This is bad. I’ve seen enough horror movies and played enough RPGS to know that we should get out of here before the door slams shut and traps us inside.”

“Perhaps.”

The room was silent for a few seconds.

“Neither one of us moved.”

“Oh, right. Knew I forgot something.” Thomas turned and immediately skidded to a stop before he walked into a shadowy figure standing right behind him.

“JEBUS!”

The Riverperson spun, cloak whirling and crouched in a combat stance, but relaxed and stood up after seeing the familiar shape.

“Tra la la. A little warning would have been nice.”

Yeah, my bad, that one’s on me.

The shadow figure walked between the human and the monster, up to the computer desk, and turned around.

Okay. Thomas, this is Tim. Tim, Thomas. You guys already met, but still. Tim, you gave him the rundown, right?

“That was not possible. He did not regain consciousness until we were almost to the cave.”

Fair point. Okay. I’ll do it. So. Thomas… first things first. We’re not in the business of fighting monsters here.

Thomas turned to look at the cloaked figure of the Riverperson.

“Yeah, I kind of figured out that part myself. So what are we doing?”
The shadowy figure shifted slightly, and it was possible for Thomas to see through part of the darkness to the wall behind, in a sort of crescent shape.

I will answer your question momentarily, rest assured. But just let me savor the moment for a few seconds. I've been waiting for this day for almost three years now.

Thomas was suddenly very conscious of how dry his mouth was, as he recognize that the changing shape of the dark figure resembled a smile.

Chapter End Notes

You folks have no idea how close you were to an April Fool's Chapter where Hal Greene had to save the world from Armagedduck, the waterfowl based end of days. (Also known as Quacknarock.)
A small device, roughly the size and shape of three television remote controls duct taped together, was waved over the side of the vehicle. Every couple of seconds there was a short chirping noise, with some sort of warbling undertone.

“...okay, that’s weird.”

Dr. Aster stepped back from the prisoner transport and turned to one of the officers nearby.

“You said that Thomas O’Dell’s eyes were glowing just before he escaped?”

“Yes. Freaked me out and I ended up hesitating. And I wasn’t the only one.”

“Hmm. What color?”

“Beg pardon?”

“I mean, what color were his eyes glowing?”

“Oh. Blue.”

“I figured. Light or dark blue?”

“I guess light blue? I don’t know all the colors, I’m not an artist.”

“Nor I. But that tells me everything I need to know. Thank you for your time.” Dr. Aster flipped a hastily attached toggle switch on the device in his hand, turned to look for a familiar face, and opted to follow the sounds of angry yelling instead.

“We had six people in the transport, two cruisers ahead of it and two behind it! Don’t you DARE try to pin this on us!”

“You had ONE JOB! If you had done it right we wouldn’t even BE here!”

The scientist turned around the corner to see a number of figures, some in police uniforms and some in suits and other professional attire, all screaming at each other across a folding table that had hastily been set up underneath an equally hastily assembled awning-style tent.

For a few seconds, Dr. Aster considered the pros and cons of trying to get a word in edgewise compared to letting the exchange proceed naturally until there was a lull, before he raised one hand and held out the palm towards the table. Shining white bone shaped bullets shot out of the gap in his palm, arranged themselves into words, and started spinning in the middle of the table.

Specifically, the bones had arranged themselves into the word INTERMISSION.

The effect was immediate. Officers Steve and Carmichael, and a human in plainclothes that was apparently higher ranking than them in the police hierarchy, stopped talking and turned to face him immediately. The law enforcement representatives from out of town reared back and at least one of them reached for their sidearm.

“If O’Dell isn’t already dead, he has about four hours to live.”

“...wait what?” Officer Steve held up a hand in a gesture intended to indicate to Dr. Aster that he
needed to stop and back up. “Why is he dying and where did you get that number?”

“There’s Wave magic all over that transport. Originally I thought when you said that he disappeared from inside it and reappeared outside, he had used a dimensional bridge just like Jordan Cater. But that’s not what I’m picking up. All the data points to O’Dell phasing through the metal like a ghost monster instead, but a monster has a smaller amount of physical matter to phase. A human has a lot more. That increases the effort involved, and the consequences of any side effects become magnified. I’m not an expert on human anatomy or medicine but I know enough about it to know that there’s a serious risk of widespread cell death and blood loss. I didn’t see any… parts left behind, did anyone happen to run across anything like that? Fingers or the like?”

“No, and he didn’t look like he was bleeding when we saw him.” Officer Carmichael shrugged. “Unless it was under the jumpsuit or something.”

“Still wouldn’t rule out internal bleeding. If he’s not already dead, I would give him at most four hours before the cumulative effects killed him.”

“Four hours from now, or four hours from when he first escaped?”

Dr. Aster turned to the local human that he did not recognize. “Four hours from when he first phased through the transport. Sorry, I should have been more precise. And as long as I’m clarifying points, that estimate did account for all of his running and climbing and jumping and other physical exertion.”

“...well, that figures. Search and Rescue can’t even send in the divers here because the water’s so damned rough.” Officer Steve shook his head. “If he doesn’t show up downstream, then that’s all she wrote.”

“Tra la la. Has anyone thought to check Waterfall, where the river gives up its many treasures?”

Dr. Aster blinked and turned around to see a cloaked figure standing behind him, flanked by a blue-scaled redhead on one side and a massive bearded figure on the other side, with horns that absolutely would not fit under the tent itself.

“...when did you get here?”

Undyne pushed forward. “Tim told us everything on the way over. You’re looking for a body on the bottom of the river, right?”

Officer Steve snorted. “Well, if he’s on the bottom of the river then yeah, all we’ll find is a body.”

“Meanwhile, I shall traverse the banks of the river for signs of egress.”

“We already have two dozen people on that, but there’s always room for one more.” Officer Carmichael spoke up. “Oh hey, before we go any further on this, quick side note Doc.”

“Yes?”

“Can you tell these guys that it’s not our fault that O’Dell broke the laws of physics getting out of custody?”

“Now hold on one second-”

“I’m a doctor, not a lawyer. I am absolutely not qualified to make that call one way or the other. All I do know is that in...” Dr. Aster pulled out his cell phone and checked the time. “In about three and a
half hours, if we don’t find him alive before then, the question will be academic in every sense but the legal one."

“Wait, if O’Dell can use magic anyway, why can’t he just heal himself?”

Dr. Aster turned to the out-of-town human in plain clothes with a badge clipped onto their belt.

“We can’t rule that out, but first, he wouldn’t necessarily even know that phasing like that would be dangerous, so he might not think to try. Second, he was running, jumping, and probably trying very hard not to drown at the end, so if he is still alive and conscious, he might not recognize the symptoms for what they are. Third, the phasing itself would have taken a staggering amount of Magical Potential, not to mention all the reports of actual bullets used to make his escape, so he might not have enough energy left to heal a paper cut.”

Officer Steve shook his head. “Yeah, well, he’s been full of surprises today.”

“That’s true. Nothing about this morning has gone as expected. Speaking of which,” Dr. Aster turned back to face Undyne, “why did Alphys send me a text that said ‘MOIRE PATTERNS ARE THE KEY’ in all caps at four AM?”

“No idea. Hey, as long as we’re asking questions randomly, what’s with all the ducks outside Joe’s House of Stuff?”

“This I know, and this I shall share. Hal Greene’s attempt to restore his miniature windmill to working order displeased the duck gods, who sought to punish him for his hubris.” The cloaked figure’s hood was cocked to one side. “At least, that is what I heard him say before he told me to flee for my life.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Officer Steve grumbled. “Okay. Everybody know what they’re going to do?”

“I do not,” replied Asgore, “but I thought that Dr. Aster and I might follow the recommendations of the Riverperson and investigate Waterfall.”

“Might as well.” Dr. Aster walked out from under the tent and offered his arm to the king with an exaggerated formality that caused Asgore and Undyne to both laugh. “Shall we then?”

Thomas O’Dell broke a Bicicle in two and immediately began to chow down on one of them. Scant seconds later he had dropped both the leftover stick and the other Bicycle on the table in front of him and grasped his head in both hands.

“Fuck, fuck, god dammit, fuck, brain freeze, fuck this shit!”

The room echoed with his profanity, but the noise was absorbed by a few pieces of furniture that had been brought in; a futon, another desk piled with cardboard file boxes, a bookcase, a space heater plugged into some sort of metal cube, several dry-erase boards on wheels, a cork board attached to the wall and covered in papers, a cheap styrofoam cooler, and the folding chair and card table that O’Dell was sitting at. The original desk with the old computer on it had been moved over to a corner, where a dark figure appeared to be staring at it.

_Really makes you wonder, doesn’t it?_

“Wonder what? Wonder if the guy who invented ice cream knew what he was doing to people?”
Sure, let’s go with that. Remember, finish everything in the cooler within the next few hours.

“Are you trying to kill me with brain freeze? Did you save me just to make me suffer?”

No, that’s a side effect.

“Ha ha… actually, why did you save me, exactly? You said you wanted to savor the moment and that was a while ago, so is the moment savored or what?”

Yeah, I suppose it’s been savored. I was hoping to have everyone here but Tim needs to be running interference to make sure they don’t follow you here. So this will have to do. Are you sitting comfortably?

“Well, the brain freeze has gone away. Does that count?”

Ages ago, this world experienced war on a scale that it had never seen before, and will likely never see again. Technology, magic, history, culture… every existing trace of civilization was wiped out, and the survivors were forced to start over from scratch. Only fragments survived.

The dark figure pointed at one of the newspaper clippings pinned to the cork board.

Do you recognize this insignia?

Thomas narrowed his eyes. The picture seemed to be about the monster school, and the doors actually had a symbol painted on them; a circle with wings, above three triangles.

“...yeah. That’s the symbol that the monsters use.”

This is known as the Delta Rune. The kingdom of monsters adopted it as their personal emblem ages ago. Adopted, because it existed before the war. It’s one of those fragments of history and society that survived, even though the legend behind it was lost.

“What kind of legend?”

A warning about the end of the world. The general idea is pretty familiar. The world relies on a balance between the forces of Light and the forces of Darkness for its existence. If one side gets stronger or weaker than the other, the balance is lost and with it, the world itself. But the legend also tells of three heroes who restore the balance and save the world.

“Right.” Thomas began to gnaw on the remaining Bicicle, much more slowly after his previous experiences. “Your standard save the world plot.”

Something like that. The problem is that the details don’t translate clearly across languages, and because the legend was lost during the war, monsters couldn’t even keep the concepts alive, even using a multi-generational game of telephone. So the legend has all of these concepts that may be literal, metaphorical, or cultural aphorisms from a culture that doesn’t exist anymore. The three heroes appear “At World’s Edge” for example. That could mean any number of things. A cliff, a coastline, falling from space, a portal from another reality, or a specific geographical location known as “World’s Edge” at the time that the legend was created or recorded. It could also mean that the heroes appear right at the very last second.

“That’s probably it. Heroes always show up at the last minute for the final battle, toppling the villain at the height of his power.”

Honestly that’s my theory too, but the whole translation issue means we can’t know for sure. There’s
also the issue of what these three heroes do. In order to save the world, they have to “seal the fountains” and “banish the Angel’s Heaven.” Those two phrases raise even more questions than the phrase “At World’s Edge” does.

“...so, is that why you broke me out? Translation and analysis of folklore? You do realize my education is in engineering and architecture, right?”

There’s more to it than that. This legend predates the war, but what concerns me are events that happened during the war itself. Monster and Human accounts differ in a number of points, but there is one in particular that has me concerned, and I need more eyes on it to figure it out.

“Wait, what human accounts? There weren’t any-” O’Dell’s mouth snapped shut and he slapped himself on the head. “The Guardians kept records. Jordan was always talking about them, how he had to write it all down before anything happened to him. He never specified but some of them must have been about the war.”

Got it in one. According to the monsters, they were completely overwhelmed by the combined forces of humanity. It was less of a battle and more of a slaughter. But the Guardian accounts say that the war was long and exacted a terrible price. Now, you would think that it would be the other way around, right?

“What’s the other way around?”

I mean, the losing side would say that they held out as long as they could, gave as good as they got, and their loss was more due to either the whims of fate or the underhanded nature of their enemies. The monsters were sealed away, they weren’t being occupied. There were no humans around to push a specific narrative or censor how the story of the war was told. And the monsters had every reason to paint themselves in the best possible light. Monsters are made of magic and magic responds to will and intent, and if a monster gets too depressed and loses the will to live, they literally go into a coma and die. It’s called Falling Down. Even a fabricated tale of resistance and defiance, built from whole cloth from imagination without a single fact to back it up, would have saved innumerable lives and increased quality of life for everyone.

“Sort of like, I would have gotten away with it, if not for you meddling humans!”

This also applies to the humans in the war. As the old saying goes, history is written by the victors, and future generations would get to hear and read lots of bragging about the skills of their soldiers, the brilliance of their strategists, the exploits of their heroes. This is especially true when there’s a huge body count after a war, because the people following leaders in peacetime have to believe that all of that bloodshed served a purpose. That everyone who died did so in service to a higher cause, rather than because the leaders were incompetent buffoons who couldn’t pour water out of a boot with instructions printed on the heel. Or the story of the war would serve as a warning to anybody who dared to oppose them, especially right after the war when everyone was rebuilding from scratch. But the survivors went out of their way to record how dangerous the monsters were, and how terrible the cost of victory.

“Well, I can’t speak for why the monsters didn’t build themselves up, unless nobody would believe that they had a chance of winning after they got locked up. As for the Guardians,” O’Dell tapped the stick of the Bicicle against his teeth. “They couldn’t blow their own horn without making the monsters look less dangerous, so later generations wouldn’t take the warnings seriously. On the other hand, they could play up the threat to build themselves up by proxy. You know, being judged by the caliber of your enemies.”

Those are plausible scenarios on their own, but taken all together, both on the human and monster
side? They make me more than a little suspicious. And that is where you come in. Tim and I are going to dig up what we can of the surviving Guardian lore and get you some copies. What you need to do is take it apart and go through it with a fine tooth comb, because there is something about that war that does not add up.

“So… you definitely did break me out for the sake of analyzing folklore. I mean… it’s gotta be better than prison, but still. Not really playing to my strengths.”

Your strengths are planning and careful study of the playing field long before you make your first move. You did a great job springing Cater on short notice the first time. I didn’t even know you were there until after the fact, and that’s saying something. You also pulled together a scratch squad to wreck the CORE on very short notice. You are the best possible choice for this position. And while this may be a matter of analyzing folklore, as you said, it is the analysis of folklore in pursuit of a pressing problem in the present day. Specifically, you’re helping me solve the problem that is the Usurper.

“…okay, I’ll bite. Who or what is the Usurper, and why did the hair on my neck stand up like I was touching a plasma globe when you said that word?”

That’s literally the problem I need you to solve. You can see and hear me after a fashion, while other people can’t. After considerable thought and research, I have come to the conclusion that the Usurper is the same way. Some can perceive it, while most can’t. There is a very real possibility that this applies to me too. As in, I can’t see or hear it any more than most people can see or hear me. And while in theory that’s a two way street, I can’t rule out the possibility that it’s not. I also can’t rule out the possibility that it is a two way street, but that there are people who can perceive us both and sided with the Usurper. So keep that in mind when it comes to sharing your work, or even leaving it out in the open. You never know who might be watching or listening.

“Hey dad!”

“Hey slugger!” Officer Carmichael dropped down to one knee, holding his arms wide just as Douglas ran into his father. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. Super bored though. Miss Toriel decided to give us a pop quiz on magic to try to keep us distracted until everyone came to pick us up.”

“I see.” Officer Carmichael looked up at the Queen, although he would have had to do that even if he was standing upright. “Sorry to put you to all the trouble.”

“It was no trouble at all.” Toriel smiled. “And please, give my regards to Linda when you have the opportunity.”

“Consider it done. Everybody else already get picked up?”

Toriel nodded. “I have received text messages indicating a safe return home in each instance.”

“Finally, some good news.” Officer Steve pulled off his hat and wiped away at the sweat accumulating under the brim. “The whole town’s on edge. Like flashbacks to the school attack.”

“Oh good, it’s not just me.” Officer Steve turned to see Frisk sitting in one of the chairs by the fireplace, with a baseball bat resting on their knees as if they were some sort of anime sword-fighter preparing to unsheathe their blade and strike at a moment’s notice.
“...were you sitting there this whole time?”

“No, I was in the kitchen with Asriel until about six seconds ago.”

Officer Steve’s reply was cut off by the buzzing of his phone. In a split second the phone was pulled out and answered.

“Officer Steve here.”

“Hello Officer Steve, this is Dr. Aster. Where are you right now?”

“Queen Dreemurr’s house. Why? Did you find something?”

“Some evidence I think only you are qualified to collect. I’ll be right there.”

“Should I call the coroner-”

Before Officer Steve could finish, there was a blue light outside of the house. A second later a skeleton walked through the door, still holding a cell phone up to his skull.

“No point as of yet… wait, why am I still on the phone when I can see you face to face?” Dr. Aster tapped the screen with one thumb and put the phone back in his pocket. “Asgore noticed something and he’s keeping an eye on it while I get you. We’ll be heading to the garbage dump in Waterfall, are you ready now or do you have other things to address first?”

“Just a sec.” Officer Steve turned to his partner. “You got things from here on out?”

“Well, I gotta take Douglas home and that’s about it.”

“Okay then. We’ll meet up later and compare notes.” Officer Steve turned to follow Dr. Aster out the front door, but stopped suddenly. “Oh, one more thing. Somehow O’Dell got his hands on a pen and started drawing on himself before today. I didn’t know what any of it meant until Saturday, but I was hoping somebody might recognize it.”

Toriel pulled her reading glasses up to her muzzle as Officer Steve pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it over. On the inside of the unfolded surface were a number of overlapping circles with varying combinations of lines and other geometric shapes intersecting them.

“...this appears to be a resonating circle of some sort, though I cannot ascertain its purpose from this diagram.”

“That’s probably my fault. I’m not an artist to start with and I had to draw it from memory. I did notice that you drew something similar on the marker board on Saturday.”

“Yes, although that was simply an overview. We are not due to study Infusion or Enchantment for some time yet.”

“Right, I gathered. So what would be the point of somebody drawing that on himself?”

Toriel hesitated, lowering the paper so that she could look Officer Steve directly in the face.

“...I beg your pardon, but did you say that Thomas O’Dell drew these shapes on himself?”

“Yes, why? Is that bad?”

There was the sound of fluttering paper and both Toriel and Officer Steve looked down to see that
Frisk had walked over to grab the paper out of the queen’s hands. The child stared at it for a few seconds before looking up at the adults, and Officer Steve could not help but notice that one eye was glowing red.

“This is probably an amplifier circle. Thomas O’Dell used it so that he had more magic potential to work with. I’ve been practicing making these for the last week, so it looks familiar.”

“...okay, so that’s how he got enough magic juice to escape.”

“Right.” Frisk nodded. “Not to read ahead of the class or anything, but these circles are two dimensional cross sections of a three dimensional field of energy. One end of that three dimensional field is inside whatever you’re working on. O’Dell was using them to absorb magic energy from the environment faster than his body could do it normally.” Frisk held up the paper to Officer Steve again. “But it doesn’t have an off switch. If you scribble on it or the ink runs or you tear the paper in half, that magic field breaks down and the energy has to go somewhere.”

“Or if the ink washes off in the river.”

“That too. What actually happens depends on the new shape that gets formed before the whole thing breaks down, but it’s probably not what O’Dell wanted.”

“Right...” Officer Steve folded the drawing up once again and put it in one pocket. “I’ll bet dollars to doughnuts that nothing about today went the way O’Dell wanted it to.”
Asgore noticed the flash of light on the edge of his vision, but continued to stare straight ahead. The water splashed as a scientist and a police officer tried to wade through it, and Asgore pointed with one finger.

“It’s still there. Nothing has washed away since Dr. Aster and myself found it.”

Officer Steve followed the king’s index finger, and saw a patch of orange fabric caught on the edge of a crumpled piece of sheet metal.

“...so that's where the ice cream truck ended up.”

Dr. Aster coughed and pointed up to the walls, where some exposed and frayed wires and cables were dangling from a few precarious hooks and connectors.

“The camera network hasn’t been maintained since after everyone moved to the Surface, and Waterfall was never kind to electronics in the first place. According to the security archives every single camera here was offline within two months of the Barrier being destroyed.”

“So we don’t know for sure that O’Dell ended up down here. Maybe it was just the jumpsuit, or part of it.”

“Right. If he was down here, it would be after spending a lot of time underwater. Given what he’s already done today, I wouldn’t rule out him using magic to keep from drowning, but also given what he’s already done today, the odds are against it.”

“...how would he keep from drowning, anyway?”

“Let’s see. He could use energy magic to break down the water into its component elements and rely on the oxygen produced by electrolysis. He could have produced a pocket dimension and used that as an air reserve. I suppose if push comes to shove he could have tried to use Healing magic to repair the damage from suffocation as it was happening. But all of these would rely on him having a lot of magic potential left after everything that’s already happened. It’s possible yes, but the more we chain together events that are merely possible, the less probable the whole thing becomes.”

“Yeah. Besides, if he had a limitless supply of magic power he could have just warped away or fought his way out.” Officer Steve scratched his chin. “Hey, you said the Waterfall cameras were down. What about the rest of the Underground?”

“Coverage is incomplete throughout Snowdin and Snowdin Road, thanks to the same moisture problems. Hotland is in slightly better shape despite the heat, the cameras outside of the old lab building are still working fine. If he went that way, we would see him, especially if he took the time and effort to unlock the elevators.”

“So should we start looking through Snowdin?”

“We don’t really need to. If we head to the section of the cavern where Snowdin and Waterfall connect, we’ll see his tracks in the snow itself. We might also check… actually, never mind. He’d have to swim upstream against the current in nearly freezing water to get to the river bank.” Dr. Aster turned and looked at the mass of garbage that had accumulated at one bend in the river. “Of course, if he fell into the Abyss it’s all a moot point.”
“Right. Well, I had best start tagging this as evidence. Then we can head towards Snowdin and see what we can see.”

Officer Steve stopped talking as a cell phone began to ring, and both the King and former Royal Scientist started checking their pockets.

“Ah, that’s me.” Dr. Aster pulled out his phone. “Dr. Aster here.”

“Hey dad.”

“Hey Sans, what’s up?”

“decided to check my sensor network when I heard what happened with Thomas O’Dell, just in case. what happened next may surprise you.”

The skeleton’s eye sockets narrowed.

“Why did you phrase it like that?”

“hehehe. But yeah, I checked the network. There was a Wave Magic signature that hit all of the R-Sensors. I mean, I can’t tell how strong it was since the network was designed for anti-photon detection, but I can tell that it was there.”

“Right. R for River.”

“No, R for Really wet. Try to keep up.”

Dr. Aster mad a snorting noise.

“Okay, yeah, fine. So if the sensors pick up a wave magic signature, you can track O’Dell through the Underground even without the cameras.”

“Exactly. Matter of fact, I already have.”

“...okay, on the one hand, I am glad to hear this, but on the other hand, you probably could have mentioned that right away, since we’re on a deadline.”

“Yeah, but you’ll understand why I didn’t lead with that in a moment. The sensor readings go off in series along the underground part of the river and the last readings are in the garbage dump. And that’s it. The next data I got from the Waterfall sensors is Dimension Magic activity, three times.”

“Those would be my bridges. In, out, and back again with Officer Steve. So it looks like O’Dell fell into the Abyss after all.”

“Sure looks like it.”

“Alright. Thank you Sans. Once Officer Steve is finished collecting evidence, we’ll check Snowdin and Hotland just to cover all of our bases. See you soon.”

Dr. Aster ended the call and turned to Asgore and Officer Steve.

“Well, as the old saying goes, I have good news and bad news.”

“We interrupt our regularly scheduled programming to bring you a vital update. The Ebott’s Wake
Police Department is reporting that the manhunt for Thomas O’Dell, known associate of Jordan Cater, has been ended. Quote: ‘All evidence indicates that O’Dell was pulled into the Waterfall Abyss by the underground river currents. Recovery is impossible at this time given the high water levels from recent storms, and the limited understanding of the Abyss itself even by monsters.’ End Quote. The public transportation and Be On Look Out warnings sent out by the Ebott’s Wake Police Department and Lost Eagle County Sheriff’s Department have been ended as a result. We now return you to Dramatic Readings with Clutch McGee, featuring special guest reader Bob the Temmie, already in progress.”

Agent Brown rubbed his forehead for the third time in as many minutes. Switching back between the laptop screen, the hotel room’s TV, and his phone was giving him eyestrain or something close to it. Once he could see straight again, he resumed typing.

Escape from controlled custody is not an isolated incident. Multiple cases have been recorded specifically involving subject code named Cassandra-1. Based on affiliation, new subject has been designated Cassandra-2. All available data indicates that Cassandra-2 did not survive escape attempt.

However, much of the available data is provided by monsters. Concealment is not only possible but likely. Underground cavern beneath Mt. Ebott is restricted to humans with monster escorts, making it impossible to investigate without interference. Cassandra-2 may still be alive. No clear means of verifying this theory is available at time of report.

Monday morning classes at All Fine Labs will provide further investigation opportunities and further attempts to secure the Black Box.

Agent Brown saved the report, attached it to an email, sent it on its way, and stood up to stretch.

“Hey, I’m gonna go out and get us something to eat, keep my ears to the ground. Anything tickle your fancy?”

Agent Black looked up from the notes spread over half of his bed, the faint trace of yellow light between his fingers winking out as if somebody flipped a switch.

“What??”

“I said I was going to get some food. What do you want?”

“I want to be left alone so I could concentrate. I think I almost had something that time.”

“...I don’t know where they serve that. Burgers okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

Joe stared at the paperwork, nodded, and a purple light formed at the end of his right arm. The light slowly filled out the shape of fingers, which reached out, grabbed a pen, and signed the release forms.

“...I can’t write worth a damn with my left hand. This is the only way my signature would be legible.”
“Well, we had people who could witness it, but as long as it works.” Dr. Ross stacked the papers, closed the manila folder around them, and stood up. “We’ll see you on Tuesday unless something else comes up.”

“And there’s no chance of that happening in this town, no sirree bob.”

Dr. Ross smiled, but Joe had the impression, based on the way her eyes shifted, that it had less to do with his joke and more to do with whoever walked into the hospital behind him.

“Hello Dr. Ross. Joe. I was told that Alphys was here for some reason?”

“She was bringing the new arm in so that the hospital could sterilize it and be sure it was ready for surgical grafting.” Joe shrugged. “There’s a whole lot about this that’s absolutely never come up in medical school so they want to cover all the bases. Also their asses, which is why I had to sign about twenty release of liability forms first.”

“Like I said, it’s all for the sake of legal formalities. Everybody on the team we put together wants to be in on the ground floor for a new age in medical advancements and human health. But we also don’t want to be barred from practicing medicine just because some politician with a drug company’s hand up his butt tries to crucify us.”

Dr. Aster turned to look at Dr. Ross, then at Joe, then back at Dr. Ross.

“I’m going to pretend that I understood that.”

“Oh, just you wait until our next coffee time break date things. I will talk your ears off. Or, I would if you had ears.”

“Oh! D-Doctor Aster!”

The scientist turned to see Alphys walking towards the lobby, and pulled out his cell phone.

“Hello Alphys. I don’t suppose you can shed some light on this text I got last night?”

The lizard scientist stopped in her tracks and her scales started to turn red.

“Oh my g-god. I’m so sorry I thought that was a dream when I woke up and it was supposed to go to Undyne anyway and-”

“You meant to tell Undyne that Moire Patterns were the key?”

“...what?”

Dr. Aster scrolled through his text client and then turned the phone around so Alphys could see the screen.

“...Moiré Patterns… I thought THAT was a dream too. Oh my god, p-please tell me I haven’t been sleep texting again.”

“Again??”

Joe snorted and tried to cover up the sound with his remaining hand. “It’s a long story Doc.”

“Joe-we-agreed-to-never-speak-of-that-again!!”
Asriel watched as Toriel carried several platters of food to the dining room table in succession.

“...uhm. Mom. Is dad going to be here for dinner tonight?”

The queen paused mid step, but quickly got her rhythm back.

“I do not know. I suppose it would not hurt to set out a plate for him.” Toriel looked around the dining room, then to the living room. “...where are Frisk and Chara?”

“I think they went to the bathroom. Frisk said something about a headache.”

“Hmm. Let us hope that is all that it is.”

By the time that Toriel had returned to the kitchen for another plate, bowl, and set of cutlery, a human child was walking slowly down the stairs.

“Are you feeling better now, my children?”

Frisk shrugged.

“No. But that’s as good a reason as any to eat.”

“I see. Chara, how are you faring?”

“It hurts to talk right now. No comment.”

Toriel stared at the child.

“...very well. Dinner is potato soup with carrot coins. I hope it will help, but let me know if there is anything else I can do.”

“...we will. Thanks.”

Skeletal fingers rotated the top plastic circle until the lines on each layer overlapped, then began to push it, causing the interference between the patterns to spread outward and away. Reversing the circle, the pattern seemed to draw in on itself.

“I think I g-got the idea while Mr. Parsons was buying a hot dog from Sans. We had been talking about the stuff we made for the gift shop, and he mentioned that when he was in elementary school, his class went on a field trip to some sort of science museum and he got a little booklet as a souvenir of the trip. It had lots of science facts in it and also some stuff that made it like a science kit. Packets of agar for growing bacterial and mold samples, a plastic magnifying lens, and one of these Moire Pattern things. So I got the idea of making our own spin on it, using the 3D printer. Did you know there’s actually a microscope made of cardboard?”

“Uh… I did not until just this moment.”

“Yeah! I mean, the framework is this pop-out cardboard thing, and for a lens it uses a small glass bead. The magnification is high enough to look at human blood samples and that’s what it’s for, to make a mass produced microscope for use in places where human medical infrastructure is limited or was damaged by disaster or war. We could do the same thing, a little booklet filled with equipment like that so kids could learn the fundamentals about biology, chemistry, electricity, electronics, physics, and magic theory!”
“How would you fit in electronics into this kit? Printed Circuit Boards?”

“Oh, I didn’t even think of that!! I was just going to have a page with all the basic principles of electrical and electronic engineering printed on it!” Alphys pulled her phone out of her pocket and started typing. “I’m going to have Anna come over right now so we can add some of these features to the prototype!”

Dr. Aster held up his hand.

“Okay, okay, you sold me on the idea, I think it’s great, it’ll sell out, and so on and so forth. But why did you text me about it so early in the morning?”

“Oh… right. Uh. Well. It’s complicated. I guess I was still half asleep and I was… n-never mind, but… do you think we could isolate a magical field and project it into the bodies of the Amalgamates so that their Souls have something to build on again? Like those two patterns overlapping when you rotate them to match up?”

Dr. Aster scratched the side of his skull, which produced a hollow scraping noise.

“…honestly, I don’t see why not in theory, but I don’t know where we’d get those patterns in the first place.”

“I do.” Alphys walked over to a filing cabinet, opened a drawer, pulled out a manila folder, and carried it over to her desk. When she opened it up. Dr. Aster immediately recognized the shape of a family tree even if he couldn’t make out the text of the names of the family members.

“Wait, you want to scan their relatives… and combine those scans to create a harmonic resembling their original field?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it. D-do you think it will work?”

“…well… I can’t think of a reason off of the top of my skull why it wouldn’t work. But it’ll take us a while to work out the engineering side and we might run into problems there.” The skeleton tapped his teeth with the tip of one finger bone. “Still, no reason not to go full speed ahead.”

Asriel stumbled into the bedroom, his breath coming in painful stabs from his sides. If anyone noticed him, it was probably because of his haste, and not his left hand, still in his jacket pocket. He tried to pull it out, only to rip the fabric as the thorns caught on the threads. It barely looked like a hand anymore, and more like some sort of bramble or cactus.

His right hand wasn’t changing, and that was what he used to pull open Frisk’s desk drawers, dumping papers and pencils and screws and bolts onto the floor, until he finally found the knife. Holding it in his teeth, he pulled back the sleeve to see how far the thorns had spread… not past the wrist, at least not yet.

Asriel took the knife in his right hand again and brought it close to the edge of the spreading green, but it shook too much for him to cut anything. He sucked in a deep breath several times, reached up, closed his eyes, and brought the knife down.

There was no pain, which did not make any sense.

Asriel opened his eyes. Somehow he was on the floor, so maybe he had fainted before he had cut off his hand? But he couldn’t feel that hand anymore, so he must have succeeded.
It wasn’t until he tried to pick himself up off the floor that he realized he couldn’t feel his other hand, either.

Or his arms and legs.

Looking around, he saw a bright red light wink out of existence, and though it was difficult, he managed to crane his head to see a pile of clothes beneath where the light had been, covered in a white chalky powder.

There was a thud of vibration and he instinctively turned to look towards what had made the sound, only to see the knife he had been holding embedded, point first, into the wooden floor.

Reflected in the flat side of the knife was a familiar white face, surrounded by six golden petals.

Asriel’s eyes opened, and he fought the quilt and sheets on his bed for a minute before he could bring his hands up to see them. While the darkness made it hard to make out color, he could feel that they weren’t covered in thorns. Which was enough to let him relax slightly.

“...are you okay?”

“Huh?” Asriel rolled over to see a human child, hunched over on the other bed, both eyes glowing red and both arms wrapped around a pillow. “What was that?”

“It sounded like you just woke up from a nightmare.”

“Oh. Yeah. Nothing new, though.”

Chara shook their head. “Yeah. Guess not.”

Asriel sat up in his bed and rubbed at his eyes with his paw pads. “What about you? Nightmares or insomnia?”

Chara shrugged.

“Insomnia. It’s only me though.”

The bedroom was silent, save for the distant hum of the air conditioner. Asriel swung his legs over the side of the bed and stared at Chara.

“Uhm. I have a question.”

“I’ll bet.”

“When we were. Together. Sharing my body. That didn’t last very long. Because of… reasons. And I didn’t ask before now, because. Well. Because of that. It didn’t end well, but it also felt like something I should already know the answer to. But, uhm. What is it like? For you?”

Chara sucked in a breath quickly and let out slowly.

“Bad.”

For a split second the bedroom was silent, and Chara shook their head before Asriel could open his mouth.

“I mean. It’s not painful. Not unless Frisk gets hurt or sick. It’s just… Asriel, you can’t tell Frisk this, okay?”
“...okay. I won’t.”

“For a year and a half, I was just. There. Watching. Nobody to talk to. Nobody knew I was there. And I was happy to see that monsters were free. To see you come to the surface. To see mom’s school and Alphys starting a lab and Mettaton becoming a pop culture sensation overnight. And I was happy to see that everything Jordan believed in had been torn down. Actually, ecstatic might be a better word. It was everything I had ever wanted for you guys. Except...”

Chara shook their head.

“You had lost so much to make it happen. And there was nothing I could do to change that. And then you were back, body and soul, but it took over a year to get there. And... and I was still here. And everyone was so happy to have you back, and...”

Chara reached up and dragged the back of one hand across their eyes, wiping away moisture and plunging the bedroom into darkness for a little bit.

“I saw. How happy. Everyone was. Without me.”

Asriel tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry.

“Chara,” he managed to whisper. “We didn’t know.”

“No. You didn’t.” Chara nodded. “Even now. There is so much about me. That you don’t know. That I never told you. That I never told anyone. Because if you knew... if anyone knew. They wouldn’t be trying to make me a new body and soul. But they’d still try to cut me out of Frisk.”

“...Chara, I know why you hated humanity now. We all do. And nobody blames you. With parents like-”

“They were NOT my parents,” Chara snarled, the red light flaring bright and their arms wrapped around the pillow as if they were trying to choke it to death. “They. They had. A child. Not because. They wanted a family. But because. They needed. A boy. Born at a certain time. Under certain conditions. And when they got. Me. They were stuck. My existence. Is based on lies. And everything that follows. Follows from that.”

Asriel stared at Chara as the human child tried to suppress their tears. Several times, he opened his mouth to speak, but could not think of anything to say.

“...I was never more than a means to an end for the Guardians. I was supposed to marry Fortitude Harrison when we were older. But Forty was a girl and she was born before I was. When they found out I wasn’t a boy. Their whole plan fell apart. Jordan was never shy about. Letting me know that I was a disappointment and failure. But I didn’t know why. Until I started breaking into his study. And going through his books and papers.”

The floorboards creaked as Asriel stood up and walked over to Frisk’s bed and sat down next to Chara. Slowly, he brought up one paw and rested it on their back. They did not flinch, and he began to move the paw around in slow circles, they relaxed slightly.

“I don’t... want to talk about this anymore. Not tonight.”

“...okay.”
Before The Fall

The air is choked with dust already, and their footsteps add to it, blinding them and slowing their stride as they cough and struggle in vain to clear their throat. Overwhelming as it is, the dust is nothing compared to the smell of smoke.

And the smoke is nothing compared to the stench of decay and rot.

They can’t see through the dust haze, but they know that the bodies are out there, sprawled where they fell, blood and puss and shit draining out of empty shells devoid of life or thought. The smoke columns above the dust give a rough indication of where those bodies have been piled together and set ablaze, a desperate and futile struggle against the danger of plague.

It takes everything that they have not to vomit. If they start, they will never stop, they will choke to death on their own bile and become another body on the pyres.

If any of this struggle reaches their face, the guards do not see it. Or they mistake it for anger, or impatience, for they dart out of the way. A wagon forming a hasty gate to the encampment is pulled behind one wall of rough timber sharpened into spikes.

The inside of the walls is somehow worse, because the stench of death is mixed with the stench of fear, of terror sweat. Grown men weep inside and outside of the healers’ tents. Others lie still, beyond the reach of healing magic, but free of its necessity.

Others are not so fortunate.

They march past ragged troops, pushed past their limits by exhaustion and starvation and illness. Commanders bark orders and castigate their forces for weakness, but despite their best efforts at intimidation there is still fear in their eyes.

They make their way to the center of the encampment, where the tents of the generals and their messengers are arrayed. Some stare at the reports in front of them with dull surprise, too tired to grasp the scale of what has happened. Others are too hardened to respond; they have seen death too much, too often, for this to reach them.

And then they are at the largest tent, at the exact center of the spot outlined by the defensive perimeter of walls and barricades and earthworks. They have little knowledge of military matters, but even they know that a spot twenty paces away, on a ridge of stone, would give them superior visibility while also being easier to defend if the walls should be breached.

Just one of many small details the betray the enormity of the situation.

The elite guard step aside, hesitating just long enough to attempt to convey some sort of show of dominance or indifference, and they push aside the curtain without looking at either guard in retaliation.

It is small and petty, but small and petty acts of rebellion are all they have now.

They immediately spot the monster; a walking eye, surrounded by four other guards. The monster is not visibly armed, but of course that means nothing. Only then do they take in the rest of their surroundings; a table, several generals and adviser, and finally… him, at the head of the table itself.

“I see you have noticed our guest, oh wise one.”
They nod in deference; they will not bow. Not to any man or monster, as a matter of principle, but certainly not to him.

“You summoned me, my liege?”

“I did. This… messenger brings us word from King Dreemurr. The leader of the monsters has asked for terms of parlay.”

“…this is… unexpected.”

“Precisely why you have been summoned.” He steeples his hands, and they can see his fingers shake, even if they can’t quite make out the wrinkles that they know must be there. “I wish to know if this offer is being made in good faith. If King Dreemurr truly wishes to set terms of peace.”

“Very well.” They turn to face the monster, and in moments they can feel the monster’s alarm and concern at being surrounded by so many armed, dangerous, and angry humans.

They can also feel, right behind it, the monster’s revulsion at what they had seen when being escorted to the encampment, and inside of it. Monsters crumbled to dust upon death, and the fact that humans did not meant that it was not at all clear who or what was alive or dead. It was hard to make out anything else beneath that singular, existential dread.

“I sense no duplicity, concealment, or misdirection.”

“…very well. Our losses are great, and our surviving forces weary of this conflict. Return to your king and tell him that we will send a messenger of our own in due course, to establish the time and place of our next meeting. Guards, release the messenger. Provide escort to the no-man’s-land beyond the encampment walls.”

They don’t have to use magic to know that he is lying. Hardly any time passes between the curtains shutting behind the monster and their escorts before he turns to those assembled at the table.

“General. What is our current tactical situation?”

“Scout reports indicate that the bulk of the monster forces have taken refuge here, in a mountain cavern.” The general taps a specific location on a map unrolled on the table, held flat by empty bottles on one side and a nearly empty salt cellar on the other. “With their magic, they can hold the entrance indefinitely, striking down our archers faster than they can respond. If we attempted to charge the entrance with skirmishers or shock troops, the first wave would not just fall, they would slow all other waves behind them. We cannot take the position, so we must either starve them out or draw them out.”

“How fortuitous, then, to have the monsters sue for peace at this moment. We must prepare an ambush, properly concealed, so that we may strike all at once when the King has let his guard down.”

There is no shock, surprise, or outrage. Everyone expects this.

“To think that the King will let his guard down would be a grave mistake,” one adviser shakes his head. “On the contrary, he will be on his guard the most. As should we all be.”

“Milord. You were not speaking falsely when you spoke of our great losses and weary troops. We will be ill equipped to respond if it is, in fact, the monsters leading us into ambush.”

Proud lips twist into a frown that is more petulant than anything else. “The Sage has assured us that
the monster was being forthright.”

“Indeed,” they respond. “But nothing stops King Dreemurr from lying to his own troops if it serves some greater purpose.”

The figure at the head of the table nods; they can tell that he sees himself in the same scenario. It is what he would do. It is what he has done. It is what he is still doing.

“Supply shipments have stopped completely, and none of the messengers to any of the closest settlements have returned. We are low on all necessities, but most seriously medicinal and healing supplies.” The general paused, then nodded across the table. “I agree with the spymaster. We must not let our guard down now. We would be too easily routed.”

They can tell that he has already made up his mind. The advice of his war council does not register. The tactics and strategy of his generals is being overruled before it has even been developed, let alone explained.

They are not particularly adept in the ways of Prophecy, but they know how this will end.

“My liege, what would you have your magi do?”

He stares at them, and not for the first time, they wonder how many guards and soldiers they can take down after assassinating their king. It occurs to them that, after all that has happened, the answer is potentially all of them.

But he speaks, and the opportunity is lost.

“I will have King Dreemurr before me at the negotiating table. I will have my sword buried in his chest. Tell your… companions. I wish for the negotiations to be arrayed in my favor. Set your magical minds to the task.”

“It shall be done. Shall I take my leave now?”

There is an impatient nod and a casual wave of the hand, and they turn, walking outside the tent curtain. It takes less than a dozen paces for them to realize that they do not have it in them to walk through all of the horrors of war they had already seen.

They raise their staff to the sky, the air crackles with energy-

“Hey, the Archmage is back.”

They blink away the bright spots in their eyes, and see their peers gathered around a roaring campfire. One figure in a bright orange robe is whittling away a wooden stick, drilling holes into it with the tip of a dagger, which they raise and wave in a greeting that might seem threatening to anyone else.

“What did the Royal Pain want?”

“If there’s any of that stew left, I’ll tell you all about it over a bowl… are you using a consecrated athame to whittle a flute?”

The figure in the orange robe looks at the knife, and the stick in the other hand.

“Is this a trick question?”
It took Frisk a moment to register that they were awake. It took another moment to realize where they were; the ceiling was not the familiar bedroom ceiling they were used to, but the ceiling of the living room above them, and definitely not some campfire on a battlefield.

There was also a small, fuzzy boss monster lying on them.

In terms of warmth and comfort, Asriel was far superior to any blanket, quilt, afghan, comforter, or any other product of the textile arts.

They turned their head and saw the two ceramic mugs on the coffee table, but they had already deduced what had happened; a bad night for Chara that they had been lucky enough to sleep through. If luck was what it was.

Hairless fingers reached up to Asriel’s head, running through the tuft of fur that always stuck up. Once, twice, three times.

Without prompting, their mind’s eye produced a similar picture, crystal clear as if they were watching it on television; only there were three children sleeping on the sofa. One human, two monsters. Then, the same three children running through autumn leaves. Dressed up in costumes for Halloween. Sitting at a cafeteria table and trading food.

Frisk blinked a few times as their eyes began to tear up, but the images stayed steady in their mind.

“One day,” they mumbled, and closed their eyes again.

The man behind the desk looked up immediately when the office door opened, with no pretense about his visitor being unimportant or put in their place until he was ready and willing to address them.

“What did you do?”

The woman closed the door behind her and walked up to the man’s desk, her eyes already panning over the newspapers that had been arranged on top of it.

“You’re going to have to be more sp-”

“I absolutely do not!”

The newspaper on top of the pile was shoved in the direction of the visitor; a special edition of the Ebott’s Wake Herald with the sensationalist headline of *Escaped Prisoner Missing, Presumed Dead* taking up most of the page.

“A man arrested for breaking and entering, assault, grand larceny and attempted murder just broke out of controlled custody. Are you really so ignorant as to think that everyone involved will just wash their hands of the whole debacle now that he is presumed dead? They are going to go through everything that happened up to that point until they figure out why and how Thomas O’Dell was able to escape. That means that they will find out about you, if they haven’t already. I did not get to my present station in life by sticking my neck out, and certainly not by letting people like you pull my head over the chopping block.”

The woman leaned over the desk, her palms slamming down on the wooden surface with such force that the man behind the desk jumped in reflex and was shocked into silence.
“Interesting choice of words you had there. ‘People like you.’ I can assure you that there are very few people like me, and I am nothing like those pawns you sacrificed when it served your purpose. And at the risk of over-extending the chess metaphor, you are not the king, and this game will go on without you if it has to.”

Slowly, the woman stood up straight.

“They can look, and they will find discrepancies. It’s impossible to erase every trace, and trying to do so just leaves more evidence. But they won’t find any evidence that leads back to me. I’ve been doing this for a long time. I know how the game is played. I certainly know the game better than you do.”

“You… dare to threaten me, in my own-”

“I have dared to challenge greater and more terrible figures than you, little man who hides behind his desk and lets other people do the talking and fighting and dying. And in three days, you will see the full extent, and the impact, of my daring.”

The woman turned, marched to the office door, and slammed it on her way out. After a few seconds, the man’s left hand reached toward the telephone on one corner of the desk, only to recoil as he saw a dark form, a shadow with nothing casting it, drop to the floor next to the desk.

“What in blazes?!”

Well, she certainly seemed angry. Can’t say I blame her, to be honest. I mean, let’s not mince words here. People don’t come to you because of your sympathetic nature, comforting presence, or fantastic moves on the dance floor.

The man behind the desk stared at the dark figure, which slowly turned until it seemed to be facing him.

“…who are you, what are you, and what are you doing in my office?”

Hello Mr. Stewart. That is your real name, right? William Stewart? The first two questions would take about five hours to explain and neither one of us has the time right now. As for why I’m here, it’s the same reason anybody comes to visit you. I want to make a deal.

“You are clearly not human. You must be one of the monsters.”

Actually no, but under the circumstances that is an entirely reasonable conclusion to reach. But that’s a side detail. I know you’ve made a rather substantial fortune by being the right man in the right place at the right time with the right pieces of paper. For all your pissing and moaning about the expenses incurred by our, uh, mutual friend’s science project, you can certainly afford it. But of course for you, money is just another lever you can use to move the world. And that’s what I can offer you.

“More… levers? I can barely hear you, never mind understand you.”

Yeah, that’s normal, under the circumstances. And not so much more levers to use, as assurances that the levers you already use will still work in the near future. You may have noticed that the world is changing. Up until recently, it was changing slow enough so that you, and everyone else, could keep up. Before the end of June 2016, that will no longer be the case.

Mr. Stewart blinked and ran a tongue over suddenly too-dry lips. “What? Why? What is happening? What is going to happen?”
A spectacular, climactic battle for the fate of the universe itself. And some other stuff, too, but mostly the big epic fight.

Stewart’s eyes narrowed in suspicion as the dark figure walked away from the desk and toward the center of the office.

“Are you proposing… some sort of alliance? You claim you can benefit me in some way. What are you attempting to accomplish?”

Well, that’s a little involved. When I first came here and got to work, I realized right away that there were going to be obstacles on the political, economic, and social fronts. I was in a hurry, so I resorted to a brute force solution. A number of Beltway Insiders working against my goals all had pasts that they had managed to outrun up to that point. Pasts that I helped catch up to them. Photographs, text messages, things of that nature. It was inelegant and inefficient, not my best work. But in the end it bought me some breathing room. Almost a year and a half.

“...wait, that was you?”

Yep. And here’s a fun fact! The power vacuum that I accidentally created getting rid of everyone who sided against the monsters back then played a major role in you reaching your current position in the ecosystem of influence, as well as why you have a certain somebody trying to bend your ear as part of her own plans. That’s also why you can see and hear me, by the way. The connection is tenuous and indirect, but it is there.

Mr. Stewart looked down at the newspapers on his desk, then to the piles of paperwork on it, and then looked around the rest of the office as he considered the implications of this new information and what it might mean if it was true.

“...so. Assuming that you are telling the truth about all of this, and assuming that I agree to help you, which mind you I have not agreed to do so yet, what precisely do you want me to do?”

That’s simple. Pretty soon, there’s going to be a lot more push back against monsters than there already has been. Some of that push back will be grassroots. Some will be through political channels, both official and in smokey back rooms. Your part of the bargain will be to undermine those political agendas before they build up enough steam to be harmful.

“...I see. You claim not to be a monster, but you are aligned with them.”

Yeah, pretty much.

“And if I refuse to work with you? What then?”

Nothing.

“...you are not at all skilled in the art of negotiation.”

Actually that’s one of those things that ends up being a lot more menacing and threatening in hindsight, so keep that in mind. I don’t need an answer right this instant, so go ahead and sleep on it for the time being. I’ll be in touch.

The darkness faded away.

Mr. Stewart stared at the space in the center of the office, started to reach for his telephone, hesitated, and slowly pulled his hand back. Soon both hands were clasped together as the man attempted to calm his nerves and gather his thoughts.
“Do not get too far ahead, my child!”

“I won’t.”

Several paces ahead of Toriel, Frisk alternately walked, skipped, and jumped down the sidewalk, depending on whether or not there was a puddle or other obstruction. They hummed a recurring tune, occasionally vocalizing it with “Dun Dun Dun!” or “Bah dah dah duh dah!” as well as other syllables.

“Hey Frisk, what are you humming?”

Frisk turned around and walked backwards down the sidewalk for a little bit so they could see Asriel, trialing behind Toriel.

“The Transformers theme song.”

“Oh.” Asriel scratched his head. “You’ve been in a good mood this morning.”

“Yeah, well, with all the crazy stuff in the last month I think the universe owes me. Monday or not.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Asriel shrugged, looking around. “Hey, have there always been this many ducks in town and I just never noticed before?”

“I must confess, that is unusual,” Toriel commented. “I wonder if this has anything to do with the flooding?”

“Probably. Ducks love water. And bread,” Frisk amended, “though it’s pretty bad for them. Since bread doesn’t exist naturally in the environment, they never evolved to digest it fully. Vegetables and fruit are better.”

“How do you know all this? Is there a book called Seventy Two Uses For Ducks?”

“I don’t know about that, but there is a book at the Librarby called Ducks: And How To Make Them Pay.”

“I know what I’m checking out the next time we go to the Librarby then...” Asriel’s brow furrowed, and he stopped walking to turn around and look down the street.

A few moments later, a wooden boat appeared, drifting across the water that had overwhelmed the street gutters and storm drains. A cloaked figure stood at the helm, while in the back of the boat a man in coveralls sat, strumming a guitar while talking with a peculiar cadence.

“Well, Hal’s fixed windmill needed wind to turn, and the classes he took gave him magic to burn, and it didn’t take long for an idea to pop in his head. He would get lots of ducks and their wings would all flap (and that’s not how wind works, but he didn’t think about that)
so he channeled his power and baked some Magical Bread.”

As the boat drifted by, Hal smiled and nodded at the Dreemurrs without breaking stride.

“As the boat drifted by, Hal smiled and nodded at the Dreemurrs without breaking stride.

“And the ducks they came from far and wide,
they blocked the streets and darkened the skies,
to choke the world to death with their feathery wings.
Too late, Hal realized he’d really screwed up,
for he’d doomed the whole earth to Armageduck,
Or maybe it’s Quacknerok, either way, the end of all things.”

Before any more of the ad-libbed folk song could be heard, the Riverperson’s boat vanished around another corner, the notes of the guitar’s folk tale motif still faintly heard before also fading with the distance.

“...mom, can I take guitar lessons?”
“Hey.”

Frisk didn’t respond, their hands still scrawling words and diagrams into a notebook.

“Hey Frisk.”

The child turned to see Alex Carson looking at them, with one hand raised and pointing at the front of the room where Toriel was rapidly applying text and diagrams to the marker board.

“I wasn’t on the team building up the Magic Annex, but I know Toriel specifically requested whiteboards instead of smartboards. Do you know why?”

Frisk shrugged.

“Probably she’s more comfortable with analog technology than digital.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” Frisk returned their attention to their notebook. “I don’t mean to be rude Mr. Carson, but I need to stay focused. Officer Steve can’t make it to class today so I need to make sure a copy of my notes gets to him.”

“Oh. Okay, yeah. Good call.”

“Attention, everyone! Welcome back, I am very pleased to see that so many of you are still here.” Toriel smiled. “Last time, we established an overview of the subject of magic, covering as much material as was convenient to our time frame but without much depth. Today we will begin examining magical theory in more detail. Ordinarily, this would be explained to you by the esteemed former Royal Scientist Dr. Wing Ding Aster, but his time and attention has been occupied by a project of considerable import. The task therefore falls to me. Fortunately, he left detailed notes.”

Toriel held up a pair of three ring binders, filled to bursting with papers and with multi-colored sticky notes turning the outsides of the binder into a scrambled rainbow.

“Perhaps too detailed. Given the time constraints we are operating within, I will do my best to summarize without omitting too much key information.”

Toriel opened one binder, nodded, turned back to the marker board and began to draw. About a minute later, she turned back to face the class, one arm still pointing at the board, and specifically pointing at a rectangle filled with arrows all pointed in the same direction, surmounted by a capital letter N.

“In this model of a bar magnet, we see that all of the iron atoms are arranged in the same direction. This sets them apart from an iron bar that has not been magnetized, where the atoms are arranged every which way. With the atoms all working together, they produce a much larger and stronger magnetic field.”

Toriel took up the marker again, drawing concentric circular lines around the bar magnet diagram.

“This analogy may also be applied to anyone who uses magic. In the same way that individual iron atoms are magnetic no matter how well organized they are, each of you already has the potential for
magic inside of you. This is both metaphorical and literal, referring to the very atoms in your body. They are simply disorganized when it comes to the transmission of magical energy. The exercises within this classroom are equivalent to the same process used to magnetize a piece of iron.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Dreemurr?” Douglas raised one hand. “Won’t that make stuff stick to us? Or make us stick to each other?”

Toriel smiled.

“That is taking this analogy a little too far, Douglas. And besides, even monsters, who are made of magic, are not constantly producing bullets or other magic effects every second of every day. To continue the magnetism analogy, the conscious will and intent of the user acts as an electromagnet might, inducing a field at their discretion which is not otherwise there when they do not wish it to be so. And, as long as we are on the subject of analogies taken too far, keep in mind that magnetism is simply one form of energy. Magic can influence magnetism, electrical potential, temperature, gravity and velocity gradients, relative speed, and numerous other physical properties. Each of these effects will require learning how to produce a different internal state, before it can be expressed through bullets. Some of them may be more difficult than others, but at the same time, some of them will be easier.”

Toriel scribbled down several more symbols on the board before turning back to the class.

“And as a final part of this analogy, remember that one way to magnetize iron is to repeatedly expose it to another magnet. Likewise, many monsters learn how to control their magic in their early childhood by play-fighting with their parents and each other.”

Toriel dropped the marker on her desk and held up her paw, where orange light swirled into a fireball shape.

“To that end, we will be dispensing with notes and theory for the remainder of this lesson. Those who are not comfortable may skip this exercise without fear that it will impact their final results, and I ask you all to respect their decision. Keep in mind always that it is the intent to harm more than anything else that makes magic dangerous, regardless of who produces the bullet.”

Asriel kicked his heels back and forth as he watched the two scientists swarm over the machinery.

“Do we have any more garden hose?”

“No, that got used up making the pumps to keep the basements from flooding. Honestly if I’d known this town was so p-prone to flooding I would have left basement levels out of the plans from the start.”

Dr. Aster grunted and pulled a pair of needle nose pliers out of one pocket, which began twisting and tightening some lengths of wire together.

“Actually, the city gave us building code exemptions when we first started building.” Alphys held the claws on one finger and thumb on both side of the wire, and a spark buzzed for a second before disappearing. When the light vanished, Asriel could see that the wire was glowing red and had melted together into a single metal mass. “If we hadn’t had that exemption we would have avoided the basement problems, but it also would have taken us longer to build anything in the first place.”

“It’s all a rich tapestry.” Dr. Aster pulled a file folder out of his lab coat, opened it up, and started flipping through the papers inside. “So there’s no basements in town at all, huh?”
“Actually there are, it just depends on the lay of the land. Bastion Circle and the Downtown District are both on higher ground, and so are some residential areas nearby. Justin said that one of the Anti-Monster League meetings he got called into was in a basement, and they were going to use that to narrow down who was in the group since it had to be somebody living in specific parts of town letting them use their place as a clubhouse, but they ran out of time before the attack on the Auditorium.”

“Well, time makes fools of us all.” Dr. Aster snapped the folder shut. “Hey, Asriel, could you come over here for a second?”

Asriel hopped off the chair and walked over to the two scientists. “What do you need?”

“A bullet. Later, we’ll have Toriel and Frisk stop by and we’ll get comparisons.”

“Okay.” Asriel held up one paw and a fireball sparked into existence. “Where’s the target?”

“Actually, due to material limitations, we c-couldn’t make a physical target.” Alphys pointed at a tubed of metal mesh that had once been a waste basket before the bottom had been removed. “Just toss the bullet through here and we’ll use the Induction Method instead.”

“Okay.” Asriel swung his arm and the fireball rocketed through the waste basket, bounced off the wall, hit the floor, bounced up again, and dissipated in midair.

“Uh. Whoops.”

“We got the data and that’s all that matters.” Dr. Aster stared at what had once been a graphing calculator and nodded. “I’ll write this down and we’ll compare it later.”

“Cool. So is this for the amalgamates, or for Chara, or both?”

“First one, then the other. Our best bet at learning how to create an artificial magic field for a monster’s body starts with getting the amalgamates their original forms back, or at least so close as makes no difference.”

“Oh. That’s good. After, uh...” Asriel’s eyes darted towards Alphys, who blinked in confusion. “After the last time we talked. I was starting to wonder if. You know. What happened to me was so weird and unusual that there was no chance of learning anything from it.”

“Well, to be fair, no competent scientist goes into an experiment already knowing what they’re going to find. If they knew already they wouldn’t need to run the experiment in the first place.”

“Humans like to use the phrase ‘tech tree’ to describe how different types of scientific knowledge and technology connect to each other, but it’s really more of a ‘tech forest’ because of all the cross pollination.” Alphys added. “That’s why the Civilization games keep making new tech trees each game, because they keep having to refine them.”

“There’s a game about civilization?”

“Yeah. Made by some human named Sid Meier. Or at least, he has his name on them, I don’t know if he still does game dev and programming himself or not. Honestly, I just g-get them so I can read the Civilopedia entries. Being responsible for a whole c-country is too much stress, even when they’re virtual p-people and I can just reload when I make a mistake.”

“...I guess I can understand that.”
“Computer games aside,” Dr. Aster spoke up, “we already know it’s possible to produce a new, stable magic field because you’re here right now. We just don’t exactly know how, so we’re taking our best guesses and building on them.” One bony finger tapped on the device. “Literally. If anything, we have two advantages. The Amalgamates still have their own souls, and their bodies are still largely intact even if they are fused together. In your situation, the original body and soul were gone. Once we figure out the soul and field dynamic for the amalgamates, we’re halfway to helping Chara anyway. We just need to figure out how to reproduce the—”

Dr. Aster suddenly stopped talking, his jaw hanging open. Slowly he walked away from the machinery he and Alphys had assembled, and began to pace back and forth across the room. Dr. Alphys put down her own tools and watched him, claws tapping nervously on the workbench.

After a few minutes, Dr. Aster stopped so suddenly that he almost tripped over his own feet, then turned to look at Alphys and Asriel.

“It is possible we may have a problem.”

“How’s your tooth?”

“Totally repaired. I think I know what happened now but I’m not sure how to test it.”

“Test what?”

“The hypothesis.” Frisk stared at Douglas’s blank expression and rolled their eyes. “The whole reason the magic worked on that tooth at all was because the sugar reacted with a metal filling, and that hurt. My other fillings are epoxy resin and wouldn’t react with the sugar, so they didn’t hurt. The healing magic tried to grow back my cavity that was filled with metal because that was the only thing that felt wrong. In other words, pain is the catalyst for effective healing magic.”

“...okay.”

Frisk sighed. “I really miss Mary right now.”

“Me too. I thought I’d be okay with a week of not getting punched or kicked or insulted but now everything is so boring.” Douglas held out his hands as Frisk placed a glowing red fireball in them, and stared at the flame, running his fingers through it once. “Hey, what was with the red eyes back then, anyway?”

“The eyes are the window to the soul. When you use a lot of magic power at once, your eyes start to glow.”

“Oh. Right. When Jordan Cater showed up at the school his eyes were glowing purple.”

“Technically magenta, but yeah—”

“Ow.” Douglas dropped the fireball and stuck his fingers his mouth.

“...I didn’t mean to do that.” Frisk held out their hands to Douglas. “Here, let me see.”

Douglas hesitated for a moment, then wiped his fingers on his shirt before holding them out. A green glow passed between Frisk’s hands and surrounded the somewhat reddened fingers, before fading away. Douglas flexed his hand and nodded.
“Good as new. Probably shouldn’t have brought it up.”

Frisk shrugged.

“In my defense, he did try to kill me and my family multiple times, so if I get really mad thinking about him I think I’m entirely justified. Sorry about your hand though.”

“If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s my mom’s for signing me up for this class in the first place even though I didn’t want to be in it at all.”

“...that kinda sorta makes sense.” Frisk shaped another fireball out of the ether and handed it over to Douglas, who took it with more than a little hesitation.

After a minute, Douglas shifted Frisk’s fireball to his left hand and held up his right. Slowly, and with obvious difficulty, green light sparked into existence above his palm and occasionally resembled a candle flame before going out.

“I screwed up.” Douglas bent over, sweat dripping from his forehead, and Frisk felt themselves jump backwards as their class partner’s breakfast splattered on the tiled floor of the classroom.

“Oh my!” Toriel immediately broke off the demonstration she was showing to several of the younger students, and practically sprinted over to where Douglas was bent double. “Are you alright, Douglas?”

“...I’ve been better.”

A cup of water slowly was lifted up to where it could be sipped; Joe didn’t seem to see it through half-lidded eyes.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Joe blinked and looked up to see Hailey Skye sliding into the other side of the booth with a tray in front of her; he immediately averted his eyes from the massive sandwich and equally massive basket of fries, trying to focus on the maps of the Atlantic Naval Battles that decorated the walls of the restaurant.

“I’m slowly starving to death. Doctor’s orders.”

“What?”

Joe held up his incomplete right arm.

“Tomorrow I go in under the knife so Dr. Ross can attach the new arm. No monster food, solid human food, or stimulants for twenty four hours before.”

“Wait, that’s tomorrow? I thought that wasn’t for another two weeks at least?”

“Same here. I got a call yesterday, or maybe the day before that, they pushed it up. Alphys managed to get the arm done way ahead of schedule, and they’re also worried about the weather getting hotter. Trying to handle surgery at the same time that cases of heatstroke and heat exhaustion start to rise isn’t great for anyone-”

There was an excited squeal from the front of the restaurant, and all conversation stopped as the other customers turned to see an alligator monster fangirling behind the counter and two fabulous monsters
“Oh, right,” Joe mumbled, returning his attention to his nearly empty cup of water. “Sans mentioned that Papyrus and Mettaton are dating now. Real celebrity power couple.”

“Wow. I heard the rumors but I thought they were just rumors. Like that thing about Thomas O’Dell tricking the police and escaping to Canada. Or the one about Hal running around throwing bread at ducks yesterday.”

“Uh.” Joe blinked and looked up unto Hailey’s face; he had started to stare at her lunch again while she was talking. “Well, the duck one is based in fact.”

“...Joe, if you can’t eat anything today, why did you go to a sandwich shop in the first place?”

“Behaving logically is expecting a lot of me when I haven’t had any coffee. It’s a miracle I remembered to put on pants this morning.”

Book after book was shuffled under the barcode scanner, until the pile was completely scanned in. Michael Van Garrett looked up to see a black cloaked figure carrying a large book in front of him: *The Lore Of Flying* by Tre Tryckare.

“This all for you today?”

“Indeed. I wish to slip the bonds of gravity in a literary sense.”

“Allrighty then.” Van Garrett picked up the bar code scanner, opened the book, found the bar code, and the computer beeped in response. “Here you go, have fun, try to have it back within three weeks.”

“Tra la la. The quest for knowledge is an endless, Sisyphean struggle.”

“Damn straight.”

The Riverperson walked away, and Van Garrett looked down at his phone as it began to buzz.

10:45 AM LadyDeathwish: BOO

10:45 AM: egads

10:45 AM: It Is An Ghost

10:45 AM LadyDeathwish: Lol

10:46 AM: Whatever shall I do

10:46 AM LadyDeathwish: Guess what just came in the mail

10:46 AM: oh good

10:46 AM LadyDeathwish: And that I had to sign like five different places to get

10:46 AM: was starting to worry
10:47 AM: hey that stuff is pretty popular right now
10:47 AM: and registered mail seemed like the safest option
10:47 AM LadyDeathwish: I know I know
10:47 AM LadyDeathwish: Im not complaining
10:47 AM LadyDeathwish: In super excite
10:47 AM LadyDeathwish: d
10:47 AM: remember this is xmas and birthday gifts both for this year
10:47 AM LadyDeathwish: Lol yeh I know
10:48 AM LadyDeathwish: Seriously tho
10:48 AM LadyDeathwish: This means a lot
10:48 AM LadyDeathwish: Thank you :)”
10:48 AM: no prob
10:48 AM: let me know if you get it to work
10:48 AM LadyDeathwish: Right
10:49 AM: been trying stuff myself on the sly
10:49 AM: since I’m too busy too take the queen’s class
10:49 AM LadyDeathwish: Did you actually just say On The Sly
10:49 AM: no
10:49 AM: I typed it
10:49 AM: big difference

Thomas O’Dell jumped as the door to the room opened, only relaxing when he saw the black cloak of the Riverperson.

“You know, it wouldn’t hurt to knock.”

“I attempted to do so, but the door parted as I reached out.”

“...oh. Never mind, I guess.”

The Riverperson walked up to a desk covered in books and began hastily moving them aside.

“Hey, what the hell man, I just got finished sorting those!”
“New information is available.” The Riverperson reached beneath their cloak and pulled out a laptop computer, which they placed on the desk, followed by a power cord and adapter, and a USB drive. “The Vice President of the Library Board has been accumulating and cataloging Guardian lore since the organization’s defeat, just prior to the breaking of the Barrier. He recently managed to digitize the bulk of the records.”

“Okay. How did you convince him to let you borrow it? Or, does he even know?”

“He was rather occupied with his work and long distance friendships, so he did not notice my presence in his office, nor my duplication of the data onto a portable drive.”

“Right. The human element is always the weakest part of a security system.” O’Dell walked over to the laptop as the Riverperson powered it on. “I’m not going to go on Facebook or anything but is there any internet access down here?”

“I am given to understand that the UnderNet hardware has been all but abandoned with nobody here to make use of it. Even the automated sensors employed by All Fine Labs personnel use a dedicated network.”

“Oh. Well, can’t be helped.”

“Indeed. How goes your task of distilling truth from myth?”

“I’m still trying to figure out where to start. This is a big job, it’s not going to be finished in just a week.”

“Tra la la. A journey of a thousand revelations begins with a single fact.”

“...why do you say ‘Tra la la’ so much?”

“Force of habit.”

Frisk tapped the fingers of their left hand on their notebook. Their right hand, clutching a pencil in it, scribbled and doodle in the same notebook under Chara’s direction.

Asriel’s appearance after the end of the class and the message that he had brought from Dr. Aster implied that the situation was urgent, yet Toriel and her children had been sitting in the office for over ten minutes with no sign of panic or emergency.

Just as Frisk was about to break the silence, the doorknob rattled and Dr. Aster walked in, walked up to his desk, shook his skull, and then walked back to the front of the desk where he sat on the edge.

“Doctor, is everything okay?” Frisk decided to say, since their mouth was already open.

“Uhm. Yes and no and also maybe.” The scientist pinched the bone between his eye sockets, and then looked at Toriel.

“I asked you to stop by and see me because we have run into something involving Chara’s situation.”

Toriel instantly stood up straighter.

“We know that the human soul, or at least Frisk’s Soul, can survive in a destabilized state, and we have reason to believe that it can do so for an extended period of time. Our best understanding of the
situation is that when Frisk and Asriel were fighting Underground, Asriel managed to hit Frisk with an attack strong enough to cause critical soul instability, but their DT levels were already high enough to allow them to survive it.”

Toriel blinked and turned to look at her children. Asriel was staring down at the floor, paws on his knees and his ears were dangling in such a way that she could not see his eyes. Frisk and Chara, on the other hand, nodded as if in agreement and then continued to look at Dr. Aster as if patiently waiting for him to continue.

“We think we can reproduce this effect, but it’s not without risks.”

Toriel’s head spun as she turned to look back at Dr. Aster, and one of her ears actually continued to move and lightly slapped the side of her muzzle before hanging down normally once again.

“First stage: Verification of the Magic Field Transplant theory that Alphys and I have been working on. If it works, it will help the amalgamates and we can use the raw data to develop a framework for building Chara’s body from scratch.”

Dr. Aster reached back to grab some sort of diagram sketched onto graphing paper and held it up where the three figures (technically four) could see it; different monster outlines surrounding a distorted combined outline, with circles radiating out of each monster to overlap the central outline like a Venn Diagram.

“Second Stage: DT Enhancement. Anything strong enough to fragment Frisk’s Soul would, by definition, risk killing them. Therefore their DT levels have to be artificially boosted as high as we can safely get. We’re still trying to figure out exactly how.”

Dr. Aster flipped the page and another diagram showed a human outline with a heart shape in the middle, and a large syringe with the letters DT on the side.

“That syringe isn’t to scale, is it?”

“What?” Dr. Aster turned the diagram around. “Oh. No, it’s not even going to be a syringe, this is just a convenient symbol. Where was I… right.”

Dr. Aster flipped the page over and turned it back so that the Dreemurrs could see it: A large heart shape that had been broken apart, with one section completely separated from the other fragments and a box around it.

“Third Stage: Soul Fragmentation. We cause Frisk’s Soul to destabilize just long enough to extract a fragment that is large enough to remain viable on its own, which we need to regenerate into a whole Soul. We don’t know exactly how to do that, but it happened with Asriel so we know that it is possible.”

“Like an organ transplant,” Frisk nodded.

“That’s as good an analogy as we are likely to get, and it’s a convenient name too.”

Dr. Aster flipped the last page and showed a triangle with an outline at each corner; a human at the bottom right, and boss monster outlines on the bottom left and the top.

“Fourth Stage: Transference. We use Asriel’s Soul Energy Aggregate Link to connect the fragments of Frisk’s Soul, and transfer Chara’s consciousness into the separate one. With a will behind it, we can start the magic field stimulation process so that they generate their own magical body.”
Toriel stared at Dr. Aster for several seconds without speaking.

“I like this plan,” Frisk spoke up. “I’m excited to be a part of it.”

Once again, Toriel turned to stare at her children; Frisk had already taken the pencil from Chara and was reproducing the diagrams that Dr. Aster had shown them in their own notes.

“Dr. Aster, this whole Soul shattering thing, how would that even be done?”

“We’re thinking a modified Point Source Emitter. Totally neutral and with no intent to harm behind it, but with power levels higher than normal. It doesn’t attack the body or the Soul, it just overwhelms it for about three quarters of a second. Sort of like how a higher electrical voltage can be carried over a wire if the amperage is extremely low, to keep it from melting from the resistance heat.”

“I see. I think. Frisk will have to explain it later. And you are certain that a Soul Fragment can be isolated without a consciousness associated with it?”

“That, actually, is where our speculation really comes into play. We don’t even know for sure if the Soul Fragment can be preserved in the containment cylinders the same way that intact souls were. All we really know for sure is that it is possible for Frisk to survive with their Soul Fragmented, and that it can regenerate into a whole Soul again even missing a piece of itself. And we also know that missing piece can, itself, grow into a completely independent Soul. That’s the crux of this whole matter, and the only thing that makes it possible in the first place.”

“For the record, I don’t think I can do that big attack again,” Asriel mumbled. “Even if I wanted to. Which I don’t. So you’re going to have to science that somehow.”

“Duly noted.” Dr. Aster flipped back to an earlier page and pulled out a pen from his lab coat pocket to make a note, before looking up at Toriel again. “Are you alright, Your Majesty? I know this was a lot to spring on you all at once.”

“...Wing Ding, are you... are you actually telling me... that in order to save one child, I must sacrifice another??”

“Uh, no?” The skeleton flipped through the diagrams again. “At least, it’s not in any of my notes.”

“You would have Frisk’s life, the culmination of their very being, put at risk in this scheme. I cannot possibly agree to it.”

The office was silent for almost a full minute, and then the human child stood up, one eye glowing red.

“Your plan, in its current incarnation, is potentially dangerous, as Toriel has pointed out. With time, I have no doubt that you and Alphys and Sans will make major refinements to the technology and the plan itself. After all, you haven’t even tried the Amalgamate treatment yet, by your own admission. There is a lot you may have left to learn.”

Dr. Aster nodded and put the diagrams back on his desk.

“Correct. Thanks for hearing me out, and we will call you guys when we have more information and less risk to contend with.”

“I wasn’t finished.”
The skeleton tilted his head to one side in confusion.

“I was about to say, even with the obvious risks, I would have no problem agreeing to the procedure in its current form. Obviously you’re still in the planning stage so it’s not like we could just get it over with right now, but still. I want to let you know that if I could, I would. Every improvement you make is just icing on the metaphorical cake.”

“...wow. That’s... that is one heck of a vote of confidence. I think my skull’s getting bigger as we speak.”

“Chara’s trust notwithstanding, doctor, you will explain to Asgore and myself your plans before any such procedures take place.” Toriel’s voice carried an edge usually found on legendary swords crafted by master blacksmiths after the steel had been folded a thousand times. “I can already tell you that any possibility that we could lose either Chara or Frisk would be absolutely unacceptable.”

“We’re on the same page, then. This was only intended to give you an overview of where we stood now anyway.”

“Good.” Toriel relaxed somewhat, and stood up. “I am glad that we are in agreement, then.”

“Oh, Doctor?” Asriel hopped off of his seat and raised one paw. “Don’t we still need to do that magic scanner test.”

“Oh, that’s right. I got so distracted sketching this out that I completely forgot.”

“Is that also why your pants are on inside out?” Frisk pointed. “Or is that something else?”

Dr. Aster sighed.

“It’s unrelated. The washing machine at the house isn’t draining properly and we’re still trying to find somebody to look at it.”

“Oh. You know, there’s a laundromat in the same strip mall as the Archaic Arcade. Luigi’s Laundro-Lounge. You could give that a shot. Just bring your own detergent because the stuff in the dispensers there is overpriced.”

“Huh. I might just give that a shot.”

“Doctor, if you’re looking for somebody to fix your washing machine, have you tried Hal Greene?”

“Asriel, I want to do laundry, not launch the blasted thing into orbit. Besides, I already tried calling him yesterday, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying over all the quacking.”

“What about his friend Justin? He knows how to do a lot of stuff.”

Dr. Aster blinked.

“...now there’s an idea.”
Venting Frustrations

Agent Brown stared at the sign. Black letters on a yellow background, all capitalized, slightly protruding from the surface and with the Braille equivalent directly beneath the English text:

CONVENIENTLY UNGUARDED
VENTILATION SHAFT

“...there is literally no possible way that this isn’t a trap, a joke, or both at the same-”

A squeal of metal drowned out the rest of the agent’s commentary as the screen covering the shaft was opened up and Agent Black crawled inside.

“What in the actual shit are you doing?”

“Calling their bluff,” Agent Black grumbled as he pulled out a smartphone. “If nothing else, we’ll learn about their security response times. And before they drag me out of here I’ll learn something about their internal layout.”

“You are an idiot and I have to wonder what horrible crime I committed in a past life to deserve being partnered up with you.”

Agent Black grunted again and vanished into the ventilation system, leaving only the gradually fading sounds of elbows and knees on sheet metal. It was possible to see flashes of light from a screen set to maximum brightness until the man turned a corner, and Agent Brown sighed and pulled out his own phone.

“Looks like somebody opened Conveniently Unguarded Ventilation Shaft Epsilon.”

“Hmmmpff?” Graham looked up from half of a Clif bar and tried to speak around the other half in his mouth. “Iffif heugh afenf?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Paul pointed at one of the security monitors. “They walked around the blind corner to where Epsilon is and haven’t shown up on the other side of the corridor or backtracked, and the acoustic sensors in the Epsilon shaft are going off regularly now. So either they crawled inside the ventilation system there, or they are leaning up against the shaft cover while performing some sort of sex act.”

Graham’s furious attempts to chew the energy bar stopped, then slowly resumed.

“Well,” the security guard said around a somewhat manageable mouthful of food, “Doctor Alphys told us to let the senior staff know if any of the Conveniently Unguarded Ventilation Shaft sensors were activated. She didn’t specifically tell us that we had to make sure they weren’t quickies before contacting anyone. I mean… I don’t want to yuck anybody’s yum, but if that is part of my job description now, I think maybe that would justify a pay raise, don’t you?”

“I don’t know. I mean,” Paul paused and tapped a few keys on the security station keyboard, “I don’t know that it’s necessarily fair to make a blanket generalization like that. It seems to me that specific work related responsibilities like that would need to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.”
“That does make sense, but considering that the subject matter itself is such a large taboo in the first place, that arguably does justify a general blanket statement, even if it’s just a placeholder so that people aren’t blindsided by it.”

Paul nodded.

“I see your point, but the actual act of setting up a blanket statement already exposes people to the subject regardless of their feelings on the subject matter. So the same taboo that requires a standardized response also prohibits that sort of-” Paul broke off and turned back to the security console as a light began to blink. “The acoustic sensors over the Soul Research lab are starting to respond. I think we can safely rule out the sex act hypothesis at this point.”

“how are you doing Miss Lindsey?”


“the what?”

Agent Black stopped shuffling through the sheet metal tube, slowly lifting his head up to peak out of the rectangular slats recessed into the side of the shaft. It was just possible to see some equipment on the outer walls of the room, but most of his view was blocked by some massive machine, suspended from the ceiling by thick metal chains.

Still, he was able to recognize the voices. One had to be that short skeleton monster that was always wearing a blue hooded sweatshirt, and the other was one of the people on the town’s radio station.

“Some historical thing. It was passing interest, not ‘memorize everything related to it’ interest.”

“oh. well, sometimes that’s the way things are. you all ready?”

“I think so. This can’t actually hurt the baby, can it?”

“nah. it’s just like getting your picture taken, it just uses different frequencies.”

“Okay then.”

The machine suspended from the ceiling began to hum, and Agent Black could feel some of the fillings in his teeth start to vibrate in sympathetic resonance.

“okey dokey. you’re coming back on here with… LV 1 and EXP 4.”

“Yeah, that tracks.”

“Vital stats coming back… 32 over 20 Healing Potential. Aggression Transfer is 11. Defensive Field is the same, 11. Sensory Processing Delay is 17, and you got 21 on Induction Vector.”

“Wait, what was the second to last one? I thought that was something like… I forget, but it had Path in the Middle.”

“Shortest Path to Destination was the old Acronym. Dad finally got around to updating it last week after everything calmed down. Speaking of stats, we can’t get magic stats without bullet analysis, since we reached the limit of what we can do with this machine and Joe will have four simultaneous heart attacks if we try to tie anything else into the power supply.”
“No big deal. I was excited about maybe learning, and then Dr. Aster called in and said that it was all science and math, and all my motivation rolled over and went back to sleep.”

“Can’t say I blame ya. Okay… yeah, here we are on the visuals. You can see the interference pattern.”

Agent Black heard footsteps as somebody walked across the room.

“So that dark blue light, that’s my soul, right? What about my kid’s soul?”

“Hasn’t formed yet. You’re the first pregnant human that’s come in here actually, so we have no real data on when the human Soul develops, or how fast, or anything like that. Dad has a theory though. What’s the earliest memory you have?”

“Oh… I might not be the best example for this because I repressed so many, but I have vague memories of drawing on the wall outside my mom’s bedroom with crayons. I think I would have been like, two or three.”

“That seems to be a common number when we ask humans that question. Dad’s theory is that the earliest memory you have indicates when your Soul actually forms into its own distinct entity, rather than just being an interference pattern caused by your parents’ Souls. Assuming that we can even apply monster metrics to human reproduction. Still, it’s early days and we might disprove that theory sooner rather than later, as long as you keep coming in on the regular.”

“Well. I don’t really see why not.”

“So, you guys thought about names yet?”

“I’m kinda leaning towards Katarine, after my great aunt, but it’s not a hill I’m gonna die on.”

Agent Black rolled his eyes and began pulling himself through the vents again, pausing by another grating as he recognized the voices on the other side. Unlike the other room, this one had no obstruction and he could clearly see the monster queen and prince, the skeleton scientist that had been called to testify before congress, and the human ambassador… who held up a glowing fireball in one hand and flicked at it with the index finger on their other hand. The fireball arced through some sort of mesh tube before Agent Black lost sight of it, and the skeleton nodded.

“Numbers look good, and are exactly in line with what we expected. More specifically, the compound frequencies are almost identical between you two, as a result of the whole Soul Transplant situation. Almost being the key word, since Frisk obviously doesn’t have the whole Boss Monster connection going on.”

“Hey, how does that even work, if Asriel’s Soul is a human Soul instead of a Boss Monster Soul?”

“Do you want the short answer or the long one?”

“How big is the difference between short and long?”

“About five hours, split evenly between math and monster anatomy.”

“Short answer now, please. I’ll take you up on the long answer later.”

“Okay. Basically, ignoring field strength and range for the moment, the key difference between monster Souls and human Souls is that human Souls do not incorporate the blueprint for the magic field that makes their bodies, because human bodies aren’t made of magic. They hold their shape
using colloids and chemistry and such. The upside is that once Asriel had that soul fragment, it basically provided the energy needed to maintain that magic field. Presumably that was rebuilt around the same time that the Barrier was broken, based on what Asriel has told me, and that’s probably also when the soul fragment was originally picked up. If it had shown up later, the new magic field would have already disappeared when Asriel turned back into a flower again. As it stands, the soul fragment kept that magic field sustained and active, even if it wasn’t actually manifesting in the world.”

“Like a battery backup.”

“Precisely correct. Anyway, we can only speculate on exactly what happened next, but given that the symptoms of aging preceded Asriel’s regeneration by at least a few weeks, we know that the field must have been active on some level. In any event, once the field was fully in place and Asriel’s body restored, the Boss Monster connection was restored with it. The parents age to the extent that the child grows. Boss Monster Soul strength notwithstanding, the connection has just as much to do with the body as the Soul. If you want another analogy, there’s that thing where two tuning forks are in the same room and striking one will excite the other one. Same basic principle except with magic instead of sound.”

“Well, that answers almost one of my questions.”

The skeleton snorted. “You’re the one who wanted to skip the five hours of mathematical and scientific proof, not me. That’s my favorite part.”

Slowly, Agent Black started to pull himself along the ventilation shaft again; the monster child had turned around at some point in the conversation, and appeared to be looking at the ventilation grate itself. After coming to a three way junction and turning left on a spur of the moment decision, the agent stopped short as a large grate spread out in front of him that could not possibly support his weight.

Beneath the grate, Agent Black could see light blue lights moving around the room almost randomly around three figures in white lab coats. One figure was off to the side, holding a clipboard and taking notes, while the other two were in the center of the room.

It took almost three whole seconds for him to recognize the shape of magic bullets resembled metallic springs, and that the two lab coated figures in the middle of the room were locking arms and dancing in a circle while singing, occasionally unlocking arms and turning around to lock their other arms and dance in the opposite direction.

“It’s Slinky, it’s Slinky! For fun it’s the best of the toys! It’s Slinky, it’s Slinky, the favorite of girls and boys! Everyone knows it’s Slinky! Everyone knows it’s Slinky!”

Agent Black quickly started to scoot backwards through the ventilation shaft until he came to the same junction as before, this time taking the other path he had not tried before. After two corners, he found another ventilation grate, this one in the side of the shaft, that overlooked two figures standing in front of a doorway. One of the figures was obviously the yellow lizard in charge of the laboratory, and Agent Black perked up, moving closer to the grating than would have been safe in order to get a better look.

“Remember, don’t let it get close to you, and d-definitely don’t let it touch you.” Alphys tapped a claw on a keypad next to the door, holding a device that resembled an extremely advanced and extensively modified vacuum cleaner with her free arm.

Next to Alphys, a human dressed in a mix of laboratory safety gear and the protective equipment
from two or three different sports nodded, and the duo walked through the doorway as it opened up. The door slid shut behind them, and after a few moments, Agent Black realized that he would not be able to hear anything from inside the room unless he found another shaft that overlooked the interior, and started crawling forward again.

Agent Brown looked from his smartphone as the hum of an electric motor became louder and louder, culminating in some sort of vehicle turning around the corner. It appeared as though it had been made from some sort of electric shopping cart, designed for shoppers who were unable to walk or stand for prolonged periods of time if at all, but the modifications were dramatic and extensive. The seat appeared to be replaced by some sort of robotic arm, and the steering column was surmounted by some sort of cobbled-together arrangement of relays, switches, and electronics.

And in the center of those electronics stood what appeared to be some sort of rodent, dressed in a tiny robe and pointed hat.

A rodent that was staring at Agent Brown.

After a few seconds, it raised one miniscule paw and made what was an obvious waving gesture.

Agent Black raised his hand and waved back.

An uncomfortable silence filled the air, until the creature turned to the electronics surrounding it and began pressing buttons. There was a beeping sound followed by a synthesized voice.

“Hello. My Name Is Chase.”

“Uh… hi. My name’s John Brown.”

“...Nice To Meet You John Brown. ...Is Everything All Right.”

“Uh. Yeah. I’m just. You know. Standing here. Looking up stuff on the internet.” Agent Brown looked down at his phone screen. “Did you know that the Stamp Act of 1765 is thought by many historical scholars to be the key instigating factor in the American Revolution because it effectively penalized the colonies for any sort of formal communication or record keeping?”

“...I Did Not Know That. ...I Have Learned A Thing Today. ...It Was Nice Meeting You Mister Brown.”

“You too.”

The rodent monster began manipulating buttons and switches and the electric vehicle began to drive away. Once it passed the corner, Agent Brown let out his breath and, out of genuine curiosity, continued to read the Wikipedia page that he had stumbled across.

This ventilation shaft eventually gave way to a much larger vertical shaft, well lit and filled with ladders and metal grills. The vent cover moved easily when he pushed on it, and Agent Black climbed out into what had to be some sort of maintenance access area, one hand clutched over his mouth to try to muffle the sound of a sneeze from the dust stirred up in the air.

With lights in safety cages illuminating the area, Agent Black could see signs over different vents, written in the same font and same Black-On-Yellow color scheme as the sign outside the vent he had
climbed inside.

LABORATORY
SELF DESTRUCT
SYSTEM

“...that’s probably not actually a thing, and even if it is, I don’t want to turn that on while I’m in the building itself.” Agent Black slowly climbed down a ladder and carefully crouched down to read a sign next to a vent set close to the floor of the access area.

SUPER MEGA
ULTRA SECURE
STORAGE VAULT

“...could it really be that easy?”

Agent Black reached out for the vent cover, hesitated, and turned to look at another sign at almost eye level.

DOG MONSTER
POKER PARLOR

“Somehow I doubt these things are going to get better.”

The ventilation grate to what the sign claimed was a security vault was pulled open, and Agent Black slid inside, making his way forward on hands and knees and using the light from his smartphone to see once again… which he almost dropped as it began to vibrate.

“Shit. They must have found us out.” Agent Black unlocked the phone and found himself staring at a message notification:

COME JOIN THE FUN.

Alphys ducked down and peered underneath a desk, shook her head, and stood upright again.

“This room has been sealed since my last attempt at containment. I don’t understand how it could have gotten out.”

Anna pulled the baseball catcher’s mask up.

“You said this thing is flexible, but how flexible? Could it hide inside of something, like a tube or a hose?”

“Yes, actually. Back in the Hotland Laboratory the Memoryheads would sometimes hide inside the plumbing fixtures. The lab sinks, the bathroom drains, even the sprinkler systems set up for the control groups for the golden flowers. But the water and gas lines to this place were shut off upstream when we locked it down.”
“Okay. That’s good thinking. Uh, hey, what if it made itself really flat?”

“...what do you mean?”

Anna held out her arms in an attempt to provide some sort of visual aid to her explanation.

“I mean, there’s this old movie, Terminator 2: Judgment Day, have you seen it?”

“...was that the one with the robot made of mercury?”

“Yeah, sorta! The T One Thousand model was made of liquid metal and could shapeshift, and at one point it spreads out over a tile floor and even reproduces the tile pattern.”

Both human and monster looked down at the floor suddenly, which seemed to be a perfectly ordinary laboratory floor.

“I don’t actually know if the Memoryhead can do that or not. So, we should probably be careful. I mean, more than we were already.”

“Right... what about ventilation?”

“Well, for safety’s sake, we didn’t want to completely isolate the lab in case somebody got stuck in here and suffocated. So it’s still tied into the system, but the filters and air conditioning would have slowed it down and given us plenty of warning even if it didn’t stop them.”

“Then it must still be in here, then.” Anna turned back to face the doors to the room. “Unless it was hiding on the doors themselves, and just jumped out as soon as we walked inside.”

Alphys blinked, then turned to look at the doors herself.

“...to do that, it would have had to hide in the gaps in the walls where the doors fit. That would be a tight fit even for a shapeshifting organism of constantly metamorphosing goop.”

“True. What about hiding on the walls and ceiling instead? Can Memoryheads reproduce patterns and textures like a chameleon?”

“I never saw them do that, but everything is white anyway to make it easier to clean...” Alphys slowly pulled out her phone. “I think maybe we should call security just in-”

The phone began to play an upbeat song in what was most likely Japanese, probably the introductory song to an anime series, and Alphys almost dropped it before regaining her grip and answering the call.

“D-D-Doctor Alphys here.”

“Hey, doc, it’s Paul. We kinda have a situation. You know that text about those secret agents trying to sneak into the ventilation system a little bit ago?”

“Yes?”

“Well, the acoustic sensors picked up another presence in the vents. And we thought it was both guys splitting up.”

“Right, that makes sense.”

“Only Chase just sent us a text saying that one of those guys is still standing guard outside of
Conveniently Unguarded Ventilation Shaft Epsilon.”

“...oh.” Alphys swallowed. “Oh no.”
“Welcome back to The Morning Rush on KEBT FM, hope you enjoyed that last block of music, because, well, you know. You can’t unring a bell, and all that. We have a few news items for you now before we hand things off to Beanpole’s Request Line at the top of the hour. First and foremost, the Build-A-Bread Bakery at the Tailings Pond Mall in Quarterhorse Fields has defeated the copyright infringement lawsuit filed by Build-A-Bear Workshop… by filing a countersuit accusing Build-A-Bear of deliberately redirecting protesters affiliated with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals towards the bakery and encouraging vandalism and harassment. While it’s not clear if the countersuit would have held up in court, Build-A-Bear has dropped their original lawsuit.”

“Wait. Wait wait wait. Let me try to get this straight in my head. The PETA folks show up to harass the Build-A-Bear guys, right?”

“That is what previous reports indicated, yes.”

“So then how did they get the protesters to go after the bakery? Why would they listen?”

“Details are sparse but with any luck we will have more on that story in the next few days. Our next item… oh, this is sad. Hiram Flagstone is stepping down from the position of Ombudsman for the Knights Of The Road Who Say Ni after sixty years of service. Good luck out there Hiram, we’ll all miss you. Uhm… hey Burgie, can you get the next item… I got something in my throat.”

“Uh. Sure. Let me see. Okay. Lone Point held a referendum earlier this morning on whether or not to introduce a bond issue to fund the popular but expensive Pontoon Bridge Initiative that passed earlier this month. The bond issue is particularly unpopular due to the sheer costs involved, regardless of any of the proposed benefits to tourism, traffic, and water quality. We also have a notification here about the Silverbell Squatters from the Triton police; it says here that they lost their tax exempt status. So… that’s unfortunate for them I guess. Brett, you doing better?”

“Much. Thanks for the breather. In related news the Holloway Distillery is announcing a special edition Spruce Beer for the Fourth of July holidays this year, available at- wait what? Oh boy. Jeff has just informed me of an important news bulletin. It would seem that the Sinkhole in Gemini Roads has finally gotten big enough to swallow the old schoolhouse. The Gemini Roads Sinkhole Sweepstakes has announced the winner as… Todd Montgomery, who chose the eighteen day spot! Congratulations Mr. Montgomery if you are listening in! Be sure to claim your prize by the end of the week!”

“Wow, I had ten days. He really went for the long shot. What about you Brett?”

“Didn’t get my ticket in this time this year, unfortunately. Not that it would have helped, I was just going to follow Clutch’s lead.”

“Really?”

“As a matter of fact, our very own Clutch McGee has managed to win the Gemini Roads Sinkhole Sweepstakes three times in the last five years.”

“Wow, I had no idea.”

“He doesn’t talk about it much. Anyway, that takes us up to just about noon, so we have a few advertisements and public service announcements for you and when we come back you’ll be listening to Beanpole Levine! Play us off, Jeff!”
“In a world where everything’s going faster and faster, getting stranger and stranger by day, keep pace with the chaos of modern life with a Breakfast Burrito from The Iron Waffle. You can eat them on the go, save them for later, or just jam them into your mouth as soon as you buy them like some sort of wild animal. Available in both traditional and monster style.”

“You’re tired, you’re stressed, you lost your job, you flunked a test… and then you’re tempted. You try it once. Just one time. That’s not an addiction, right? And then again the next day. And then again the next. It’s just a bottle each day, you tell yourself. But it’s not enough, you can’t escape the thirst, and soon it’s two bottles a day, then three. Until one awful day you wake up and you realize you’ve been drinking eight whole bottles every day, your life spiraling out of control, down the drain… of water addiction. Stay safe, stay dry. This message brought to you by Citizens Against Dihydrous Monoxide.”

“You said that you would always be there for me!”

“My dear, it’s not me! It’s anaphylactic shock! You know I can’t afford an Epi-Pen on my income!”

“It’s been called the greatest theatrical breakthrough of the modern era.”

“Gossip in the alleyways,

rumor in the back streets,

telephone games with their lives on the liiiine!”

“Two star crossed lovers, separated by incompatible work schedules and financial obligations.”

“The bigger they are,

the harder they fall,

when you rise to the skies,

there’s no way to go but

DOOOOOOOOOWN!”

“And a swarm of stinging, pollinating insects that put everything into perspective!”

“You can’t quit now, you’re the only one left to take the shift!”

“Screw you! I’m allergic! You’re not going to take me to the emergency room if I get stung, are you? Didn’t think so!”

“Written and directed by Lyla Rosewater, performed by the Belmoley Players, it’s BEEEEES! The Musical!”

“No matter how far!

No matter how dark!
When the light fades away,

there is still the spark

INSIIIIIIIIDE!”

“Playing July Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth at the Ebott’s Wake Memorial Auditorium!”

“Here at Rick’s Hardware, we carry everything that you could possibly need for home repairs and maintenance, automotive upkeep, and every single item on your honey-do list from unbalanced tables to leaky faucets to building the fastest motorized inner tube the world has ever seen. Our staff is standing by to help—”

“Sorry to cut in there, this is Brett Brinkmann again with an urgent news bulletin. All Fine Labs has just sent us a warning that one of the Memoryheads has escaped the laboratory buildings and is now somewhere in Ebott’s Wake proper. Details are currently sparse but we will bring you more information as soon as it becomes available. In the meantime, Doctor Alphys has asked us to remind everyone to not let the Memoryhead touch them. We’ll repeat them for emphasis. Do Not Let The Memoryhead Touch You- we just got another update. All Fine Labs is sending out multiple security teams in order to find and contain the Memoryhead as soon as possible. Anyone who sees or thinks they have seen the Memoryhead is asked to- Jeff, what? I couldn’t have possible heard that right… oh. It seems we’ve already got seven or eight callers calling in trying to report its location. Wow. Uh. Go team, I guess. We will have more for you on this story as it becomes available.”
Thanks for the Memories

Officer Steve rubbed the space between his eyes for several seconds, before reaching into one pocket of his uniform and pulling out a small bottle. After a few moments of fighting with the child-proof cap, he shook out four caplets into his hand and proceeded to dry swallow all four at once.

“You know that can cause liver damage, right?”

“We live in a world where ice cream can cure cancer.”

Officer Carmichael shrugged.

“That is true. Carry on, I guess.”

Steve grunted, put the bottle back in his pocket, and pulled out a notebook from another pocket before walking up to the huddle of people in the middle of Heritage Park. One of the government agents was sitting on the ground, shivering under a blanket despite the high ambient temperature, surrounded by the other agent, one of the All Fine Labs security staff, and two EMTs. A few feet away, several people in lab coats were standing around some sort of transparent tube that was filled with something that kept shifting and warping and looked disturbingly like a face made out of other, smaller faces.

Officer Steve cleared his throat.

“Okay, who wants to go first?”

The teacup rattled slightly in its saucer as Undyne put it down in front of Toriel, who picked it up without comment. Undyne sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the coffee table and began to blow on her own cup of tea.

There was an uncomfortable silence interrupted only by Toriel sipping her tea, and then the creak of the sofa as she turned around to look out of the window.

In front of the house, Frisk and Asriel were tossing a fireball back and forth, their mouths occasionally moving as they spoke to each other. Toriel sighed and turned back to face Undyne.

“...I must apologize, Undyne. I have been a very inhospitable host.”

Undyne shook her head. “It’s fine. You can’t make decent tea to save your life anyway.”

Toriel snorted as she tried to muffle her laughter, and nodded.

“That is certainly not within my sphere of competence.”

Undyne waited until Toriel had taken another sip before speaking again.

“I can keep you company, or an eye on the kids, if you’d rather talk to somebody else. Asgore or Sans or whoever.”

Toriel shook her head.

“I do not think that… this is something I can talk to Sans about.”
“...must be serious then.”

Toriel did not respond, but turned to look outside the window again. Frisk and Asriel had been joined by Douglas, Casey and Skate once more, and Frisk was holding something that resembled a Stop Sign made from Cyan magic.

“It is that. And it also strikes very close to home for us both.” Toriel turned back to face Undyne. “Today… before the chaos of the Memoryhead escaping… Wing Ding explained a plan to give Chara their own body.”

“Awesome!!!”

Toriel tensed up, and Undyne’s smile slowly faded away.

“Uh… less than awesome?”

“The procedure, as he explained it, involved… breaking Frisk’s Soul apart.”

Undyne stared at Toriel for a few seconds, before noticing movement through the window behind the queen; Frisk was rising into the air, clutching what looked like a balloon and string in one hand, only both balloon and string were glowing with Blue Magic.

“Uh huh.”

“That, alone, was disturbing enough. But… Frisk and Chara were so… it is as if… Undyne, they reacted as if Dr. Aster had suggested something completely safe and devoid of any risk.”

“Yeah, that sounds like them.”

Toriel’s eyes opened wide in surprise, and Undyne had to force herself not to laugh at the resulting expression.

“Come on, Toriel. Nothing about this is out of the ordinary. I mean, for Frisk at least. No matter how bad things are, or appear to be, they either go full speed ahead or plant their feet and dare the world to move them. Matter of fact,” Undyne nodded, “them not having a poker face when the going gets tough is kind of a recent thing. Like the last month or so. So I guess we do have to worry about that. Backsliding into old habits where they think what we don’t know can’t hurt us, even if it hurts them.”

“That is. Not exactly what I was concerned about. But you do raise an important point.” Toriel turned to look out the window, but Undyne coughed to get her attention.

“So what precisely are you concerned about? Just the danger of the procedure? I’m pretty sure Dr. Aster would make sure it was as safe as possible, and I know that Alphys and Sans would do the same thing, or it would never happen.”

Toriel shook her head irritably.

“No, I understand that, and I was also quite insistent that there be no risk to my children’s lives. But it feels as if I, and I alone, am the one concerned about this.”

Toriel turned back to the window, just in time to see Frisk on the ground after the Blue Magic balloon had dissipated into motes of light. The human child bowed to the other children as if they had just performed some impressive theatrical display, and the other children were clapping if they had hands and cheering if they did not.
“Undyne… is it possible that I am missing something?”

Undyne tapped her finger against the teacup several times.

“Actually I think you are.”

Toriel turned to face Undyne again, and Undyne stared back at the queen’s gaze.

“…explain, please.”

“The first thing you’re missing is that nobody is asking Frisk to do anything that they haven’t already done. I don’t know that much about the science of Souls but I do know that they had their Soul broken apart before. I doubt it’s going to be pleasant, but they know what’s involved. The second thing is…”

Undyne paused as she looked behind Toriel. Douglas seemed to be rising into the air, suspended by a balloon on a string glowing with Blue Magic, just as Frisk had been, only Douglas was continuing to rise out of the frame of the window. There was a flash of green and Asriel’s vines seemed to be holding onto the human child by their foot, and a few seconds later, Asriel was lifted off the ground too, and Frisk jumped up to grab his feet, which caused them to be carried aloft as well.

“The second thing is that it sounds like what Dr. Aster is trying to do is like an organ transplant, but with a Soul.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Yeah, I told you about those books I got from the book sale? Human anatomy and medicine? I mean, I’m not going to be a healer or anything but I’ve been reading them in my spare time and there is a lot of stuff that the human body can do that just has no equivalent for monsters, and that might be what you’re tripping over here. From a monster perspective, something that changes the Soul like that does sound extremely dangerous, but from a human perspective it doesn’t sound much different from a kidney transplant or something like that-”

“Let go! Let go let go let go hahahaha!”

Behind Toriel, Undyne watched as a patch of flowers formed out of the ground, cushioning the impact of three children falling from the sky. Toriel turned just in time to see Asriel trying to wriggle away and kick his bare feet out of Frisk’s grasp, laughing uncontrollably the whole time.

“There’s a third thing, Toriel.”

“Hmmm?” The queen turned around to face Undyne again as Asriel and Frisk started to wrestle on the lawn.

“It’s been over a year and a half since we got up here. And Chara’s been hitching a ride with Frisk for that long. And we only found out about it last month.”

Undyne looked down at her teacup.

“If Chara seems eager to get their own body, there’s probably a reason for it.”

Toriel nodded slowly, her shoulders sagging.

“I have, I believe, tried to distract myself from that very subject. Just as I did when Asriel… when he came back to us.” Toriel sighed. “My children were right in front of me. And they were suffering.
And I did not even notice.”

Undyne looked past Toriel and saw that the children were upright and seemed to be trying to create musical instruments out of magic energy.

“You can’t be everywhere at once, and you can’t read minds. Besides. Asriel said that when he was calling himself Flowey, he didn’t want anyone to know who he was. Not that it’s come up at all, but I think Chara was exactly the same way. Both of them could have let you know but they decided not to. That’s not your fault.”

Toriel looked down at her own cup of tea.

“Is it not?”

“How could it be?”

“I am their mother, Undyne. They should be able to come to me with anything. They should feel safe telling me-”

Toriel stopped speaking abruptly.

“...oh.”

Undyne stared at the queen, barely noticing the children’s antics behind her.

“Oh what? Did you figure something out?”

“I believe that I have some apologies I need to make.”

Officer Steve stared at the bouncing magical springs before looking up at Alex and Brendan’s grinning faces.

“I’m gonna regret asking for details. I know it.”

“It’s simple! The Wave magic springs are constantly in motion themselves but also prevent motion of any sort!” Brendan explained. “And the Memoryhead is also constantly in motion because it’s always reforming and shifting!”

“It’s the perfect containment strategy!” Alex chimed in. “The Slinky, the Slinky, for fun it’s the best of the toys!”

“The Slinky, the Slinky, the favorite of girls and boys!” Brendan chimed in, turning the jingle into a duet.

“Everyone knows it’s Slinky! Everyone knows it’s Slinky!”

“I swear to God I am this close to arresting you both for disturbing the peace,” Officer Steve growled, holding up the thumb and index finger of one hand a fraction of an inch apart while rubbing at his eyes with his other hand.

Officer Carmichael turned to Dr. Alphys. “So, that thing is secure right? It can’t get out of that jar?”

“Not unless the p-power runs out before we get it back to the high security storage area. I can keep it topped off with lightning magic b-b-but it’s bad for the charge controller circuitry.”
“I see. That’s good to know-” Officer Carmichael stopped talking as Officer Steve walked up to where the two government agents were still sitting down.

“...Doc, are you sure that you don’t want to press charges this time?”

“I don’t think it would help anyone if I did. And having to fight off a Memoryhead should be its own punishment.” The lizard scientist shivered despite the heat of the day. “I still have nightmares about the first time.”

Officer Steve nodded slowly, still staring at the agents.

“...there are a number of things I could still hit you with if I was so inclined. But I would need to drag Doctor Alphys and her all star team of science nerds away from their work to act as corroborating witnesses anyway. It goes against my better judgment, but I’m letting this slide. And that is the extent of my patience. If I get another call on the radio, and I drive up and see you two standing around, I will bury you both in so much red tape that you’ll die of old age before it’s all straightened out.”

“So, looking on the downsides, still no Pattern Magic. On the upside, mom was one hundred percent right about playing around being the best way to learn magic. Douglas was three to five times better outside than he was at All Fine Labs.” Frisk scribbled something down in a notebook, then looked up at Asriel, hanging off the edge of his bed. “Did I tell you he threw up in class?”

“No, it only came up like six times while we were outside,” Asriel snapped. “Also how is almost flying away on a magic balloon an improvement?”

“I mean, he got sick just from trying to make a fireball, but outside he could actually fly. Well, sort of, since he couldn’t control it.”

“Yeah, I still can’t believe mom didn’t rush outside screaming bloody murder when that happened. Or Undyne for that matter.” Asriel twisted around on the bed and grabbed his pillow, wrapping his arms around it. “Maybe they weren’t close enough to the window to see what we were doing?”

“Either that, or Toriel must have still been preoccupied by what Doctor Aster told her.”

Asriel nodded. “Yeah. Uhm. How are you guys taking that?”

“I am genuinely impressed that it took them less than two weeks to come up with an actionable plan.”

“I don’t want to be a buzzkill but I am vetoing anything that involves giant needles.” Frisk tapped the page of their notebook with their pencil. “I saw the cartoon syringe as big as me and my heart literally stopped for a second.”

“Uh… don’t you get allergy shots?”

“Those needles are small and I can look away from them and Doctor Therrick is super good at redirecting my attention. It’s not the same thing.”

“Okay, yeah, but wouldn’t it be worth it to not have Chara living in your head?”

“Point of order, I don’t think I technically qualify as alive, so ‘living in Frisk’s head’ is a misnomer.”
“So what I said when I was loopy from the dentist is accurate. I am possessed by a zombie ghost.”

Asriel lifted his head up from the bed. “Wait, how does that work?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t do it.” Frisk added a few more details to the notebook and then turned it around to show Asriel the diagram of some sort of bipedal robot or similar machine. “Anyway, check this out. I got the idea while I was staring at your paw pads while we were floating off into space.”

“Since you brought it up, I’ll thank you not to grab my feet ever again. I almost lost my grip. Also I have no idea what I’m looking at.”

“It’s my perfected design for a general-purpose robot body that Chara can possess if they end up as a ghost. I’m going to expand the schematics and send them to Alphys and see if she has any suggestions, since she’s the robotics expert.” Frisk started tapping various parts of the sketch. “I’ve covered all the bases. Micro-nuclear power plant, shape memory alloy locomotors, full spectrum transceiver arm cannon, Blue Magic assisted flight system—”

“Those are the basics?” Asriel stared at Frisk, eyes wide in confusion.

“I said bases, not basics. If Chara has to settle for a basic body then we might as well go down to Joe’s House of Stuff and pick out a microwave or something.”

“This is all assuming that I end up as a ghost monster in the first place. Unless you’ve managed to figure out Prophecy when my attention was elsewhere, I doubt that you know that for a certainty.”

“Whatever you end up with, I hope it’s a body with paw pads. Revenge will be mine.”

“I had nothing to do with Frisk trying to grab you before you and Douglas both became Space Cadets.”

“Not for that. For all the times you tried to tickle me back in the Underground.”

“Again, not my fault. The siren song the beans was too strong for me to ignore.”

“Then that’s the excuse I’m using.”

“Then in that case, a ghost body sounds ideal, since my default state would be intangible. I would be completely immune to your tickle-related vengeance. Beyond that, I can’t get too excited about a body that is basically up to a cosmic dice roll, but I am definitely looking forward to a room of my own. Not that you haven’t been amazing roommates, but like the old saying goes, three’s a crowd.”

“Yeah.” Asriel let his head fall back to the bed. “Guess there’s that.”

Silence fell over the bedroom, except for the scratching of Frisk’s pencil on paper, and Asriel occasionally kicking the side of his bed with his feet. The silence lasted long enough, and was awkward enough, that both children jumped a little when they heard a light tapping on the bedroom door.

“My children?”

“Yeah mom?” Frisk called without looking up from their notebook.

“I was wondering if I could borrow Chara for a moment.”

Frisk turned to look at Asriel, who had also raised his head at the same time to look at Frisk.
“Uh… just a moment, I need to put away some notes.” Frisk snapped the notebook shut, pulled open a desk drawer, shoved the notebook inside, and dropped their pencil on their desk. The child closed their eyes, and when they opened them again, both were glowing red. Chara stood up from the chair and walked over to the door.

“Wow, you guys have that down to a science now, huh?”

“Frisk does. I find it to be more of an Art.” Chara opened the door to see Toriel standing outside patiently. “Hello Toriel.”

“Hello, Chara.” Toriel closed her mouth, put her fingers together, and then spoke again. “I was hoping I could speak to you regarding what you said earlier today at All Fine Labs. Would you be so kind as to join me downstairs for a few minutes?”

“…I can do that.”

Toriel turned and walked to the staircase, with Chara following behind the queen. Before descending, they turned to see Asriel sticking his head out of the bedroom door, looking both confused and worried. Chara shrugged and returned their attention to the stairs, and saw that Toriel had already taken a seat at the dining table.

Even after Chara sat down on the opposite side of the table, Toriel did not speak right away. The queen rubbed her paws together, looked around the room, closed her eyes, sighed, and finally looked at the child.

“This is… rather more difficult than I expected it to be.”

Chara said nothing, and Toriel cleared her throat and sat up straighter in her chair.

“Earlier today. You no doubt remember that I was. A little terse with Doctor Aster when he explained his plans.”

“Yes, I did notice.”

Toriel nodded.

“You, on the other hand, seemed unbothered in any way, and even enthusiastic.”

“You could easily say that, yes.”

“When Wing Ding said that- wait, let me start again. I know that the procedure…” Toriel trailed off for a moment, then shook her head. “Chara, would you really… Chara, is there something wrong?”

Chara blinked, strobing the dining room in red light.

“Is this a trick question?”

“I apologize, for some reason I cannot articulate myself very well on this matter.” Toriel closed her eyes, clasped her paws together, inhaled slowly, and exhaled just as slowly before opening her eyes again and staring at Chara.

“Chara. I want you to have your own body, and your own life. But the more Doctor Aster spoke, the more worried I became. Perhaps it is because I was not as proficient in the sciences, but it sounded to me as if this entire procedure involved a great deal of risk.”

“You understood that part correctly.”
Toriel nodded.

“But despite the risk, you did not seem that concerned. Or rather, it did not appear to me that you were as concerned as you should have been.”

“There is an aphorism about eggs and making omelets out of them that probably applies here.”

“Perhaps.” Toriel put her paws down on the table again. “But eggs are common and easily replaced. You and Frisk are not.”

For almost a full minute, neither child nor parent spoke.

“Chara. You do not have to answer if you do not want to. But I feel that I must ask. You were… here. With Frisk. For a long time. You know that… that we missed you. Asgore and I. But you did not let us know that you were there—”

“I thought that I explained that already. There was no way I could realistically expect anyone to understand and believe me. In the best case scenario, everyone would think that Frisk was pulling some sort of practical joke in poor taste, and suffer the social consequences for something they had no control over. Worst case scenario, everyone would think that Frisk was either going crazy, or under some sort of magical assault. Which would not be too far off. I never said anything because there was no point in saying anything.”

Toriel nodded.

“I see. I did understand that part. But I did not get a chance to ask my question. Chara… did you want us to know you were there?”

For a split second, Chara broke eye contact with Toriel, and the red light faded slightly.

“...Chara, I do not mean to pressure you, but I cannot help if I do not know what is—”

“Asriel was gone.”

Toriel blinked and noticed that Chara’s hands were gripping the edge of the table with such force that the skin around their knuckles was changing color.

“Your son. Your own son. My best—” Chara’s voice cracked. “My best friend. Was gone. And I was here. What was I supposed to do? Take over Frisk’s body and leave you a note? ‘Sorry that your son died for nothing but here’s the viper you took in that destroyed your whole family.’ There’s no possible way that would have ended poorly.”

Toriel’s mouth opened in shock at the child’s tone, but Chara barely paused for breath before opening their mouth again.

“But I didn’t. Because I knew that Frisk would have to pay for my mistakes if anyone knew about me. And then we’d start all over again back in the Ruins. So I said nothing. I watched monsters move up to the surface and said nothing. I watched humanity make room for them and welcome them and I said nothing. I watched Frisk make friends and do homework and get sick and get better, and I said nothing. I watched Asriel struggle through life without a Soul and I said nothing, even though I wanted more than anything to say I was sorry.”

Chara stood up, the chair skidding back behind them, eyes blazing with red light and tears streaming down their face.
“I watched the world move on without me and I said NOTHING because it was better WITHOUT ME IN IT! Is that what you want me to say?! I admit it! I ruined everything! I hurt Asgore and I killed Asriel and it’s all my fault and everyone’s been rubbing it in my face for over a YEAR and you have the AUDACITY to act surprised that Doctor Aster offered me a way out of this hell and I took it!!”

Toriel shot up out of her chair, eyes wide with shock. Chara’s hands reached up and grabbed their hair, and they grit their teeth, their breath coming in hissing, rasping noises that slowed down gradually.

“I got up in the middle of the night when I was sure you were both asleep and I went out in the backyard and I cried. For over a year. Because you looked at Frisk and you saw Frisk and you smiled because you didn’t know I was there, and if you did, you wouldn’t smile like that anymore because that smile was never meant for me in the first place.”

Chara let their hands drop back to the table again. On the other side, Toriel stared at them. Slowly, and somewhat unsteadily, the queen walked around the table, bumping into the corners and other chairs as she did so, until she was standing next to Chara.

“I didn’t…” Toriel managed to say. “I didn’t know.”

Before Chara could react, Toriel dropped down to one knee, lunged forward, and wrapped both arms around the child. One massive paw came up to the child’s unruly hair and began to smooth it out.

“I didn’t know. I didn’t know. Chara, I’m sorry, I didn’t know, I’m sorry.”

For a time, the only sound in the house was the queen’s sobbing.

“...Toriel. I apologize for losing my temper the way that I did. Whatever has happened to me, it is a consequence of my own actions. I had no right to take any of it out on you. And, in light of the damage I did in the Underground, I have no right to compl-”

“It’s alright, Chara. It,” Toriel sniffed, “it is alright.”

Chara lapsed into silence once more, until Toriel managed to regain her composure.

“Chara… my dear child… I am the one who must apologize. I love you and I want the best for you and I want to be able to help when there is something wrong. The question. Should have been how to convince me. Not if you should try. If you… if you did not feel safe coming to me. Then the fault lies with me.”

Toriel felt Chara bring their arms up to return the embrace. Their entire body was shaking, and their hands gripped the queen’s dress as if it was a lifeline thrown to someone who was drowning.

Justin Carrow wiped his hands on a greasy rag, which may have made his hands more grease covered as a result.

“The good news is I’ve diagnosed the problem. The bad news it’s a bitch to fix.” A small, mangled chunk of plastic was held up where Sans could see. “This is a connector between the motor and the gearing inside of the agitator. You can see how it’s worn down from use. In theory it should be relatively simple to replace, but the manufacturer doesn’t sell these parts individually. At least not to independent freelance contractors like me. And even if I could replace it, you would still have the
same essential problem causing it to wear down over time.”

“can i see that?”

Justin held out the plastic chunk, and Sans grabbed it, held it up to his eye socket, and a purple light began to shine on it. The plastic component was surrounded by a lattice of purple light.

“y’know, it wouldn’t be too hard to print one of these at work.”

“I don’t want to knock your three-D printing prowess, but I don’t think it would handle the stresses involved.”

“maybe. could turn it out on a lathe though.”

Justin nodded. “That could work. I could put the whole thing back together by seven if you got it done this afternoon. You’d still have the same problem to deal with later.”

“right, right. what if i turned it out from metal stock?”

“Well, that’s the other half of the problem. The reason these things are made of plastic in the first place is because they’re built to break down first if the machinery is overloaded, so that nothing else does. It’s the same idea as a shear bolt.”

“well, we have three people in the house now instead of two. guess that finally caught up with us.”

“Right. Honestly, if you wanted this fixed for good, it would take a couple of days, but I can rebuild it with a slip-clutch assembly. Hal and I did it to his washing machine a few years ago.”

“thinking the short term solution is what we need the most, but thanks for the offer.” Sans put the plastic chunk in his pocket. “gonna go ahead and take this to Advanced Materials and turn a new one out. won’t take ten minutes.”

“I’ll be here.”

Sans vanished in a flash of blue light, and when the light cleared, he was standing in an All Fine Labs office next to another skeleton monster, who did not bother to look up.

“Hey Sans. What did Justin say?”

“he found the problem and it’s a simple fix, just gotta make something for him on the lathe first.”

“Well, that’s a relief-”

There was a buzzing sound and both skeletons checked their pockets.

“It’s mine,” Dr. Aster said, pulling his phone out. “Dr. Aster speaking.”

“Hello, Wing Ding.”

“...Your Majesty. Is everything alright?”

“Ah… it will be. In the fullness of time. I just called to. I wish to apologize. For being so. Ah. Contrite. Earlier today. I know you would never take any unnecessary risks when lives were on the line and I am sorry if I insinuated anything of the sort.”

“I do understand and share your concerns, Toriel. I did not take it personally in any way.”
“That is. Good to hear. It is just… I can’t lose anyone else. Not again.”

“I understand.”

“Thank you for your time. When… when you have an actionable plan. Please let us know so that we may begin preparations for, I suppose whatever needs to be done.”

“I absolutely will.”

“That is, that is all. Thank you again for your time. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Dr. Aster ended the call and stared at the phone for a few seconds.

“something wrong?”

“No. Just parents worried about their children. That’s supposed to happen.”
There was the scrape of wooden spoons on wooden bowls.

The chewing and swallowing of food.

The crackling of the campfire.

The rustling of the wind through the branches of the trees.

And every now and then, the distant yelling and screaming of soldiers preparing for battle, or recovering from it.

“What a mess.”

They can’t reply with a mouth full of potatoes and carrots and chicken, so they simply nod.

“...we’re not actually going to go along with this, right? Setting up a parley under false pretenses?”

On the other side of the campfire, a figure in Dark Blue robes shrugs.

“Why not? We’ve gone along with everything else so far.”

“Yes, but that was war. War changes everything.”

“War changes nothing but the lines on maps,” interrupts another figure wearing Sky Blue robes. “Cities burn and people die. That happens in times of peace too. People die ahead of schedule but they all die in the end.”

“Funny that you should bring that up,” grumbles another robed figure, this one in Emerald Green. “Considering how this war started.”

The sounds of eating stop abruptly, save for the splash of a sliced carrot that fell out of a spoon and back in the bowl again. The figure in green looks up at the silence.

“...oh, come on. Don’t even try to tell me that I’m the only person who figured it out.”

“Like I said, war changes nothing. There was a war twenty years ago after the river banks shifted. And before that it was the bad harvest. And before that it was the poaching in the northern forest. There’s always a war and it’s always for the same reasons.”

“Not like this one, and you know it. Little conflicts between kingdoms over changing natural boundaries or limited food or trespassing never had to involve the whole world.”

The figure in light blue rolls their eyes, the only part of them that can be seen under their hood, pulsing with energy and power.

“There’s a difference between territorial and resources scarcity, and the stealing of souls-”

“HORSE SHIT!”

The green robed figure scrambles to their feet, and the rest of the group around the campfire instinctively leans away in shock.
“That whole ‘monsters will take our souls’ song and dance is an excuse, and each of us knows it! Soul Assimilation has been common knowledge for five hundred years. Humans know it. Monsters know it. Everyone knows it!”

The figure in green shakes their head, walks closer to the campfire, and begins to ladle more stew into their bowl.

“War with the monsters wasn’t even an afterthought on the king’s agenda before he found out that it actually could work in the other direction. And since then, he’s been willing to set the entire world on fire, and every living thing in it, just to get his hands on a Boss Monster Soul.”

The sounds of eating slowly resume, until a figure in Deep Purple robes speaks up.

“Atlantis is gone, by the way.”

The sounds of eating stop, and the figure in dark blue shakes their head.

“I’m not surprised. When did it happen?”

“Six months ago.”

The figure in dark blue looks up suddenly.

“And you were going to tell us this when, exactly?”

“When I saw myself doing it. Which is now.” The figure in purple leans forward so that their face is even harder to see under the shadow cast by their hood. “And profane language notwithstanding, our esteemed Magus of Kindness is correct. The whole world is burning. Every continent. Every nation. Atlantis, Mu, Shambhala… civilization as we know it has ended.”

They look down at their bowl, and let the spoon slide back into the food again, feeling less hungry.

“When I was summoned to the camp, I heard some of the advisers comment that none of the messengers to the nearest settlements had returned.”

“Those settlements don’t exist anymore.” The figure in purple puts down their bowl and clasps their hands in front of them, apparently staring at the campfire. “And those messengers are dead. The demands on the food supply, the labor force, and the land itself meant those people were already doomed. The monster counter-attacks to cut off the army’s supply lines simply meant that they died quickly, rather than drawing it out over the coming winter.”

“Hmmm. I was a little confused when he conscripted the town guards, but I had assumed that he had some sort of rapid striking attack that would put the monsters on the defense.” The dark blue figure stands up and walks towards the campfire for more food. “Should have known better.”

“Can you all stop?”

Every face turns toward the one figure who had remained silent, one in robes of Saffron Yellow.

“We all hate the king. Yes. He is worthy of all the hate we heap upon his royal head, and more. But let’s not forget who swore an oath the follow him.”

“Oaths can be broken,” interrupts the orange figure.

“Yes, yes, oaths can be broken. That’s my whole point.” The yellow figure looks around the circle. “You all feel it. It’s getting harder and harder. We were put in a position where we had to break one
The circle is silent once more. They feel and hear something and look down to see that some of the stew has spilled onto their crimson robe.

“...if the king manages to absorb Asgore Dreemurr’s Soul, then wouldn’t Asgore be able to exert some control over him? Control of the body is divided. It’s been a few years, but I do remember that part. Right?”

They turn to face the figure in green, who hurriedly chews through the mouthful of stew so they can respond to the question.

“Yes, that’s correct. In both the original accident, and the later experiments, everyone involved retained full mental autonomy and shared control over the body. Having said that, I know where you’re going and I’m going to stop you now. Except for the original accident, everyone volunteered for these tests and the pairings were specifically chosen based on familiarity and previous bonds. People that would work well together, and who were already nearing the end of their natural lifespans, and willing to dedicate whatever was left to the advancement of knowledge. None of that applies in our situation.”

“And after watching his entire race be systematically hunted down, I don’t think Asgore would be in much of a mood to talk some sense into him,” the figure in yellow speaks up. “Quite the opposite, in fact; I could see Asgore taking revenge on humanity by reinforcing our king’s worst excesses. And with our powers diminishing, I have serious doubts that the seven of us together could defeat them, never mind anyone else.”

“So we would end up with a ruined world, ruled over an immortal god who would make the surviving dregs of humanity pay for the extinction of monsters in some very disturbing ways.” The orange figure picks up their handmade flute and starts to carve it again. “I for one am not looking forward to this.”

“Do you think I have been?” The purple figure leans forward again. “I have seen today coming for weeks now, but I can’t find a viable future going forward from this moment.”

“So we expand our options. Look at the least worst non-viable future going forward.” The orange figure starts to drill out another hole in the flute. “None of us are living through this, you know. We all suspected, now let’s get it out in the open. Whatever else happens, we can’t let the king get Asgore’s Soul. Right?”

The heads of the circle nod, some sooner and some later.

“The monsters have taken refuge in a mountain cavern. They know they can hold out against an oath to keep the other. We chose to follow the king instead of our conscience. Each one of us. Every crime we helped him commit in the pursuit of immortality, every atrocity we looked away from instead of stopping. Now we’re dealing with the consequences.”

“I did what I did because I saw no other way forward.” The purple figure sits up straight. “Resistance always lead to death. It still does, if anyone was wondering. If you’re saying we should have died sooner rather than later, I suppose it would have turned out the same way in the end, and we could have kept our own hands clean. But they would only be clean because we would be dead after being executed for treason against the crown.”

The yellow figure throws up their hands in exasperation.

“Maybe we should have been!”

The circle is silent once more. They feel and hear something and look down to see that some of the stew has spilled onto their crimson robe.
assault, but they don’t know that the king’s army is too weak to assault the cavern entrance, and too poorly supplied to lay siege. That’s why they’re trying to parley. We could warn them, but they probably wouldn’t believe us, and even if they did, we’d have the king’s remaining army out for our blood, and he might actually be stupid and desperate enough to charge everyone into that cavern and try to overwhelm the monsters with numbers he doesn’t have. Or worse, his scouts might find another way into the cavern from a point that the monsters don’t have guarded. So we block off the cavern ourselves.”

“If we cave in the cavern entrance, the king will just have his soldiers trade swords and spears for picks and shovels,” the figure in green interrupts. “That’s only going to stop them for a week, at the most.”

The figure in orange robes shakes his head.

“I don’t mean by caving it in. You’re not the only one who followed all the latest developments in magical theory like a child counting the days before a festival.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t go that far,” the figure in green protests.

“I would.”

The figure in green glares at them, and they feel a smile form on their face. The smile vanishes as they turn to see the figure in orange pull out a leather-bound book from beneath their robe and open it.

“I think that it’s within our power to create a self-sustaining magical Barrier. One that seals off the cavern entrance and every other possible access point we might not know about. It will take all seven of us working together, and we have to do everything right the first time, and the strain might kill us even if we succeed. But it’s the only way I can see to save the world from the king.”

The circle is silent for almost a minute.

“It could work,” concedes the figure in yellow. “But as you said, it would require us to do everything right. I think we need a backup plan.”

There was a dull thud, and Frisk’s eyes shot open, only to close again immediately against the glare. Rearing back from the light, they knocked another book off of the desk before waking up all the way. They were sitting at their desk, and the reading lamp was on; it didn’t take long to deduce that they had fallen asleep at an angle that had left the lamp shining directly into their face.

How they had gotten into that position while asleep in the first place would have been a mystery for anyone who didn’t have a roommate in their head.

With a grunting noise, Frisk leaned over in their chair and picked up Basics of Fractional Horsepower Motors and Repair and Making Permanent Magnets from where they had fallen to the floor, returning them to the pile of books they had been looking over earlier. Their eyes moved over to the notebook that they had been scribbling in, or rather, that somebody else had been scribbling in; the handwriting was different, and the closest pencil was on their right hand side.

Before they could take in too much of the text, they snapped the notebook shut and opened a desk drawer to drop it inside, then looked around at the rest of the bedroom. Asriel’s bed was empty, the sky outside the windows was the fading orange and red of sunset, and they could hear the hum of the central heat and air unit as it tried to cool down the inside of the house.
The chair scraped against the floor as they stood up, walked over to the door, and slowly opened it a crack. Outside in the hallway, they could hear Toriel’s voice coming from the ground floor, and when she paused, Frisk could hear another, much deeper voice; Asgore. Frisk leaned back into the bedroom, closed the door, and rubbed their temples with both hands; not only did they have a headache, but for some reason they had an overwhelming craving for a root beer and one of Grillby’s cheeseburgers from the Dank Memehaus.

Once the throbbing in their head was more manageable, they walked over to their bed and laid down on top of it, eyes closing. The dream they had woken up from was not only familiar, it almost felt as if it had picked up where a previous dream left off. It was also somewhat more coherent than their dreams normally were. That wasn’t normal, but at least they weren’t nightmares about losing Asriel, or being kicked out of the house, or being rejected by their friends, or the timeline resetting, or Jordan Cater trying to kill them.

Frisk’s eyes opened up again suddenly as the thought occurred to them that, just maybe, it wasn’t normal to have that many nightmares.

“It still amazes me that humans c-can go so long without sleep. B-back in New Home and Hotland, I had a reputation as a, heh, well, not so m-much for the science project all nighters as the anime marathons. But that doesn’t mean anything up here now.”

Outside the doors of All Fine Labs, Doctor Alphys readjusted a Mew Mew Kissy Cutie brand tote bag filled to the bursting point with books and papers while Justin Carrow stood nearby, staring at the small crowd of protesters that hadn’t been driven away by the heat.

“If it makes you feel better doc, staying up late like that is bad for you. Well, bad for us. Nerve connections start to break down faster than they can form. Actually though, maybe that healing magic stuff can help with that.”

“We won’t know for sure until we g-get the go ahead to do clinical trials. Which could still be years away.”

“Actually, it must fix the neurons, since it fixes nerve damage. Hal’s thumb, that old man in the magic class, the media shhhtstorm after that one kid’s parents ordered him some spider cider and he started walking again. Fuck, that was a mess.” Justin shook his head and the pair started walking down the street, the ex-soldier automatically adjusting his position and his pace to put himself between the scientist and the protesters.

“Was that the one where the kid tried to walk and hurt himself because he hadn’t walked for so long?”

“Yeah, he had zero muscle tone after something like eight years, so he almost literally jumped in at the deep end. I don’t particularly blame the kid for not knowing, or being overexcited, but the parents trying to shift all the fault to this town in general, and Lance in particular, was a dick move.” Justin snorted. “Too bad they didn’t order a Bicicle from the Nice Cream website. One for the initial problem and then one for the follow up.”

“It’s probably just as well. We’re churning out PSE units non stop on assembly line three and we’re still nowhere near catching up to demand. If Lance didn’t have that c-card game to go to in order to de-stress, he’d be tearing his fur out.”

“They say nothing exceeds like success.” Justin suddenly stopped mid step, letting his foot slowly
“drop to the ground. “Hey, doc.”

“Uh, yes?”

“Something’s been bothering me for a while and I think I finally put the pieces together. You remember those magical gizmos you were putting together before the big magic reveal? Like Joe’s goggles?”

“Yeah, the Party Favors. What about them.”

“Right.” Justin nodded. “Now, this might be nothing, because I know nothing about how magic works, let alone how magic technology works. But the goggles, and that watch you made for me, were those based on the same design as that light gun gadget in the Soul Research Lab?”

“Yes, it’s the same basic principle of field induction.”

“So why does the pistol work for everyone who walks in the door looking for a T-Shirt, but the Party Favors only work for the people they were built for?”

Alphys stared at Justin in silence for a few seconds, before blinking.

“Oh. Oh wait. Wait…. Justin, do you have the Condensentrator on you right now?”

“Yeah.” Justin reached into one pocket and pulled out a watch and handed it to waiting, shaking yellow claws. “I started carrying it around twenty four seven after O’Dell managed to escape. Not to pull a Forsythe but I’m not totally sold on the idea that he’s dead.”

Alphys pried off the face of the watch, held up the internals to one eye, and… slowly lowered her arms.

“...oh.”

“...everything alright, doc?”

“Uh. You know how. I was. Really, really t-t-tired when I p-p-put these things together?”

“Kind of hard to forget. Sans was the one who gave me the tutorial on the watch because Undyne was carrying you out of the lab like the ending of An Officer And A Gentleman.”

Alphys squeezed her eyes shut and her scales took on a red tinge of embarrassment.


Justin stared at Doctor Alphys, who had opened her eyes again and stared at the pavement beneath her feet. There was a rumbling sound and Justin turned to see a rock rolling down the sidewalk, change course into the street, and then roll back up the curb onto the sidewalk again.

“It’s called a side-walk, not a side-stand, you jerks.” The rock commented before rolling away.

“...okay, so when Joe was using the goggles and when I used the watch to fight Jordan Cater, they still worked, so I’m guessing that’s where the Soul colors come in.”

“With the batteries put in the wrong way, the hardware couldn’t convert stored electricity like the bullet analyzer pistol. They used the closest available source of Pattern and Energy magic. Joe’s Soul and your Soul respectively. That’s why the technology seemed color coded, because that’s the magic your Souls default to. If I go home and pick up what's left of the dimensional magic manipulator I
was building for Officer Steve, and the batteries are backwards in that too, I am going to scream.”

“...huh.” Justin scratched the side of his nose. “So the magic was inside us all along.”

“Yeah. I guess you could say that.”

The two figures started walking again, slower this time as Alphys began to reassemble the watch.

“...something else occurs to me just now, Doc.”

“Oh God.”

“Yeah, that's one response. Do you happen to know what you were planning to build for Hal?”

“I, uh. I had some ideas written down. But if I’m honest, he was at the bottom of the list for a reason. I was going to make some stuff for Frisk before him. That was before I learned about their magic, though.”

“Right. I don’t particularly blame you for trying to keep magic out of Hal’s hands. And I say that as his lifelong best friend. The man’s dangerous enough already with a wrench in one hand and a trumpet in the other.”

“Yeah. Keeping magic out of Hal’s hands… that worked out great, d-didn’t it?”

Justin snorted and valiantly tried to push the smile that formed on his face back into a more neutral and apathetic expression.

“Yeah, let’s all pat ourselves on the back there.”

The pair walked in silence for a little longer, before reaching an intersection.

“Well, this is where we part ways. Having said that, I do have one more question.”

“Go ahead.”

“About Frisk and the magic thing. You keeping that under your hat, was that just, like, a personal favor, or was there something else to it?”

Alphys shook their head.

“Frisk didn’t know I was in earshot when they mentioned it, but I knew they were scared of the implications. I was… uhm. I tried to breach the subject a few times. But I never did.”

“Oh. Okay. So it wasn’t some sort of advance program for the magic class or something like that.”

“No, no. We’re still not sure why their magical abilities are so advanced compared to other humans. In any case. I was keeping their secret as a friend.” Alphys shrugged. “You know how it is. When somebody finds a way to break your whole civilization out of a magical prison, and also gets you to confess your feelings to the really cute fish you’ve been crushing on since the moment you laid eyes on her, well. That forges a bond that you can’t cut even with a laser in the Terrawatt range.”

Justin nodded.

“That sounds about right.”
Nobody spoke in the kitchen, but it was a comfortable silence. Assuming that the word silence could apply; there was the sound of potatoes being sliced, vegetables being chopped, and dishes being cleaned.

Toriel was very reluctant to break that comfortable rhythm, even as she realized the necessity of doing so.

“Excuse me, Frisk?”

“Yes?”

“Could we… talk for a moment?”

“Sure.”

Toriel returned her focus to the baking sheets she was preparing.

“Earlier today. When Chara and I spoke. I was… I am, somewhat worried about how you took it.”

Frisk paused in their chopping of potatoes.

“If you mean that Chara would like to move out of my head, I knew that already. I don’t really blame them. Most of my brain is filled with nerdy technical things and old transformers episodes so it’s crowded in there.”

“Ah.” Toriel turned to look at Frisk again, whose eyes were completely focused on their culinary task. “I see.”

“Uh. To be honest. I was a little worried when they started yelling.” Frisk’s hands slowed to a stop. “And by a little worried. I mean. More than a little. Since. Uhm. In my experience. Before things get bad. They get loud.”

Frisk’s own voice had gotten softer as they spoke, and when they resumed their work, it was much slower. Toriel sighed and nodded.

“I cannot fault you, or Chara, for coming to that conclusion.” Toriel gathered the sliced potatoes, arranged them on the baking sheet, and then added other vegetables and several cuts of meat, and finally placed the pans in the oven where a fireball was already waiting.

Outside of the kitchen came the sound of a door opening and closing, and Frisk turned to see two more boss monsters walk inside, one very large and one their own size.

“Hey. Dinner should be done in about fifteen minutes.”

“Which is enough time for the two of you to wash up,” Toriel spoke up, following Frisk out of the kitchen and watching both children head upstairs. Once the sound of a door closing reached her, she turned to face Asgore.

“How did… did everything go well with Asriel?”

Asgore sighed and shrugged as he sunk into the sofa and clasped his hands together.

“He… he was trying hard not to cry several times. As you anticipated. I can’t say that I didn’t feel the same way.”

“I see.” Toriel stared at the coffee table after sitting down in a chair opposite the sofa. “I… spoke to
Frisk. About what had happened. They were able to speak of it. And voice their worries. That is progress.”

Asgore nodded.

“We can speak to them both together after dinner. Just to make sure we are all on the same page.”

Toriel did not respond.

“...Tori?”

“It is so much easier to be angry.” Toriel shook her head. “When I understood what the Taylors had done to Frisk, it was easy to be angry at them. When I understood what kind of environment that Chara grew up in, it was easy to hate Jordan Cater and his ilk. But Chara has bottled everything up for over a year. Completely and utterly alone. And I did not even notice that they were there, let alone that they were trapped in such a way. I want to- I want to lash out, to hurt whoever hurt my children. But the only one I can blame, if I can blame anyone at all, is myself. For not knowing what I never could have even suspected. And for not noticing what Chara and Asriel and Frisk were trying so very hard to conceal from everyone.”

“...I believe that it is still the fault of Jordan Cater. It was he who raised Chara in such a way that they came to believe that they were a liability to all others, and that it was better for them to suffer in silence than to speak up when they were hurt. The same goes for the Taylors and Frisk’s upbringing.”

“And what of Asriel?” Toriel countered. “He spent that same time pretending to be someone else. Being something else. If he did not feel safe coming to us for help, then who could we possibly blame except for ourselves?”

Just put it right on top of the flower patch.

The Riverperson hesitated, their hooded face turning to stare at a dark hole in space.

“You are aware that this is a grave, correct?”

It’s fine, they’re not using it anyway.

Slowly, the Riverperson returned to the task at hand, fitting metal and plastic and ceramic components together with gloved hands, occasionally looking up at the sheets of paper that Thomas O’Dell was holding up. After a few minutes, a crude hexagon of sorts had been assembled, and the Riverperson hesitantly placed it on the patch of flowers.

The shadow with nothing casting it reached out what might have been a hand, and from darkness came light; seven tiny stars, each a different color. The hand split into seven different tendrils, each carrying a star to a corner of the hexagon except for the red star, which was deposited in the center. The tendrils vanished, and the shadow figure stepped back.

Thomas O’Dell coughed.

“Excuse me. You said you were going to explain what we were doing later. Is later now?”

Right, thank you for reminding me. This is the grave of Chara Dreemurr’s human body. It’s also where Chara fell into the Underground, and where every other human fell into the Underground,
including Frisk. Without getting too bogged down in definitions, this is what is called a liminal space, an area that marks an intermediate boundary between different aspects of reality. In this case in particular, it is a liminal space between life and death. Which is particularly relevant for our purposes.

“What purposes? Are we trying to bring Chara back from the dead?” Thomas pulled off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. “Because I asked Jordan about that a while ago, and he wasn’t a fan of it even if it was possible.”

After what happened at that school, his opinions on the matter probably changed. But that’s neither here nor there. And in any case, that’s a separate and distinct process unrelated to what we’re doing here. These things are called the Last Dreams, and they are the most potent sources of magical power in this timeline. Or they were until I used up all their power. They need to be recharged, which is why we set them up here. Fortunately, with the queen in seclusion in Home, there was no way to extend any of the sensor networks beyond the road to Snowdin Town, so nobody at All Fine Labs will notice what’s happening and come looking for the source of the strange energy readings.

“...every question of mine that you answer leaves me with two more questions, and that’s making me really angry right now.”

Sorry. If it makes you feel any better, it’s not something I’m doing on purpose.

“...yeah, I don’t feel better knowing that.”
“Honey! I’m home!” Undyne grinned as she shut the door behind her. “That never gets old.”

The amazonian fish monster made her way through the house, but the huge grin on her face slowly faded with each room that she didn’t find Alphys in, until she walked out of the back door without any smile at all and made her way to the shed.

“Alphys? Are you working on something?”

There was a sound not unlike a sigh, but also very much like a sob, and Undyne opened the door to the shed to see Alphys sitting at her project bench, face buried in her claws.

“...hey, is everything okay?”

“I put the batteries in backwards.”

Undyne stared at Alphys for a few seconds, then looked at the incomplete glove on the workspace in front of the scientist.

“Officer Steve’s thing? But if he’s taking Toriel’s class he won’t even need it, right?”

“Right.”

“So no harm no foul, right?”

“Right. Except for the part where putting the batteries in backwards caused the equipment to operate in a way that caused everyone to assume certain fundamentals about how human magic works that are not actually true, throwing all of our scientific conclusions into doubt and endangering half of the projects that All Fine Labs is currently contracted to do.”

“...oh.”

“Yeah. I’m just so… so…” Alphys held up her claws, clenched them into fists, and sparks began to arc off of them like the inside of a plasma globe. “So angry at myself right now. I thought I’d just end up in a funk like I used to but I just want to scream and punch and kick and wreck everything, but that will just make things worse!”

Undyne walked up next to Alphys, crouched down and wrapped one arm around the scientist’s shoulder.

“You know this is progress, right? You want to beat up something over this, but you’re not beating yourself up.”

Alphys shook her head.

“It can’t be progress if I accidentally set our whole research program back to the drawing board.”

“I meant progress for you. Alphys we didn’t even know if human magic was possible anymore until like a month ago. You’re just starting out on this whole thing. You and everyone else at All Fine Labs. It’s like trying to learn how to draw or create a new bullet pattern or play a musical instrument.
You’re going to screw up a lot. Embrace it!”

Alphys sighed and rubbed her forehead with one claw.

“I want to. I’m trying so hard to just think of this as more data. But I’m still so angry and I don’t know what to do with it.”

“Well, lucky for you, I know exactly what to do with it.”

Before she could respond, Alphys felt herself being picked up, carried out of the shed, and dropped on the back yard. By the time that she had scrambled to her feet, Undyne had formed two spears, one in each hand, and was in a clear and obvious fighting stance.

“You want to punch and kick and wreck stuff?! Let’s go! DON’T HOLD ANYTHING BACK!”

“So, how was your excursion with Asgore?”

Asriel looked up from the book in his paws. Frisk was sitting and staring at their laptop screen, typing something hunt-and-peck with their index fingers, but the voice that came out of their mouth had the otherworldly echoing quality that meant Chara was speaking.

“Uhm. It was… a thing. That happened.” Asriel grabbed a bookmark and slid it into place before setting the book on his chest of drawers. “We went to his house. Talked in the garden. And. Some other stuff.”

“…how are you doing now?”

“Not great.” Asriel admitted.

“…I am sorry I lost my temper. I just reached a point where it felt like there was no right answer and I got frustrated.”

“Right. I know how that feels.”

“…I am starting to have concerns about this plan to get a new body.”

“Huh?”

“Not second thoughts. I still want to go through with it. But I no longer know what to expect if and when it succeeds.”

“Well, no matter what body you end up with, we’ve already decided we’d find a way to make it work.” Asriel cleared his throat. “I wasn’t serious about the tickling threat, just so you know. That was just banter.”

“I meant the family dynamics and how everyone will respond. When I. When I lost my temper. I was certain, one hundred percent certain, that there would be consequences. I remembered how Toriel reacted when I poisoned Asgore-”

“WE poisoned Asgore,” Asriel corrected. “And he survived.”

“...I remember how Toriel reacted. I expected that to happen again. I had every reason to expect that to happen again. That was the whole reason I never said anything. When she started apologizing, even though I was the one that lashed out at her, it was as if she pulled the rug out from
Asriel said nothing in response, but scratched one ear.

“...Jordan was a terrible parent, a terrible person in general, and with the benefit of hindsight and perspective, I see now that he was a terrible example of a human being, rather than being a typical example. But at least he was predictable.”

“Huh. Well he did attack the town regularly on Fridays.”

“That is true, but what I meant was... if I did anything, no matter what it was, Jordan would find a way to find some sort of fault or flaw in it. If not the execution, then the motivation or justification. Toriel and Asgore are different. It feels like just interacting with them is like walking through a minefield. I thought for sure that when I started yelling, Toriel would yell back. Or raise her hand, or shut me up with a fireball. I am glad that Frisk did not have to pay for my outburst but now I feel like I am walking on eggshells, waiting for the explosion.”

The bedroom was silent for a few minutes, save for the clicking of the laptop keyboard, until Frisk leaned back in their chair.

“Okay, there we go. I put all of my technical ideas into a single PDF file and sent it to Alphys. Now I just have to wait for feedback.”

“Hey, what does PDF stand for again?”

“Portable Document Format.”

“Oh.” Asriel grabbed his book and opened it again. “I thought the F stood for file, so when you said PDF file it sounded redundant.”

“I think a lot of people think that. And there’s some people who say ‘PDF format’ so it’s like saying Portable Document Format format.”

Three figures sat at a table, in a room with the lights turned down. The brightest source of illumination was a ceiling mounted projector, currently shining a blank white light onto a set of marker boards being attended to by a fourth figure, who was easier to see on account of being lit up by the projector.

“It took me a little bit to recognize what I was looking at, but after I saw the pattern once, I started seeing it everywhere.” Mike pointed at some photographs, computer printouts, and other papers that were all held onto a marker board with magnets. “Everyone in town blamed the Guardians for the disappearing children, and at first glance these documents support that hypothesis. Trying to establish a routine or establish lists of known associates, the kind of information you would want to collect if you planned to kidnap somebody. But there’s two problems with that. First, every time one of these kids vanished, these documents are dated after the disappearance.”

Mike walked over to another board and tapped on a sheet of paper with two handwritten notes. The first read ‘HOW ARE THE MONSTERS GETTING OUT??’ and the second, off-centered compared to the first in order to make room for a photograph of the mountain taped to the paper, read ‘WHY THESE CHILDREN??’ Both notes were underlined and circled.

“The second point of interest is this note. A reminder by the person making them of the key questions that they need to keep asking themselves when looking at all of this data in order to figure
Mike walked back over to the table where several other figures were sitting.

“Oh, and just so you know. That’s Jordan Cater’s handwriting. It matches the samples from the notebooks that were recovered from their last safehouse.”

Elijah McGraw stared at the marker board for a few seconds before turning to the rest of the table.

“Oh… this means Jordan Cater was looking for the fallen children. Which makes sense. He lost, or thought he lost, his own daughter to the monsters. It makes sense that this would be something that hit close to home.”

“It also explains why he went to such drastic measures.” Justin scratched the stubble on his face. “People who think they have the moral high ground always think that they are justified whatever nasty shit they end up doing.”

“There’s more.” Mike held up one hand to interrupt. “After Steve finally got me copies of Cater’s fingerprints, I was able to compare them to the file folder and the tape and everything else inside the strongbox. It’s a very good match. I’m almost certain he was the one who collected all of the Guardian lore and buried it underground for safekeeping.”

“We should send a thank you note to him once he gets sentenced,” Eli joked, but his smirk faded as he turned to look at the only figure at the table that had not spoken yet. “Uh… Hal? You’ve been really quiet, and that makes me really nervous.”

The mechanic stared straight ahead for another few seconds before shifting in his seat, sitting up straighter than he had been before.

“First day of the magic class, the monster queen mentioned that there’s a form of magic called Prophecy. It’s Pattern magic. Purple. And way before the queen was even making lesson plans, Dr. Aster said that the Barrier used up all of the magic outside of the Underground to keep running. Now, I’ve been thinking about the stuff Cater said, especially after the clusterfuck at Mt. Ebott and outside the school, and the way O’Dell was able to escape, and a couple of other things. And I have to wonder if maybe, just maybe, if the Barrier really used it all up.”

“…dammit, I really wish Steve and Joe could have made it tonight. Now I’m going to be thinking about that shit until we can get their feedback.” Justin held up one hand, middle finger extended. “Thanks for that Hal.”

Two small hands disassembled a radio, a stick blender, and a three hole punch, carefully sorting screws and springs and other component parts, all of them tinted red from the glow in one eye. From his bed, Asriel watched the process, occasionally kicking his legs back and forth.

“The parallels between the Guardian mythology and the earlier monster religion are, at the least, a very suspicious coincidence, and at the most, evidence of descending from a common belief system. The Architect who fashioned the world. The Progenitor, the source of all life. The Arbiter, who measures the moral worth of men. And the Demon, lesser than the other three and yet greater than all of them combined at the same time. It’s impossible not to see the corollaries with the Maker, the First, the Judge, and the Trickster.”

“And all this time I thought the reason you were so excited when we got to go to Snowdin was to pet
all the dog monsters. But it was the Librarby all this time.”

“Well, half and half, really.”

There was a snorting sound from the hum child without the strange echo.

“I think it was because of that background that I noticed that something was going on during the trip through the Underground. Moments when Frisk and I were stumped, but there were sudden lateral insights. Or sudden tangents that had nothing to do with the situation at hand. Especially in the laboratory basement. Frisk described it as a sort of pattern recognition, but not being able to remember the original pattern. Something was making connections, but it wasn’t us.”

Frisk’s hands had slowed to a stop as they concentrated more and more on what Chara had been saying.

“How often does that happen?”

“I have not noticed it since the Barrier was destroyed. It might have been something unique to the Underground, but I never noticed it when we were back there getting everyone ready to move, or when everyone was… during the fight at the CORE.”

“…so whatever it was, it’s gone now?” Asriel’s legs slowed to a stop and he pushed himself up on his elbows. “Or does it leave and come back, something like that?”

“If it has come back, I haven’t noticed. And given my circumstances I would like to think that I would pick up on it really quickly. There is one other factor that I have yet to mention. The Last Dreams.”

Frisk’s body suddenly froze.

“The stars.”

Asriel stared at the human child in visible confusion.

“Wait, are you talking about the stars like in the CORE that normally only you guys can see, or-”

“During our fight. All that magic power. It did… something. Turned into these little marble things, but instead of being made of glass and other stuff, they were made of pure magic power. I mean, I didn’t know anything about magic then but I still knew that the moment I saw them.” Frisk carefully pushed their current project away with shaking hands, so that they could rest their arms on the desk.

“Last Dream is, I think, the monster terminology for it. I found something resembling the description in some old books about the War that Gerson let me read. The descriptions match up. In times of crisis, human warriors could sometimes use them to perform amazing feats on the battlefield. There was also a description of something like that in some of the Guardian Lore, but the translations were harder to follow; sometimes it was translated as Absolute Instinct, sometimes it was translated as Limit Break.”

There was a sigh from the human child and it was not clear from the sound if it was from Chara or Frisk.

“There were seven of them left over from the battle. One for each color of the magic spectrum as it turns out. But we didn’t know how to use them, and just before you came down from the mountain, there was some sort of public relations fiasco. And I panicked. I didn’t know what Frisk was going to do next, so when they fell asleep, I took over. I took the Last Dreams outside and… well… I guess


"I tried to make a deal with the devil."

The bedroom was silent, except for the human child’s breathing, which was becoming more and more ragged and hoarse.

“You could have… you could have left a note, or something. ‘I O U one Asriel’ or something like that. I was going to- I almost.”

“I know I know I know, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

Asriel slowly stood up and walked towards the human child.

“Guys…? Are you okay?”

“I don’t feel good.” Frisk choked out. “My hands are shaking and I want to cry even though you’re here now and it all worked out so I’m not sure what’s going on.”

“…do you need me to do anything?”

Slowly, unsteadily, the human child got up from their chair and lunged towards Asriel, wrapping their arms around him and almost falling over.

“Okay. Sure.” Asriel shrugged, or did something close to a shrug given that another child’s arms were wrapped around him at the time. “I can do that.”

“You’re here now,” Frisk managed to force the words past a lump in their throat. “You’re here now. That’s all that. That’s what matters.”

Agent Black stared at the side of the shower without seeing it. Even if he had been focusing on it, there wasn’t much to see, as the fixtures that controlled the amount and temperature of the water were some distance above the spot he was staring at, owing to the fact that he was sitting down.

In his mind’s eye, images flashed into existence, jumbled together with no logical connection between them. Fragments of his childhood. Fragments of his training.

And fragments of lives he had never lived, lives spent in the dark. Phantom memories where he had wings or flippers or claws instead of hands. Thoughts that weren’t his, ambitions he had never shared, fears he had never considered.

The sound of the shower couldn’t drown it all out, anymore than it could drown out the sound of the knocking on the bathroom door.

“Hey. We got an update.”

“…be right out.”

Slowly, with limbs that felt heavier and slower than they should have been, Agent Black pulled himself upright, turned off the lukewarm shower spray, grabbed a towel and started to dry off.

A few minutes later, a somewhat more dressed man walked out of the bathroom. Agent Brown immediately looked up from the laptop.

“ Took you long enough. Got a call from HQ. Looks like the waves we’ve been making traveled a lot further than we thought. The boss will be here in a few days.”
“Jesus H. Christ.”

“Yeah.” Agent Brown nodded. “I want to say this job can’t get any more complicated, but I don’t want to tempt fate.”

In a secret room behind an ancient door, a room carved from the living rock of the mountain, filled with files and notes and the accumulated debris of a living space, one monster and one human sat at a table. Both figures were staring at a third figure, a shadow with nothing casting it, in the center of the room.

If a single present moment can lead to multiple futures, then each present also has multiple pasts. The present is the future’s past.

“Wait, that makes sense from a whole multiverse of alternate timelines kind of way, but if that’s the case why didn’t you just say there are multiple timelines?”

Let me put it this way. Cause and effect is based on the idea of past events shaping future events. An apple falls from a tree, that’s the cause. It lands on a mathematician’s head, that’s the effect. But what if you know that something is going to happen in advance? Not even prophecy, just pattern recognition and good planning skills? Then the actions that you take in the present are defined by events in the future.

Thomas shook his head.

“That’s true, but that’s just guessing at what the future can be. Those guesses can be wrong and the future turns out different, but the past is still there, over and done with.”

Predictions can be wrong, this is true. But memory of the past is not infallible either. As it turns out, every single person is a nexus between the different possible future people they could become, and the people that could have become them.

“But I just said, that’s memory of the past, that’s not the same as what actually happened.” Thomas O’Dell rubbed his forehead where a sharp pain was forming. “Is it?”

Let us use the destruction of the Barrier as an example. Frisk fell into the Underground, and once they were in there, a number of options were available to them. They were limited by their understanding of the world, as well as the limitations of their body and senses, but they weren’t railroaded into a single outcome. At the same time, there were many, many possible children that could have climbed that mountain, with any number of backgrounds, with any number of motives. A multitude of Frisks, each of them different.

“But… but that’s the multiverse thing again. Each time a kid fell down, there could have been different outcomes, but we know that there was only one. Specifically the one where Frisk went into politics and now there’s magic ice cream vendors in the park every Tuesday and Thursday, plus alternate Wednesdays.”

Exactly! It’s that continuity of experience that has people thinking in terms of singular pasts and singular futures. Some can imagine different scenarios, but they personally only lived through one. As a result, they understand the concept of a timeline easily, but a network of multiple interlocking pasts and presents, prioritized by sequence, is something they don’t have any personal reference for. People think of the multiverse model, as you put it, as a network of branches like a tree. They never even think about the root network underground, doing the same thing in the other direction!
“While this is… interesting… it doesn’t really clarify what you are doing or why. Or what we are
doing and why. Or why we had to desecrate a child’s grave to pull it off.”

Right, right. I told you all of that so that you would have the necessary context for what I’m about to
tell you know. And can I just say, I appreciate your patience through these various models and
analogies. Some people just throw a tantrum if you try to explain nonlinear temporal mechanics to
them.

“Oh really. I wonder why.”

As I said, Chara’s grave is a liminal space. An area where the boundary between two different
aspects of reality is more flexible, if you can call it a boundary at all. Actually, there’s a better
example. Have you ever been listening to a radio and you happened to be in the right spot at the
right time with the right weather conditions to pick up a transmitting station that was well out of your
normal range reception? That’s another example of what a liminal space is. The reason that this is
important for us is because it allows us to bend the rules a little.

“…okay, I am familiar with the radio phenomena you describe. The skip. Why didn’t you just use
that from the beginning?”

Because it’s just another analogy. No matter what past events drove Chara or Frisk or the other
fallen humans to the mountain, no matter what future events took place in the Underground, they all
fell onto that same spot. It’s a nexus. It’s a choke point. It’s a place where all these different
possibilities all overlap with each other. That means that other possibilities and probabilities are
closer in spaces like that, and you don’t have to reach as far in order to touch a different possibility.
In the branching timeline model, it is the trunk, where all the roots and all the branches connect to.
An Axis Mundi.

“…wait, that grave is the center of the world?!”

Well, A center of the world, not THE center. There’s more than one.

“How?!”

The same way there’s three different north poles. One is based on the axis of rotation. One is based
on the position of a star. One is based on a magnetic field. They don’t line up perfectly.

Thomas covered his face with one hand.

“I think my headache is turning into brain damage.”

Yeah, sorry about that.

Chapter End Notes

This might be the most obscure chapter title I have ever used in ANY writing project.
Pat yourself on the back if you figure out where it's from.
“Well, here we are.”

The commentary is unnecessary; once the light fades away, they can see clearly the ruins of a once proud city, stone foundations still standing even when most of the wooden buildings atop them have been burned to charcoal or shattered into kindling by the force of the battle here. The bodies of the attackers are scattered throughout the streets in various states of decay; presumably some of the dust of the defenders remains, but after so long it seems likely that most of it has been blown away.

One body, crushed under a collapsed doorway, is being ripped apart by some sort of animal; they raise their staff, and then think better of it. What power they have left needs to be saved for the task ahead of them.

“So where do we start looking?”

Their companion in yellow robes shrugs.

“Probably whatever buildings are least damaged… or, I suppose, mostly intact.”

“That’s a lot of ground to cover.”

“Yes, well, it’s the City of Skeletons. Everything monsters thought was worth sharing or saving came through here for translation and archival, whether it was a magical breakthrough or government policy change or advertising for a comedy troupe putting on a performance. If what we need is anywhere, it will be here.”

“I know, I know,” they nod. “And it’s not like we can go to the original laboratories anymore.”

They make their way through the streets, trying to strike a balance between averting their eyes from the carnage and actually looking where they step so that they don’t trip over something that they would rather not touch.

“What do you think it will be like?”

“Huh?” They have no context for the question, with their attention occupied by the macabre landscape.

“I mean, after we’re done. There’s never been a war on this scale before. And what we’re doing… that’s going to change everything forever. How are people going to rebuild without magic?”

“People managed without magic before. Pointed sticks, sharp rocks, fire from sparks or friction.”

“I suppose, but what about after that? They can survive, but what will civilization look like without magic? If it’s even possible to rebuild civilization at all?”

They stop mid stride, tapping their staff on the cracked pavement below; old blood, mostly decayed and dehydrated, scrapes off with the wind.

It reminds them uncomfortably of monster dust scattering.

“I don’t know… food is the foundation of life, and abundant food the foundation of civilization. The survivors need to gather where the soil is rich, but close enough to fresh water sources so that they can irrigate by hand instead of using water magic. Rivers and lakes. That’s my best guess, anyway.
“Not that I’ll live long enough to see if I’m right or wrong.”

“True.”

They resume their wandering through the ruins of the city, occasionally peering into a ruined doorway, red light shining from the top of the staff. The black, charred remains of the city do not reflect that light easily, and the soot in the air is starting to make it harder to breathe above and beyond the smell of putrefaction and decay.

“Is that the Library?”

They stop investigating a half collapsed workshop, turning to see a massive stone edifice, carved skulls and spines and ribs next to books and quills and inkwells, pillars in the shape of long arm and leg bones surmounting the corners, all blackened by smoke and soot... but still largely intact.

“If it isn’t, I’ll be very surprised.”

“Kind of makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“What, if it’s even in there at this point?”

“Well, that, yes. But also how long this will last. It’s still standing now, but everything else here is a mess, and...”

They turn to stare at their companion, a forlorn face beneath a saffron hood, and end up biting their lip for a moment before speaking.

“Are you alright?”

“Not really. As a matter of fact I’m starting to wish I’d kept my big mouth shut. What we’re about to do, that’s not much better than what the king would do.”

They take a deep breath.

“You said it yourself. In fact, you spent the better part of an hour arguing to convince the rest of us. Even if we trap Asgore Dreemurr and whatever other Boss Monsters are still alive inside the cavern, the king will still be outside, and some people will still follow him to the death. Even if the only kingdom he can still rule over is a blood soaked battlefield next to a mountain. We are not the only people who can use magic, just the ones who devoted their lives to studying it. Once we’re gone, others could follow in our footsteps. Undo what we did, or find a way around it, and then the world is doomed.”

They step closer to the figure in yellow, their staff crashing on the ground as they walk.

“It was you who pointed out the obvious; even if there’s no Kindness left in the king’s Soul, others could master Healing Magic on his behalf, pushing back the effects of time and aging long enough for him to achieve his ultimate goal of immortality by any means necessary. So why, exactly, are you hesitating now?”

“Because I have had time to reflect on what that really means.”

The voice from under the yellow hood is softer than they expected, which throws them for a moment.

“Without magic, there will be no way to push back against disease. To mend bones and skin. Without magic, people will be blind and deaf to the world around them, huddling around fires and
hiding from the dark, or whatever they imagine lurks in the darkness. But most of all, without magic, strength will just be a matter of muscles and numbers.” A gloved fist taps a chest covered in intricate woven designs on a yellow background. “Justice is just a word if people can harm others, and nobody can stop them or confront them with the consequences of their actions. Integrity won’t mean a thing if those without Integrity can harm and destroy with impunity. Kindness means nothing without the capacity to help. The best parts of humanity will become abstract ideals if they aren’t forgotten entirely. That leaves the worst parts. Selfishness, ignorance, cruelty… what’s the difference between a world under the iron first of the king for all eternity, and the world we would leave behind after stopping him?”

They stare for a while, the irritation and anger leeching away as they consider this position, before finally turning towards the Library building and setting off.

“The difference is, that in the world we leave behind, no matter how cruel anyone is, their days of cruelty are numbered.”

Something was tickling Frisk’s nose; that was the first sensory input they were aware of. A few seconds of scrambling had them lying on their back and sneezing, while something else was moving around in their bed.

“Ugh, I’m up, I’m up...” Asriel mumbled, before apparently falling back to sleep again.

Frisk rubbed at their nose and alternately sniffed and exhaled, trying to get rid of the Boss Monster fur that had invaded their nostrils, or at least the phantom sensation left over from having their face buried in Asriel’s fur.

Eventually, the human child looked around the bedroom; sunlight outside the window, plus the sounds of a town waking up, gave them a rough idea of the time without checking their cell phone’s clock. Toriel would probably come to wake them up before long if they didn’t come downstairs on their own.

With a certain amount of difficulty, not to mention a certain amount of annoyed, half asleep Boss Monster, Frisk climbed out of bed and made their way to the bathroom, splashed some water on their face. Even when they stared at their reflection in the mirror, they could still see the devastated city in the dream, filled with rotten corpses and dust.

A battlefield and a military encampment, a council of war, a different council of war, an expedition to a ruined city… all of them clearly connected by a common theme, and all of them possessing a clarity above and beyond most dreams they had. All of them about the War between Humans and Monsters. That much was certain, the only uncertainty was why.

They also had the unshakable conviction that they were reliving actual events, rather than their mind fabricating a scenario from what limited information they had about it. Only there was nobody they could possibly speak to in order to corroborate that what they thought they knew. Toriel, Asgore and Gerson were the oldest monsters alive, but even if they were willing to explain what they remembered of the final days before the Barrier was created, Frisk wasn’t keen on asking them.

“I miss the dreams where weird things happen for no reason.”

‘Hmmmm?’

“Just talking to myself. I mean. Literally this time.”
Alphys reached across the bed to try to turn off the alarm clock as soon as the music started, but couldn’t reach it. It took a few more seconds, and a few more lines of the song, for her to wake up and see that she was entangled with Undyne in the middle of the mattress.

“Hey honey.”

Undyne yawned, showing a massive mouth of extremely sharp teeth, and opened one bleary eye.

“Morning miss smarty pants.”

Alphys snorted.

“Where did that come from?”

“I just woke up, okay? Deal with it.” Undyne let go of Alphys and managed to get over to her side of the bed. “I can’t tell where my dreams end and yesterday began.”

“Yeah, it was pretty busy.” Alphys slid over to the end table, turned off the alarm, and stood up to stretch. And, as it turned out, to flinch as sore muscles protested the previous day’s exercise. “I can’t believe I had the energy to spar with you for three rounds.”

“I can. That was awesome.”

Alphys picked up her glasses and peered through them before settling them down on her snout.

“Do you need the shower first?”

“Naw, I’ll be fine if you want to go first. I’ll set up the breakfast machine too.”

“Thanks. Today’s going to be so busy. Joe’s g-getting the arm installed, some investors want to come by to t-t-talk about more magical foods, Dr. Aster wants to talk about test bed technology for the Amalgamate Cure, and that’s all before lunch.”

“Right. Speaking of lunch, do you want to meet me some place, or should I bring something to the lab for you, or something like that?”

“...I like the idea of the second one.”

“Awesome! Anything sound good to you?”

Alphys shook her head as she walked out of the bedroom.

“Surprise me. But, you know. D-don’t break any appliances or walls to do it.”

“Okay, we’re gonna give you a shot Mr. Stanton. You may feel a little prick.”

“Joke’s on you guys, I am the little prick,” Joe said with a grin, but the fingers on his remaining hand were still trembling with nerves. A few of the operating room staff laughed behind their masks.

“There we go. Now, this next shot you won’t feel.”

“Aight.”
“Looking good. Mr. Stanton, how about you count down from a hundred for me?”

“Okay. Wait. Out loud, or… in my head… or….”

Light and dark shifted. Outlines and boundaries blurred and warped. But there was one constant; a shadow in the corner of the operating theater, growing darker and more distinct with every moment.

“Oh…. It’s you again….”

*Hello Mr. Stanton.*

“Hey. Are you a doctor.”

*Not at this time.*

“Oh….”

The last traces of light faded to gray, and the gray faded to black, and Joe was surrounded by darkness.

“…huh. I don’t remember this happening last time I was in the hospital.”

*How are you feeling?*

“Well… honestly this is kind of weird. I was feeling out of it when the anesthesia was taking hold but now it feels like it wore off because everything is sharper and clearer.”

*Interesting.*

“…wait a minute, am I dead?”

*Not at this time.*

“Oh. Good. Because if I die, I’m not paying any hospital bills. Fair’s fair.”

*Agreed.*

“…where is this place?”

*You are still in the operating theater. Your senses are just in standby mode from the anesthesia.*

“...should I be awake right now?”

*Unclear. Tentative hypothesis: Your magical abilities have grown to the point where your Soul can maintain all the functions of consciousness, independent of the related areas of your physical brain. Known parallels: Meditation. Out Of Body Experiences. Hypnotic Trance State.*

“…I suppose Near Death Experiences also count.”

*True. Updating list of known parallels.*

“...hey, who are you?”

*The one who comes when people fall, and call out for help in the dark.*

“Oh. You got a name?”
One for every world, every timeline, every person who falls.

“...so why are you here talking to me?”

The laboratory accident in Workshop Two, with the Project Grayscale prototype.

The darkness faded, and Joe found himself staring at Workshop Two, intact and undamaged save for the occasional scorch marks and dents that came from normal experimental work. The Amplifier prototype was on the workbench, next to the microphone pickup that Joe was using to record his observations and thoughts. And, standing in front of the workbench, Joe saw himself from the outside.

“Is my hair really that messy?”

Yes, but you can pull off the look. It fits your aesthetic.

Joe saw his mouth moving, but with no sound, as his hands grasped the dials and knobs and adjusted the settings of the machinery, as ignorant of the coming catastrophe as a man swinging a baseball bat at a stick of dynamite. Energy arced inside the machine, visible as light discharge in the gaps between the panels, and the world was filled with light; seven colors, all at once, fighting and overlapping and feeding on each other.

Joe saw the orange and cyan light overlap, degrade, and explode into brilliant white light. The Amplifier shattered under the force, scattering the component parts, but the backstopping panels for the control dials shielded his hands from the shrapnel inside. The shock wave knocked him back with such force that his feet left the floor and he slid across the tile when he finally landed. Glasses cracked but still mostly intact.

Joe saw his own mouth form the words “What The Fuck?!” before the walls cracked, the ceiling collapsed, and Workshop Two imploded under the force of an uncontrolled Wave-Force Collapse.

Joe saw himself look up at the falling ceiling through a spiderweb of cracks in the glasses.

Joe saw himself mouth the word “Help” before the debris collapsed on him.

Joe saw... something... descend from the sky. Like the photo negative of a lightning bolt, darkness instead of light, striking the debris that had buried his body.

Joe saw the blue light around the debris, pushing it away.

Joe saw himself getting up, unsteadily and painfully, with blood streaming from mangled eye sockets, purple light flickering as he looked around and saw the world without eyes.

The darkness returned, and the vision of the laboratory faded away.

“...I don’t remember that part.”

You got hit on the head pretty hard twice in a row.

“...I guess that would explain it.”

“Mr. Cater?”

Jordan Cater’s eyes looked up from the table and turned to stare at the man who entered the room.
“Mr. Abbot. I didn’t expect to see you again.”

Abbot was not sure what made him more uncomfortable, Jordan Cater’s previous detachment and near trance-like state, or his current intense gaze.

“As I stated previously, I am your court appointed defender. I have a job to do. At least you’re more talkative this time.”

“Yes, well, it’s amazing what a good night’s sleep can do.” Jordan stared at the table in front of him again as Abbot sat down on the opposite side and opened his briefcase. “So, what are your legal recommendations?”

“Under the circumstances, all we can rely on are technicalities. Your association with the religious order in the town gives us grounds for a change of venue, and legislation has not yet been written involving the use of magic, but that only goes so far. You are charged with attacking a school filled with children with intent to harm those children, Mr. Cater. I doubt we can count on splitting hairs to win us any favors with judge or jury; they will not care if the attack was done with magic or an assault weapon or a rolled up newspaper.”

Jordan closed his eyes and sighed. “I suppose not.”

“I mention this now so you understand where we are right now, before I bring up the next matter. The prosecutor’s office hasn’t said anything about a plea deal. Either they consider your case to be open and shut, or they expect you to ignore any deal that they offer you and drag it out as long as you can.”

“I suppose they should be commended for their insight. I have been told that I am notoriously stubborn. Having said that, I do have some questions to ask about this process before we proceed further.”

“Alright. I’ll do my best to answer them.”

“If this should go to trial, the prosecution will most likely call on eyewitnesses to the events, is that not correct?”

“It is very likely. There are no shortages of potential witnesses. Several officers of the Ebott’s Wake Police Department, and assorted private citizens including the faculty of the school itself. Having said that, they may not need to rely on eyewitness testimony. There are numerous online videos of the incident itself which may well serve as evidence.”

“I see.” Jordan nodded. “How likely is it that the prosecution will call on Frisk, the monster ambassador?”

Mr. Abott stared at his client for a moment before answering.

“I can’t say that with any degree of certainty. I believe that their being called to the witness stand depends mostly on how important their testimony is to getting a conviction, but the prosecution may also call them simply for the appeal to emotion.”

“I see.”

“...Mr. Cater, I don’t recommend trying to shift the focus towards magic. Even if we could succeed in getting the Jury to focus on what Frisk Dreemurr can do in terms of magic, that still won’t help you specifically. This is especially true if the prosecution does not call on them as a witness but we do, because the prosecution can then shift the focus back on you, trying to force another
confrontation with them or make them relive traumatic events, to gain juror sympathy.”

Jordan frowned and leaned forward.

“And where is the sympathy for the father who lost his daughter? Where is the sympathy for the child who was taken too soon? No, don’t answer that,” Jordan shook his head and waved his hand, leaning back in his chair. “It doesn’t matter. Chara has been forgotten by everyone except for me. Let us focus on what we know.”

“...right. I do sympathize with you regarding your child, Mr. Cater, but I have doubts that we can invoke that to our benefit in the courtroom.”

Underneath the table, one of the public defender’s pens was clutched in Cater’s fingers; Mr. Abott’s attention had been entirely focused on the man leaning forward, and so he had completely missed both the telltale blue glow, and the pen itself rolling across the edge of the table into the waiting grasp of a slender purple light connected to Cater’s hand. Where nobody could see, the pen glowed with cyan light, and vanished.
And Then There Were Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This is a bad idea. Over cover is already blown and you’re going to drag law enforcement into it again.”

Agent Black shook his head and walked into the All Fine Labs building, hands on the security pass that indicated he was allowed to enter the building for educational purposes. As it turned out, the front desk staff were already busy with many, many other students, most of them children who had all apparently arrived at the same time. The monster queen and instructor was speaking to Dr. Alphys off to one side of the room, and on the other side, Officer Ward was talking to one of the security staff.

At the same moment that Agent Black saw Officer Ward, the policeman noticed him as well, held up two fingers pointing at his own eyes, and then pointed those fingers at Agent Black.

“I told you. They didn’t ask us to give back the passes or say we were kicked out of the program—”

“Make a hole! Out of the way please!”

Agent Black, along with almost everyone else in the lobby, turned to see two laboratory workers pushing a wheeled cart with a cylinder on top. His eyes locked onto the shifting, morphing mass inside the transparent tube and everything else faded into the background; the two skeletons in lab coats that were opening and closing doors as the cart passed, the short human child and goat monster walking up to him, everything.

“On second thought you were right this was a bad plan we should leave.”

“Hey.”

Agent Black looked down to see the monster prince and the adopted child of the monster queen standing in front of him.

“Mom told me that today’s class is about cooking with magic. Also Dr. Aster asked me to keep an eye on you two so the Memoryhead doesn’t escape again. They need it for an important scientific experiment today.”

“...uh huh.”

“I don’t know how much you figured out on your own, or if anyone told you, but the Conveniently Unguarded Ventilation Shafts were built into the All Fine Labs building from day one so that anyone who did try to sneak in and steal important magical hardware or scientific information would just waste their time. That’s why you guys didn’t get kicked out, because you didn’t actually trespass into any really restricted areas.”

Agent Brown stepped around Agent Black.

“So if they tried to press charges, it would have constituted entrapment.”

Frisk shrugged.
“Maybe. I told you all of that so you would take me more seriously when I told you this: The Memoryhead is not going to be in a secure containment system for today’s experiment. If you do any more poking and prodding after class, there is a non-zero chance of causing another breach. And if the Memoryhead does break out again, the lab staff isn’t going to be as nice as last time because this experiment is actually really important.”

Agent Brown stared at the human child; their expression and their tone of voice was all but impossible to read. The monster child with white fur next to them was arguably easier to understand, despite the obvious differences between monster and human expressions.

“And do you also have a message for us?”

“Yeah.” Asriel took a deep breath. “The last person who broke into All Fine Labs got set on fire. By me. I’m not saying I’ll do that again, but Frisk says it was important for… some words I can’t remember now.”

“Full disclosure,” the Frisk supplied.

“Yeah, that was it.” Asriel pointed up behind Agent Brown’s shoulder. “Also, even if you did try anything, he would probably stop you first.”

Agent Brown blinked, turned around, and flinched as he realized that a figure almost a foot higher than he was had managed to invade his personal space.

“The hell?! How did you sneak up on me like that?!”

“SUPER STEALTH STILTS!” Hal shouted as he stomped his way through the lobby atop a pair of obviously homemade platforms that elevated his body and extended his stride. “NOBODY CAN EVEN TELL I’M HERE!”

Dr. Aster peered at the shifting mass inside the containment cylinder, watching eyes form and melt back into the sludge and form again.

“Hey, doctor? Before this goes any further, can we ask two questions?”

“Sure, it’s a good time for it.” Dr. Aster looked over at the workbench where Alex and Brendan were assembling a rather ramshackle looking machine, blueprints spread out over the working surface and held down by random tools. “What do you need?”

“First… splitting this thing up, won’t that kill it? I mean, I know the amalgamates are all made of different monsters smooshed together, but still.”

Dr. Aster shook his head.

“The individual monsters still retain a distinct identity by virtue of their individual souls. The Memoryhead has no Soul at all, so all this will do is divide it back into the component parts the other monsters lost. It’s alive, yes, but it’s in the same way that… what’s the best example… in the way that a human organ is still alive for a few hours after it’s been removed for a transplant.”

“Oh.” Alex didn’t look completely convinced by the explanation, but returned to the task of assembling the machine.

“What was the other question?”
“Right, that’s mine.” Brendan looked up from his work. “What happens if those secret agent guys try to break into an actual high security area? Do we just, do we let it happen, or call for the security team, or what?”

“My understanding is we call the security team and let them tackle it.” Dr. Aster pulled out his cell phone. “Alex, you better head over to the Education Annex. I’ll take over and we’ll run the test and let you know how it went.”

“Oh, right. Shit. I had an alarm set but it didn’t go off.” Alex pulled out his phone and started walking towards the workshop door.

Brendan waved at Dr. Aster. “Bet you a soda that he set it on PM instead of AM-”

“FUCK!” came a cry of frustrated anger outside the workshop.

Justin scowled at the monitor before looking down at the paperwork next to the keyboard, only looking up when he heard the sound of footsteps behind him.

“Oh. Hey Asriel.”

The prince of monsters stopped in his tracks.

“How did you know I was here?”

“ Heard you walking. Despite being exposed to loud noises and explosions, my hearing is good enough to pick up on anything that might be somebody sneaking up on me. A little going away present from Afghanistan.”

“Oh. What are you working on?”

“Filling out my time card for yesterday. I was in and out of the lab like eight times doing different things. How about you?”

“Just waiting around until mom’s class is done. With Dr. Alphys and Dr. Aster both working on important stuff I can’t hang out with them or wait in their offices. I can go bother other people if I’m distracting you.”

“At this point I think I prefer the distraction to actually filling out the paperwork.” Justin shrugged. “Paperwork has always been my least favorite part of the job, no matter what job it was. Actually now that I think about it, that might have played a role in why I kept ending up with different jobs rather than sticking with one.”

“Greetings class. Today, we shall be explaining and exploring the fundamentals of Magical Cookery. Please get out a fresh sheet of paper or page in your notes—”

Toriel’s voice was suddenly drowned out by multiple voices making sounds of celebration.

“I’m gonna make the biggest cake!”

“I’m going to make enough cookies to reach the moon!”

“I’m gone ta rustle me up ma’s ole snickerdoodle recipe soon as I get home!”
“Ahem,” Toriel projected her voice above the sudden increase in noise. “I do appreciate your enthusiasm, but before we can actually begin cooking, we must explore the fundamentals. This is both because our ingredients and tools for the practical demonstration will not be ready until tomorrow, and because of the importance of food safety.”

Toriel turned to the marker board and began to draw the arrows, boxes, and circles that indicated a flow chart.

“While human cooking is reliant upon heat, there is more to creating a meal than simply setting the ingredients on fire. There are concerns of temperature, for example. Too hot and the ingredients are destroyed, too low and they are simply raw ingredients that are warmed over. There is also the matter of cooking time, of the way that different ingredients react to heat, and what ingredients work well together compared to ingredients which do not mix. Thus it is also with magic; the right color of magic, exposed to the right ingredients, for the correct amount of time. The source of magic in the cooking process parallels the same means of heat as in the methods you may be familiar with. Boiling, baking, roasting, frying, steaming, even sous-vide.”

Behind them, Frisk heard one of the government agents whisper “Sue What?” to the other as they flipped to a blank page in their notebook.

“This means that cooking with magical fire, magical water, or even magical electricity are all equally valid methods, coming down to both the nature of the recipe and your level of familiarity with different forms of elemental magic. Of course, because elemental magic is not a perfect counterpoint to the physical materials and reactions they resemble, you must understand precisely what you are attempting to do to the ingredients. This is where proficiency in the spectrum comes in.”

Toriel tapped the whiteboard once again.

“The two most iconic attributes of magically prepared food, in comparison to human food, is its ability to promote rapid healing of injuries and illnesses and the ability to sublimate directly into energy and raw material. These two properties are associated with the restorative power of Green Magic and the transitional capabilities of Cyan Magic, but specifically using those colors is not always required because of the fundamental property of magic that we have already discussed.”

Toriel drew another diagram of an old fashioned horseshoe magnet, with labeled poles and arcs of magnetic field strength between the poles.

“By infusing any amount of any color magic within the material of the food, we have given the food its own low-level magic field. By consuming this food, we introduce it to the higher strength fields produced by the Souls of living beings. The weaker field of the food instantly aligns with our stronger fields, disintegrating and rebuilding itself in precisely the configurations that our bodies require, just as iron filings are attracted to a magnet.”

Toriel turned to face the class again.

“The key to proper magical cooking is to correctly balance all of the different types of magic to create a meal that can be easily assimilated. This is where understanding how different types of magic respond to different ingredients comes into play, as an ingredient that is not processed correctly may resist being assimilated, like a raw starchy vegetable or perhaps a bone left in a cut of meat that needed to be removed. There are also ingredients that, when exposed to magic, incorporate chemical or physical properties into the resulting food that may not be desirable in the final dish.”

‘This would have been nice to know a little sooner. Like, I don’t know, perhaps a few years ago.’
Frisk sighed and continued scribbling down Toriel’s magical cooking flowchart.

“Take, for example, the hot pepper which is highly prized in many forms of human cooking for its heat. Casually exposed to a simply magical flame, such a pepper would have its effective heat magnified, while making it impossible to neutralize with milk or sugar water. This could result in serious medical complications for everyone in the area.”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Dreemurr?”

Frisk turned around to see the government agent with black hair raising his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Brown?”

“Could you explain what you mean by everyone in the area? Do these peppers explode or something?”

“I was just about to expand upon that. The reaction of magic with these materials in uncontrolled ways, combined with the alignment of the magic field in the food with the magic field of the person eating them, means that the properties of that food will be transferred in a similarly uncontrolled way. In the same way that drinking or eating something that is too hot, or even spilling it on yourself, can cause injury, so can magical food with this kind of amplified characteristic. In the case of the hot pepper, whoever ate it would either be surrounded by magical fire or produce it from their mouth. Everything and everyone around them would be at very real risk of bursting into flame.”

The classroom was silent for a count of three.

“COOL!”

“After class we need to go to the store and get some peppers!”

“We’re gonna be like dragons!”

“This is going to be AWESOME!”

“This does not surprise me as much as it should,” Frisk muttered as they rubbed their forehead.

“AHEM.”

Toriel’s projecting Teacher Voice silenced the enthusiastic children almost immediately.

“The entire point of explaining this to you was so that you could avoid the consequences of uncontrolled magic. It is for your safety. Should I learn from your parents that you have been violating food safety guidelines at home, there will be consequences above and beyond your self inflicted burns and tears. Regardless of your feelings on learning magic, I am certain you do not wish to spend your entire summer vacation doing homework, is that not correct?”

The previously excited children seemed frozen like deer in the headlights of an oncoming semi truck.

‘Wow, she went straight for the nuclear option.’

As if to accentuate Toriel’s statement, the lights in the classroom flickered. Frisk felt the vibrations through the floor before seeing Alex Carson’s pencil roll off of the edge of the table. A few second later, the lights stopped flickering and the vibrations stopped.

“Well...” Toriel paused before turning to the marker board once again. “That is, I suppose, only to be expected. This is a scientific laboratory and manufactory, after all. Now, let us start with the use of
Communication Magic. Red Magic does not easily interact with physical matter, meaning that it often serves as a refinement to—"

“EUREAKA!”

Toriel almost dropped the marker in her fingers as the shout rang out, through every corridor, every room, every ventilation shaft in the All Fine Labs building complex. Scant seconds later, a skeleton monster sprinted up to the door to the classroom and stuck his head inside.

“IT WORKS! HAHAAAAHAHAHAHA! I need to tell Alphys! ALPHYYYYYS!”

Dr. Aster disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared, and Toriel stared at the doorway, apparently at a total loss for words, when another skeleton walked inside.

“hey Tori. did dad show up here just now?”

Toriel nodded.

“figures. he’s so excited that he’s dropping frames left and right. sorry if the lights went out for a bit, took a bit more juice than we expected. I better go catch the old man before he goes full Real Genius. Never go full Real Genius.”

Sans winked in Frisk’s direction and left the classroom.

Toriel still had not recovered her voice.

_I love it when a plan comes together._

“Wait what?”

_Another piece has fallen into place. On that subject, I have some information that you should remember after waking up. Eventually. Probably._

“We are part of some sort of Cryptic Asshole’s Union, and if you give anyone a straight fucking answer they kick you out?”

_Man, if I had a nickel for every time somebody called me a Cryptic Asshole, I’d have two dollars and fifty five cents._

“That is not actually an answer to my question, and is also just specific enough to raise even more questions. Like what exactly lead to you being called a Cryptic Asshole fifty one times.”

_Occupational hazard. I don’t always have all the answers, but even when I do, I am limited in my ability to convey that information to my partners._

“Are you sure that I didn’t die on the operating table? Because being trapped in the darkness with somebody saying nonsensical shit is probably an afterlife in some religion somewhere. Specifically one of the afterlives reserved for people who didn’t share in kindergarten or eat all their green vegetables.”

_Actually no. I had plans for that particular contingency. to be honest, but it seems you’re just too stubborn to die, even for a split second when it would be convenient. Not that I’m complaining about it. But yeah, we should… okay. I got it. We will start with an attention grabber._
“...which is?”

Everyone thinks that Thomas O’Dell is dead, but he is very much alive.

“...shit.”

More importantly, O’Dell is not the only person in that situation. Josef Stanton, your magic and your mindset are both ideal for discovering and studying patterns. You are an excellent scientist and engineer for that reason, but I think you might learn even more if you started applying your skills outside of the laboratory.

“Okay then. We’re back to cryptic hints but fine. I can lean into it.”

Good to hear. Second important point. Clean out the carburetor on your bike. The sooner the better. Third important point. The needle-in-a-haystack approach to hiding the Phase Integrator Failsafe isn’t going to work if the people searching for it have even slight competence in Pattern Magic.

“That does make sense, but how would oh for fuck’s sake those government agents are in the magic class now.”

Correct. There was a fourth point I was going to make, but due to events taking place while you were unconscious, it has already been taken care of. So, before our conversation is finished, it’s only fitting that I leave you with a cryptic warning.

“Of course it is. Well, hit me with it.”

Okay. Here we go… next time, you can’t afford to hold back.

“...alright. Short, sweet, just vague enough to let the imagination run wild. As cryptic warnings go, I give it a solid nine out of ten.”

Thanks. I try.

Chapter End Notes

Frickin’ finally. Now we can start getting to the GOOD stuff. >:D
Bony hands shook as they tried and failed to grip the pull tab on a can of soda, multiple times. With a grunt of impatience, the can glowed blue and the tab popped all the way off, flying up several inches and landing on the floor of the lab. Dr. Aster didn’t even seem to notice as he leaned back and drained the entire can in a few seconds.

“...okay. That’s better.” Dr. Aster turned to face the queen and her children, standing by the door to the laboratory. “Sorry about earlier, it’s just… it’s amazing. It worked even better than our most optimistic predictions. This is a game changer. It’s revolutionary. And it’s going to open doors we never considered before.”

“Just out of curiosity, does one of those doors lead to me getting my own room any time soon?”

“Yes! HAHA!” Dr. Aster held out one arm and pumped his fist in a way that was almost not incredibly nerdy. “I can’t even explain how unprecedented this is! Scientific methodology is all about process of elimination, trial and error, educated guesses, chipping away at the block of marble until only the statue remains, except the statue is verifiable scientific fact. But today’s experiment was like hitting the stone once and causing a chain reaction of fractures throughout the entire structure, leaving behind an exact duplicate of Rodin’s The Thinker!”

The skeleton blinked suddenly. “Somewhere along the way this metaphor got away from me.”

“ya think?”

Dr. Aster scoffed and threw the empty soda can, until then still clutched in his wildly gesticulating hand, in the general direction of the trash can. A blue light surrounded it and adjusted the trajectory until it vanished inside with the clank of aluminum on aluminum.

“I tested the system five times with the Memoryhead. Each time, even a partial field induction from one sample caused the rest of the composite to fractionally separate also.”

“...and that’s... good? Right?”

Dr. Aster stared at Asriel.

“Yes, it is good, but don’t you see?! The field induction could have imposed the structure of the source monster over the entire mass. It also could have caused one part of the Memoryhead to regain its original shape while the rest of it remained in flux. But everything was separating out. Everything was regaining shape.”

Dr. Aster stared at the blank looks of the Dreemurr family.

“Uh, there’s obviously something weird about that, but I can’t think about it right now because my brain is full of cooking information.”

“...okay, fair enough. Cutting to the chase. The only reason that those fragments of the Memoryhead could regain shape like that would be if there was a way to assimilate and transform extant magical energy. This is significant is because it implies that the original hypothesis was right, but for the wrong reasons. The primary element received the energy directly, and once that field formed it
repelled the fields of the other elements like a magnet on top of a superconductor.”

Dr. Aster reached into one pocket, pulled out his phone, unlocked it, tapped his way through assorted menus, and finally held up the screen for the Dreemurrs to see.

“And this is why.”

The lab was silent for a second, until Sans started to snicker. Frisk held up one hand.

“What does Dr. Ross have to do with the Memoryheads?”

“What?” Dr. Aster turned the phone around to see a picture of Dr. Ross, holding up her hands in such a way that a shadow cast on the wall next to her resembled a caricature of a human face in profile.

“Dammit my thumb must have bumped the side of the screen...” Dr. Aster tapped the side of the screen again, then turned the phone around slower and more carefully to show everyone else a picture of tiny white stars in a black background.

“Just to be clear, those are Soul Fragments. Monster Soul Fragments.”

Frisk and Asriel both turned to look at each other at the same time, although Asriel’s expression was one of annoyed confusion, while Frisk’s was one of dawning comprehension.

Dr. Aster turned the phone around and stared at the picture.

“Alphys was right from the very beginning. Determination preserves Monster Souls, even after the body degrades. But when the Amalgamation Syndrome began, she thought she’d made a mistake. That the whole theory was wrong. These fragments of the Amalgams detached, sought each other out, and stabilized because of the fragments of Soul inside them. And using the same instrumentation, we can permanently revitalize the completed, intact Souls of the monsters, restoring their bodies completely.”

Dr. Aster looked up at the royal family again.

“And if we start right now, we’ll be done tonight.”

The keys shook slightly in Agent Black’s hands as he tried to get the hotel door open.

“...you need any help-”

“I got it I got it.”

The door finally swung open, and the two men walked through the threshold-

“FUCK!” Agent Black reeled backwards in shock, slamming right into Agent Brown, and compressing the plastic and paper containers that until that point had held assorted take out food.

“Dammit what the hell?!” Agent Brown stepped back, arms and chest covered in ketchup, mustard, soda and grease. Dropping the crushed containers and shaking the liquid from his hands, it was a few moments before he looked up to see what had startled his partner.

“I’d say I was disappointed, but that would require me to have faith in your abilities in the first place.”
The woman sitting on the edge of the bed stood up and walked to the threshold where the two men were still standing.

“...you don’t get paid by the hour. Get in here.”

The door to the hotel room shut and the latch rattled as the lock turned.

A scant few seconds later, an impossibly tall figure emerged from the stairwell and walked over to the door with the spilled food and beverages in front of it.

Crouching down carefully in order to maintain his balance, Hal pressed a stethoscope up against the door.

“Golly, tonight? Really??”

“He seemed absolutely certain, and fixated in a way that I have not seen since the breakthrough with the food supply.”

Asgore nodded slowly.

“It must be really happening then. What do we need to do?”

“...I am unsure. This is all coming so fast and so soon. We need… clothes? No, we do not know even what their form will be. Perhaps- no, we need to get furniture, but the spare room is already full...”

Toriel trailed off as a blue sphere rose in front of her face, followed by a line of blue magic connecting to a human child’s hand. In their other hand, Frisk was holding up their notebook, with the title ‘Chara Bedroom Checklist’ scrawled across the top of one page.

“I took the liberty of compiling a list of all the necessary steps we would need to take, and put them in the right order. By necessity it is incomplete because we have no data on body type, even in the broadest sense, but I think it will work if performed by Boss Monsters who are stronger than me.”

Toriel stared at Frisk, then the notebook, and slowly reached out to take it. As Frisk let go, they started to rise up again.

“Oh, right. Ballast.”

A flash of green left behind some vines tethering Frisk’s leg to Asriel’s hand. The young prince slowly pulled the human child back down to earth, and the magical balloon popped with a sound that resembled a horn honking than anything else. Asgore brought his paws up to muffle a laugh, and Toriel reached up to rub her forehead.

“Frisk, in the future, please refrain from flying or floating like that. I am concerned that you might fall and injure yourself.”

“Right. It was just an expedient to get your attention while you were overwhelmed.”

Toriel breathed in and out slowly.

“Yes, well, perhaps I was somewhat.” The notebook was held up and Toriel peered at the child’s handwriting. “Well. Rather than dally any longer under the weight of uncertainty, we should begin at once. That way, Chara’s room will be ready by the time their body is. Let us all return home; I shall
prepare us lunch, and then we can begin in earnest.”

Undyne walked into the All Fine Labs lobby into a solid wall of chaotic noise that caused the covered dishes she was carrying to rattle.

Security staff and research staff alike were carrying large instruments or component parts around, either by hand or atop carts or with the benefit of moving dollies. Voices spoke over each other in a rainbow of emotions: frustration, panic, excitement, anger, anticipation, and more. At several points, the lights flickered and the intercom buzzed to life with words that Undyne could understand, but had no context to put them in.

“Hey Undyne.” Justin waved from the front desk. “If you’re looking for Dr. Alphys, you might need to wait a while. She’s up to her neck in a huge project.”

“Yeah, figured that out on my own, thanks.” Undyne walked up to the desk and put the plate down. “I thought I’d surprise her with a home cooked meal after her meeting with those investor people or whatever it was, but it looks like she out-surprised me.”

“Oh, yeah. About that.” Justin frowned. “It turns out having a skeleton monster barge into the meeting room screaming Alphys name at the top of his lungs, or rib cage, or however that works… anyway, it scared the hell out of them and they got out of here as fast as they could. So that deal’s dead in the water.”

“Well, shit.”

“Yep. I wasn’t there but Paul told me about it. On the plus side, Dr. Aster did that because he got some crazy results while doing science and now everybody and their brother and their brother’s dog is putting together something big and complicated. They even pulled everybody off the assembly lines for this.”

Undyne’s jaw dropped.

“They what? Seriously?”

“As surely as I’m sitting here still filling out this god damn time sheet.”

“Undyne.”

In a split second, Undyne spun around and located the voice that spoke her name, a voice she would pick out of any crowd, no matter how large or loud or chaotic.

Alphys was standing next to the security desk in the lobby, one claw leaning against it for stability. Her face was covered in sweat, and her scales seemed to be a paler, more sickly shade of yellow than Undyne remembered them being that morning.

Moving so fast that only an ultra-high speed slow motion camera could prove that she hadn’t teleported, Undyne was in front of Alphys, down on one knee with her hands on the scientist’s shoulders.

“Alphys? Are you okay?”

“…Dr. Aster found a c-c-cure. We’re g-going to save the Amalgamates.” One shaking claw came up, wiping the sweat from Alphys’ face. “I. C-called. Everyone. B-b-b-back. To. B-b-back.”
Undyne nodded as a metaphorical light bulb clicked on over her head. “Oh.”

“Undyne.”

“Yeah?”

“...Undyne.”

“I’m right here. I’m here honey.”

“...what if it doesn’t work?”

“Then you’ll try again. You and Dr. Aster and Sans and everybody else.”

Alphys shook under Undyne’s hands.

“I feel sick.”

“We’ll go to your office. Turn off the lights, muffle the noise. I brought you food and you will eat it.”

“No.” Alphys shook her head. “I have to be here. I have to be here. I can’t run away again. I can’t run away. If I run away now. I’ll never stop.”

“You’re not running away. You’re catching your breath. That’s all. Come on. Can you walk?”

“...I don’t know~”

Alphys shrieked as scaly arms scooped her up, and Undyne began to navigate through the chaos of manpower and hardware to get to Alphys’ office.

“Problem solved! Hey, Justin! Grab that plate and follow me!”

It took a while for the blurry images to register as actual sense data, much less the fact that they were objects and people.

“And how are you doing, Mr. Stanton?”

Intermittent darkness, but that was probably the result of blinking. Perspective shifted, centering on a figure standing next to some sort of machine.


“Oh.” The cotton feeling inside of Joe’s head faded away slightly. “You’re still here.”

“Actually I just got here. Don’t worry about it. Disorientation after anesthesia is a common side effect.”

“Who in the hell is Anastasia...” Joe’s head turned again, his eyes locking on to the windows, the chair, the other bed in the room. “Wait. Wait a minute.”

Joe squeezed his eyes shut, opened them again, and looked down at his right hand.

Slowly, he lifted it up and moved the thumb and the fingers, in order. Then a peace sign, a rude gesture, a pair of horns, a thumbs up, and finally a fist.
With each gesture, purple light glowed in between slats of black metal and plastic, tracing its way from fingertip to the circle of reddened, irritated skin just below the elbow.

“Aw hell yeah.” Joe grinned. “Back in the game.”

The scientist abruptly let his new arm drop and leaned back in the hospital bed again.

“That is what I would be saying, if I didn’t feel like total shit.”

“That’s also a common reaction after surgery.” The nurse pointed at the table next to the hospital bed. “Your friends dropped some stuff off for you, by the way.”

Joe blinked, turned his head and tried to focus on the table. There was a card that said ‘Happy Birthday’ except that the word Birthday had been crossed out and the phrase ‘Badass Cyborg Arm Surgery’ had been hastily written beneath it in what appeared to be black marker. Next to the card was a comically large novelty bar of Toblerone.

“Hehehe. Keepin’ the tradition alive.” Joe grinned and let his head rest on the hospital bed again. A few seconds later his grin vanished and his eyes opened.

“I need to clean out the carb on my bike.”

Three children stared at a wardrobe, though the uninformed observer would probably only see two children.

“Mom’s going to want to get rid of this now.”

“Why?”

“Way back when Frisk had the flu, it tried to kill us. Well, kill Frisk. I don’t think it realized I was here.”

“...is that normal for wardrobes on the Surface?”

“No, they’re very docile. Humanity has been domesticating wardrobes for thousands of years.”

“You’re doing that thing with your voice where I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

Frisk frowned. “This is my normal speaking voice.”

“Exactly.”

“...dork.”

“Nerd.”

The children stared at the furniture some more.

“...if Frisk put a dimensional bridge in there, we could connect it to the slopes of Mt. Ebott. Like Narnia.”

“That’s that book with the lion and the people turned to stone, right?”

“That’s a pretty abridged summary of the plot of the first book, but yeah.”
“I’m not sure I’m qualified to build a dimensional bridge from scratch. At least not yet.”

“...ghost monsters can possess furniture, right?”

“I think so.” Asriel scratched one ear. “I remember dad telling mom one time about a ghost in New Home who possessed a table, but somebody else was using it and it took a while to straighten out.”

“Well, possession is nine tenths of the law.”

A few seconds later, Asriel glared at his sibling.

“You did that on purpose.”

“Indeed.”

“A wardrobe is so big and heavy, it would be hard to get up and down the stairs, though.”

“Right. Actually, if I end up really small, like the lab mice, I could fit my whole room into the wardrobe.”

“Yeah. Actually, what if you end up big? Like a giant squid monster?” Asriel held out his arms to indicate a large space. “Actually never mind the size, how are we going to manage the water?”

“...well, I’m guessing I have to live in the river then. Or move to Lone Point. Which Toriel can’t do because of the school here.”

The spare room was silent for a few moments.

“Let’s talk about something else.”

Dr. Aster tapped the surface of the console with a regular, high speed clicking. Not because his hands were shaking, but because the console was vibrating beneath his hands. So was the entire laboratory area.

Above him, a familiar shape could be seen through the mist produced by vaporizing coolant before it was sucked away into the ventilation system. Lights and Point Source Emitters and electric contacts glowed. Even without the protective shell, the resulting machine resembled the DT Extractor in ways that went beyond mere coincidence.

Outside the area, a small crowd of nonessential personnel were watching, some even pressed up against the safety glass by the people behind them. Inside the lab, a mere handful of people checked connections and instruments and made last second adjustments, including Sans.

The vibrations were briefly joined by an otherworldly sound that would have caused the hair on Dr. Aster’s neck to stand up straight, had he any hair, or skin for that matter. The scientist turned to see the many legged shape known as Endogeny, tails curled underneath it or absorbed into its central mass, which was low to the ground and even its ear protuberance were twisted back against its head.

“I know, I know.”

Dr. Alphys came up beside the amalgamate, one shaking claw reaching up to stroke the side of its head.

“I know you’re scared. I know. I-”
Alphys swallowed and leaned closer to Endogeny’s head.

Whatever she said, Dr. Aster could not hear over the sound of the machinery, but Endogeny stood up, nuzzled their head against Alphys, and slowly walked toward the machine on trembling, shifting legs.

“Sans, double check the Soul Scanner mirror.”

“Mirror is green. Picking up multiple signals.”

“Alex, power supply.”

“Ninety percent on line A. Ninety two percent on line B. No heat spikes yet.”

“That should be enough. Brendan, how’s the containment cylinder?”

“Uh. The Memoryhead doesn’t look happy. I think it wants to murder me. Is that supposed to happen?”

“Yeah. Alright. Everyone who has fingers, now would be the time to cross them.”

Dr. Aster flipped open a safety catch and pressed a button.

Light streamed out of the gap between the terminals, illuminating the shaking figure of Endogeny. The earlier whine became a wail, and then a howl, but the Amalgamate stayed in the beam. Electricity in all the colors of the rainbow arced across the surface of the machinery, leaving sparks that floated in midair before fading away.

And then it stopped.

Dr. Aster stared at Endogeny, which slowly stood up and cocked its head to one side in confusion.

“...what happened? D-did the circuit breakers trip?”

Dr. Aster held up one hand.

“Wait for it-”

Multicolored cracks spread across Endogeny’s surface like lightning bolts, and the Amalgamate exploded. White fluid or gel or ooze splattered onto the windows, the walls, the floor, the safety shields protecting the staff, and the machine itself.

Alphys covered her mouth and shrieked, while Dr. Aster peered through the gaps in the ooze before nodding and pressing another switch. The safety shield lowered and the scientists stared at five bodies lying in the center of the laboratory, covered in sopping wet fur. Some were making whining noises, others were slipping on the ooze covered floor. One rolled over on its back, brought a paw up to its face, and wiped away the residue.

“Free. Finally. It’s over. It’s over.”

Dr. Aster held up his cell phone and peered at each monster through the Soul Scanner application.

“...perfectly stable. Just like I thought. Self organizing field behavior once we gave it a jump start.”

The scientist spun around and looked out at the people on the other side of the window.
“Okay, everybody! Medical team! You are their shadows now. Everything gets recorded and I mean everything! If these fields start to degrade I want to know in under ten seconds so I can bridge to you and bring them back here! Hardware team! Get in here and prep this thing for the next Amalgamate. Check every circuit, every switch, every weld and every machine screw! Undyne, get in here and grab Alphys before her legs give out.”

Dr. Aster turned around to stare at the machine.

“But first somebody need to clean up all this dog residue.”

“Hey, Justin, you want to come in here with a mop and bucket?”

“...is that a joke, or a legitimate addition to my work responsibilities?”

“Uh, it was a j-”

“Because I’ll do it, but I want time and a half.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Undertale Anniversary, everyone! :D
“Good morning Ebott’s Wake! You’re listening to the Morning Rush on KEBT FM! I am, and always shall be, Brett ‘The Brett’ Brinkmann, coming at you with the often imitated, never duplicated DJ Pantz!”

“Wait, people are imitating me?”

“Well, that’s how the saying goes. I don’t know anyone who is. But they say you can’t prove a negative, so I can’t say for sure that they’re not.”

“That was… completely unhelpful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And I hope everyone else is having an… uh… a unique Wednesday, here in the city of Ebott’s Wake, ‘One for the money, two for the show.’ That particular tourism slogan dating back of course to the sudden and inexplicable Broadway Appreciation Craze that swept Lost Eagle County in early 2003.”

“So, like, everyone was really into musicals all of a sudden?”

“Strangely enough, no. Everyone was really into the idea of Broadway as a general idea. In the abstract.”

“…uh huh.”

“Exactly. And now for the news! Our big story this morning, All Fine Labs has announced that they have developed a cure for Amalgamation Syndrome. According to a statement compiled by Doctor Wing Ding Aster, former Royal Scientist and current Director of Applied Research at All Fine Labs, they are calling the treatment process, and I quote, ‘a tentative total success’ unquote.”

“Oh, so that’s what he does at the lab.”

“Yeah, I’ve been wondering that myself for a while now. Ah, in deference to the privacy of the affected monsters no further details are available on the results, but Dr. Aster has included a summary of the theory behind the procedure, which… I don’t trust myself to pronounce all of the words here correctly, or for that matter any of those words correctly, so we’re just going to move on.”

“Still, big round of applause to the folks at All Fine Labs, and a shout out to Dr. Alphys. I know for a fact that the whole reason she started All Fine Labs in the first place was to find a cure, so I bet she’s really stoked after all this.”

“In other news, City Planner Henry Cartwright Hyphen Smith was arrested last night on a number of criminal charges including but not limited to driving under the influence of a controlled substance and… one hundred and twenty seven individual counts of possession of drug paraphernalia.”

“Excuse me what?”

“According to Officer Carmichael at the Ebott’s Wake Police Department, this is the third such incident with Mr. Cartwright Hyphen Smith in the last five years and they are almost absolutely reasonably maybe sure that they can make the charges stick this time.”

“Wait… City Planner… on drugs…”
“Officer Carmichael also reminded us that the disappearance of the previous City Planner, Samuel J.J. Adelbert, remains unsolved and any citizens with any information as to his whereabouts or condition, or who have made any progress in deciphering the series of cryptic statements he had published in the Ebott’s Wake Herald in the weeks leading up to his disappearance, are asked to contact the Ebott’s Wake Police Department.”

“Never mind, I thought I figured something out but then I remembered where I live now.”

“Well, Socrates did say that the only true wisdom is knowing that we know nothing. Or maybe that was Plato. Some Greek guy, I know that much. Ahem. Moving on to county news items, there has been a massive increase in reported cases of heat exhaustion in the past two weeks, and the Lost Eagle County Health Department has once again sent out an advisory on recognizing the signs and symptoms. These include excessive sweating, although I’m not sure how exactly they quantify excessive in this heat… cold, pale and clammy skin… a fast, weak pulse… nausea or vomiting… muscle cramps… exhaustion or weakness… dizziness or headache… and passing out. If you experience any of these symptoms, first and most important you should get out of the heat and into a cooler area. Loosen up clothes so they’re not retaining as much heat, this will also help your circulation somewhat. Get some water to drink to replace the water used up by sweating, but sip it, don’t gulp it. If you drink too much too fast you can induce vomiting, which is one more thing you don’t need to deal with. If you can douse yourself in cool water, you should do so, but, and this is important, don’t use ice cold water. That can throw you into shock and that’s an even bigger problem than heat exhaustion.”

“Every day I learn something new about human bodies that makes me glad I’m a monster.”

“Speaking of health concerns, Big Pig McCracklin’s Barbecue in Lone Point was shut down by the Lost Eagle County Health Department yesterday less than three hours after debuting their newest specialty item… Deep Fried Oil.”

“…what, like the oil in the fryer, or…”

“I don’t know, and I’m trying not to think about it. Moving on, a new store will be having a Grand Opening ceremony today in the Tailings Pond Mall in Quarterhorse Fields. The Orchestraporium is a clearinghouse of musical instruments, accessories, instructional guides and, if I’m reading this press release correctly, musical composition software and audio sample libraries. And, the first one hundred and twenty seven customers will get a free piccolo!”

“You know, I wondered why Clutch wasn’t in yet today.”

“That’s as good an explanation as we are likely to get. Unless he’s just stuck in traffic. Maybe Gary can enlighten us on that subject. Gary, how do things look from your lofty vantage point?”

“Brett, traffic is flowing smoothly across all main and side roads, thoroughfares, and secondary tributaries! With the arrest of Cartwright Hyphen Smith, the Curse of Samuel Adelbert has been lifted! The tortured spacetime of the Ebott’s Wake township has returned to Euclidean clarity! Rejoice, rejoice, for the seed of the World Tree has sprouted! A new era dawns!”

“Uh, I would like to remind listeners that the Curse of Samuel Adelbert is an urban legend and not supported by actual statistical evidence. Besides, if there was any concrete evidence about what happened to Mr. Adelbert, the Ebott’s Wake Police Department would have solved the case years ago.”

“What was that thing about a tree?”
“I know there’s a world tree in Norse mythology but that’s all I got.”

“Also, while we’re on the subject, how would arresting Cartwright Smith break a curse?”

“Cartwright Hyphen Smith.”

“...I thought that’s what I read.”

“No, sorry. His name isn’t hyphenated. His full legal name is Henry Norman Cartwright Hyphen Smith.”

“...ohhhhh.”

“And that brings us almost up to break, so before then we’re going to- oh, hang on… okay then. Jeff has informed me that we have somebody calling in. Hello, caller! You are on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“Guys! Guys! Guys! I think I solved the mystery of the disappearance of Sam Adelbert!”

“Oh… hey Quentin. I was under the impression you were too busy with the magic class to call us anymore.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised too! I thought it was going to be really hard, like trying to study advanced physics, but it turns out it’s really easy!”

“We’re glad to… hear that.”

“And with my spare time I thought I’d go back into my old notes, to see if magic gave me new perspective or insight, and I remembered that paper published by Dr. Stanton about the timeline of the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, so I went back and double checked, and then I went to talk to Martha Metzinger at the Ebott’s Wake Genealogical Society, and she confirmed that Sam Adelbert had a sister named Christina Adelbert who married into the cult and became Christina Harrison!”

“I can’t believe I’m saying this but I’m actually interested in hearing where this goes. So were the cryptic hints and clues dressed up in Guardian Symbolism and Mythology so that nobody outside the cult would understand?”

“Oh, nononono. That was a symptom of carbon monoxide poisoning.”

“Wait what.”

“Yeah, the Adelbert family fortune was wiped out in 1991 during the Savings and Loan Crisis, so their assets had to be liquidated and they only kept the old Adelbert manor house on Fiddler’s Row, which still had all the original heating appliances like steam radiators and coal burning furnaces. After Sam Adelbert disappeared and the estate defaulted to the city of Ebott’s Wake and it was registered as a historic landmark, they had to go through the whole thing to make repairs that Sam Adelbert couldn’t afford, since Christina took all of the remaining liquid assets with her when she married into the Guardians! The workers complained that the building was haunted but only on cold days when the heat was turned on, and after the furnace had been replaced the haunting complaints dropped by eighty five percent.”

“...wow.”

“I know, right?! So yeah, I thought everyone should know that and I had some free time since the magic class is starting an hour late today so All Fine Labs can finish taking care of all the other stuff
they had to let slide while working on the Amalgamate Cure. Oh, and later this week, I found something really interesting about the shape of Kelly Plaza! I still need to double check my math and go by the city records office but- oh, I shouldn’t give it away yet. Bye guys! Talk to you later-”

“Bye Quentin. Looking… looking forward to it.”

“You know, he didn’t actually explain what happened to Samuel Adelbert specifically.”

“Uh, don’t, don’t call back, Quentin! Leave a little, ah, mystery for everyone else to solve. And yeah, we are almost overdue for a break now so we will do that and when we return, you all get to hear Bob the Temmie’s interview with the owners of the Tailings Pond Mall and their official statements regarding the previous altercations and legal conflicts with the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals. Stick around, there will be more Morning Rush after this!”
They can feel the rough, uneven path beneath their feet, even through the soles of their boots. Under any other circumstances that would mean it was time to have them repaired, but… before they can stop it, they remember the face of the cobbler they most frequently paid custom to, and their family, and the other businesses within that same part of the city.

A city that no longer existed.

“There is one more alternative that we have not discussed yet.”

The words are out of their mouth before they realize it, mostly from a desire to redirect their attention away from memories they wish they could forget.

“No. We cannot be sure that the Trickster will take our side.” A head covered by a dark blue hood shakes back and forth. “And even if they did, the cost of their help may be higher than this world can afford to pay.”

“Then we might as well. The way things are going, there are no good outcomes.”

The figure in dark blue robes does not protest further, but nobody else speaks up to support their position.

They do not press the issue further. The rest of the walk to the cavern entrance is silent, save for the crunching of earth beneath seven pairs of feet.

The monsters are wise enough to have a guard, but naive enough to limit themselves to a handful of watchstanders and defenders. Animal forms, all of them; a turtle with a massive warhammer, a wolf or dog with a spear or lance, a bird of prey holding a crossbow, and a spider with some manner of sword in each of their six hands.

Then again, perhaps that is all they have left who are in condition to stand guard.

Behind them, the figure of King Asgore Dreemurr.

The monster king’s presence is so compelling that they barely even recognize the half dozen retainers and assistants surrounding him. He is taller than them, that much is true, but there is more to the effect he has than simple height.

“Greetings, wise ones. Have you come to escort us to the meeting with your liege?”

There is a split second when their emotions are tangled into knots. They want to explain the king’s treachery, to throw in their lot with the monsters, to turn the tables on and the tide against the last forces of the man that set the entire world ablaze because he was afraid of the dark.

But they hesitate, and the feeling passes, and with it the opportunity. Just as it did in the king’s tent. And a thousand other times during the war, and before it started.

They set their staff upright, as much for stability as anything else.

“The king has refused to accept your parlay.”
Asgore is not surprised. They can tell that he is the type who wears his heart on his sleeve, and if he had been surprised it would have shown on his face, if only for a second. That face instead turns somber.

“Then we surrender.”

They shake their head.

“The king has refused to accept that, also.”

That response does surprise Asgore, they can see his eyes widen.

Behind them, another staff strikes the earth, and the air crackles with energy. Green barriers form between the monsters and the magi, and almost as quickly, light blue and orange orbs appear outside the shield, circling closer and closer to each other.

“Fall back! Fall back to the cavern bend! Protect the king!”

The turtle monster, ironically, is the fastest to respond, and his hammer slams on the shield before he finishes speaking. The green light cracks like glass, and the turtle monster is thrown backwards by dark blue light.

The outside of the cavern is chaos, but the monsters form a defense rear guard as they move inside. Some dozen bullets spiral out from monsters further back, including some potent fireballs that shatter the shield completely. They can see the monster queen at the last turn before the cavern goes deeper into the mountain; the monsters were cautious enough to not put their entire leadership in harms way just in case something like this happened.

It won’t make a difference, but it is somehow reassuring. They don’t understand why.

There is no time to sort their feelings. Another shield goes up, across the gap in the rock itself.

There is an interminable span of time where nobody does anything.

“I can’t keep the shield up forever! Get started!”

They find their hands moving, recreating the geometric arrangements and the energy relationships described the documents recovered from the skeleton library. Once a purely theoretical curiosity, being made manifest through the power of their will.

It is too late for hesitation, too late for second thoughts, too late for regrets.

Beside them, one by one, the pattern is repeated.


Each filling in the gaps between the others, building on and reinforcing the gestalt in succession. A massive sphere, permeating air and water and soil and trees and the living rock of the mountain, draining magic out of the world to sustain itself.

Draining life out of the world.

Draining hope-

They falter. The forces within and around them are at war with each other. Like soap, the harder they try to hold on the faster the power gets away from them.
It burns from the inside.

“Aguh.”

They see a green robe fall to the ground in front of them. There is a faint green light rising up from the shattered body, but it fragments and vanishes into nothing.

Their heart also breaks, but there is no time to grieve. Of course the Magus of Kindness would be the first to succumb to the backlash.

There is a groan, and then dark blue joins green on the ground. When yellow falls, there is not even a warning noise.

They will be next. They can feel it.

The anger and the guilt and the shame, made real through their magic, turning on them, tearing apart their body, their soul at war with itself-

But then, it is done.

The cave entrance becomes dark, darker, yet darker still. Darkness unfathomable by any senses, for even light itself cannot cross back through the Barrier.

If the monsters were on the other side, raging and screaming and cursing their name and their family for ten thousand generations, they would not know.

Slowly, they reach into their robes and pull out the first thing their fingers touch, and roll it towards the cave mouth.

The flickering red orb vanishes across the threshold, lost to sight and sound, beyond their reach for eternity. Not that there was any point in searching for apprentices after this-

There is motion out of the corner of their eye, and they are forced to turn in the direction of their fallen friends, the people who were more than family to them for decades.

The purple shapes fade away, and the staff is lowered.

“We were… as successful as we could have been. It will hold, even though we…”

The purple hood turns towards the three fallen figures, and then away again.

Green, Dark Blue, and Yellow.

Kindness, Integrity, and Justice.

“You three. Go. Warn the king’s soldiers. If they go inside the cavern. And win. All this was for nothing. I can tell. That I won’t make the trip.”

The voice from the light blue hood is in obvious pain, both physical and otherwise. The figure in purple limps away from the cave, leaning heavily on their staff. They take a step to follow and their leg almost gives out on them.

They see a flash of orange in the corner of their eye and feel an arm prop them up… and then feel that arm give out. Both of them fall.

They land awkwardly on one knee, pain sparking up through their body like a lightning bolt.
Through the haze of pain they see the figure in purple robes stop and start to turn back and they hold up their arm.

“No. Keep going. If you don’t make it… they’ll go in. And if they defeat—”

“If I leave you now. You will. All die.”

“We will die if you stay too. You know that better than anyone. Go.”

The purple figure hesitates, then turns back and moves down the path.

“I’ll come back. I swear I will.”

They take a few deep breaths, trying to marshal enough energy to stand up, but they feel more exhausted with every passing moment.

“For the first time. In a long time. I remember what it is like to be afraid.”

The sound of their friend’s voice draws their attention away from their own body.

His hood is down, and there are black cracks on his face, leaking viscous fluid like tears made of ink.

The orange glow from his eyes is almost gone, and they realize with a shock that his natural eye color is actually green.

They have known him for decades, but they did not know that.

“All fear death. It is the absolute—”


They do not say anything after that.

His head bows, chin resting on his chest, and the orange light goes out entirely. Seconds later, the light rises from the now vacant body, warm and shining like the sun. It explodes into a brilliant flash, spectacular in death as in life, but then it is gone.

They hear a muffled noise, and though they cannot see the light blue robes from where they have fallen, they know that they are alone at the cavern entrance.

They adjust their grip on their staff, slick with the black tar oozing out of the backlash scars on their palms, and lean against it.

They need to rest. Just a moment. Then they will get up… travel down down the mountain… somebody has to warn the…

They just need a moment…

They just need…

They just…

The bed covers were thrown back after seconds of panicked flailing, trying to find an edge or a fold that would provide a grip. Frisk’s hands were brought up and they stared at their palms, looking for
gashes in the skin and any trace of black fluid.

Nothing.

Their breath started to slow down as they let their hands fall to the bed again.

‘So… what was that about?’

“Nightmare. I guess.”

‘Ah. Makes sense. Same thing here last night. Back in Bastion Circle… where’s Asriel?’

Frisk turned to focus on the other bed in the bedroom, which was empty, its own covers thrown off to one side. Their own covers were pushed back the same way, and the human child half crawled, half slide out of bed, shuffling towards the bedroom door.

The moment they opened it, they could hear Asriel’s voice from downstairs, soft and indistinct but still instantly recognizable.

“Well, that solves that mystery.”

Crossing the hallway to the bathroom, Frisk stared at their reflection in the mirror for a little bit, if only to be absolutely sure that there were no cracks seeping fluid out into the world.

Undyne abruptly stopped tapping her feet on the ground, and in turn, some of the doors of the nearby cabinets stopped rattling.

“Alphys is hurting so much right now, and there’s nothing I can do. I can’t punch what’s bothering her to make it stop.”

“Yes, well, not every problem can be solved with force.”

Undyne turned to glare at Dr. Aster, his sockets half open from what had to be exhaustion, or the magical counterpart to a sugar crash, or possibly both.

“Yeah. I know. That’s the problem.”

“…Alphys always solved the problem in front of her.” Dr. Aster stared at the folders and binders full of notes piled together on the table in front of him. “Break the Barrier. Everything she did was in service of that goal, until the fallen monsters woke up. And when Amalgamation Syndrome set in, that became the focus. Reversing the process. Stabilizing the flux. Quality of life improvements. Pain management. Always the problem in front of her.”

One hand reached out and picked up a familiar set of blueprints, labeled with assorted symbols.

“Whatever experimental or instrumental errors Alphys made. However sloppy her rigor got. However disorganized her notes. She never rationalized or justified the suffering of others. History is full of humans and monsters who brushed aside ethical concerns, thinking that they could make up for the harm they did today with the results they got tomorrow. Reducing thinking, feeling people to data points and laboratory specimens. Alphys never did that.”

The top page was pulled back, and the scientist examined the schematics and cross sections beneath it.
“You want to help Alphys. You can start by reminding her of that. It will mean the most, coming from you. Don’t tell her that everything is okay. Don’t tell her that she fixed everything. She won’t believe you and she’ll feel even worse.”

“But everything is okay. Everything is fixed. The Amalgamates are split up and—”

“Old habits die hard. Alphys has lived with this hanging over her for so long that she does not know how to live without it. That is your job now.”

The workshop was silent except for the rustling of papers, until Undyne stood up and nodded.

“Got it. I can’t go on the offense, but I can be her defense.”

Dr. Aster shrugged.

“That’s as good a metaphor as any. Let me know how it goes… I’m having trouble reading my own… hands writing. Hah. Hah.” Dr. Aster put the blueprints down, took a stumbling step away from the workbench, and held up one index finger.

“Check please.”

In a flash of blue light, the doctor vanished.

Undyne blinked a few times.

“…probably should have stopped him if he was that tired.”

“OH, HELLO DAD! HOW WAS WORK AT ALL FINE LABS?”

The skeleton monster lying face down on the sofa grumbled something as Papyrus walked through the living room.

“GLAD TO HEAR IT! HOW IS ALPHYS DOING? SURELY THIS IS THE HIGHLIGHT OF HER CAREER ON THE SURFACE!”

There was more grumbling.

“OH, THAT IS UNFORTUNATE! AS SOON AS I FINISH SORTING THESE GROCERIES I SHALL HEAD THERE TO ASSIST UNDYNE IN PROVIDING MORAL SUPPORT!”

The only sound from the sofa was a muffled snoring.

Asriel’s paws were folded together, one on top of the other, but even in that position it was impossible to stop them from shaking.

“So. Uh. I feel better about that now. After talking with Doctor Alphys. I’m still not. One hundred percent. That I was always Asriel. But I am, around ninety ninety- I mean, ninety nine percent sure that I am now. And I want to be. But you know… if, maybe…. Well. It’s a possibility. That there will be. An Asriel. Waiting for you and dad, in whatever the afterlife is…”

Asriel trailed off, staring at his paws so that he wouldn’t have to look Toriel in the eye or face.
“Then I shall have two Asriels. That is simple enough.” One large paw reached across the table to pat Asriel’s paws. “Thank you for speaking to me about this.”

Asriel nodded and leaned forward as the tension that kept him sitting up straight vanished.

“Asriel, I know that, in All Fine Labs, I said some things in the heat of the moment that should not have been said. I could not believe what I saw, and that was why I said it was an illusion. But I know Asriel. I know my baby. And I know that he, and you, are one and the same.”

One of Asriel’s paws came out from underneath Toriel’s and rubbed against his eyes, only to freeze at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. A few seconds later, Frisk appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, skidding to a stop as they saw everyone already in the room.

“...are we interrupting something?”


Toriel stood up and smiled as she walked over to a countertop with a cutting board and several fruits atop it.

“What with the scientific excitement of yesterday, the magic class has been delayed by an hour. Not only has this given me ample time to prepare a more substantial breakfast than normal, it has proven to be an ideal time to discuss matters that have previously fallen by the wayside. That includes the two of you, if there is anything that weighs heavily upon you.”

“Oh.” Frisk walked over and pulled out a chair next to Asriel. “Well. Same old same old with me. Not being able to figure out pattern magic is driving me crazy, but the magic class isn’t done yet.”

“Nightmares about being back in the Guardian cult notwithstanding, I am downright peachy keen.”

Toriel abruptly stopped slicing fruit and turned to face the human child.

“I instantly regret mentioning that.”

“Do you wish to-”

“I am fine. It was a textbook nightmare where I thought that I had constructed everything that happened in the Underground and afterwards as an elaborate defense mechanism and escape through fantasy. Completely normal.”

“...you never really talked about what it was like in there. I mean,” Asriel added, “you told me a few things, but I learned more about that place in the last week than I ever did before.”

“There was never that much to tell. It was a group of people who were so convinced that what they were doing was right that it was impossible for them to realize when they were doing something wrong. In that respect, they were far from unique.”

A plate of sliced fruit was placed in the center of the table. Asriel continued to stare at his sibling, who reached for an orange slice.

“Actually, I take that back. I have been doing a little research after Frisk falls asleep, and most cults are built around some sort of central focus. A single leader whose charisma, in whatever form it manifests, holds the group together. The Guardians did not have that… quite the opposite actually. The cult was led by the Council, but nobody was supposed to know who was on the Council except for whatever Councilor nominated them to join. It was allegedly to prevent anyone from currying
favor and cultivating personal power at the expense of the cult’s long term goals. I think it was to make everyone paranoid.”

Chara paused to bite into a slice of fruit.

“Of course, at this point it hardly matters. Nobody in the world cares about what the Guardians did or believed in anymore.”

Ah yeah, back in business.

Thomas looked up from the papers on the table and turned to see a hole in the world, a shadow with nothing casting it, materialized in the center of the room.

“Huh?”

Finally got the Interface to work right again, and just in time too.

“...I will add that to the list of things that you say that I don’t understand.” Thomas pointed to a small pile of papers in one corner of the room, next to the cooler filled with monster food, to emphasize his point.

That’s a fair point. I will try to give you some context as soon as I can. In the meantime, have you made any progress in deciphering the Guardian documentation?

“Yes, for given definitions of progress.” Thomas turned back to the table and tapped a stack of printer paper that was covered in the pixelated digital reproductions of some sort of handwritten script. “I’ve had to cheat to get around the language barrier. If Jordan had magic before all this happened he probably would have made more headway.”

Headway towards what?

“Ah. Right. At the safehouse, he had me find some notebooks and pencils so he could copy everything he could remember about the guardians so it could be preserved. That was apparently his job, he was in charge of their archive, or at least he was responsible for some of it. Some of the records went way back. I mean, way, way back. He said he spent years studying language and anthropology and archaeology trying to figure out how to translate it, but no dice. It apparently antedated every language common to this area before colonization from the European powers.”

That’s fairly impressive.

“It is, if I do say so myself. Which I do. But it’s still slow going. Having to use this pattern matching all the time gives me eyestrain.”

Thomas blinked and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Or maybe that’s just me without my glasses. Either way, I haven’t gotten much further than an alphabet, or the equivalent of one. It’s not exactly an ideograph based language and it’s not exactly a character-to-syllable building blocks arrangement either. There’s context to the information I’m getting that doesn’t appear to be stored in the symbols and markings themselves, and I haven’t determined if it’s coming from the surrounding symbols or if I’m doing that thing where psychics say they can pick up information from objects they touch.”

Psychometry. I have yet to do a rigorous side by side comparison, but it would make sense if most of
the traditional forms of extrasensory perception could be categorized as Pat-t-t-t-t-eRRRRRRRN

The shadowy figure flickered, fragmented, broke apart into pieces, and recombined into one, all within a single second.

Thomas stepped back suddenly, bumping against the table and causing a pair of pencils to fall to the floor one after the other.

“What in the shit??”

You can’t fucking be serious, I just fixed- Wait, is today Wednes


Chapter End Notes

FINALLY.

Context: I live and work on a farm and the sheer scale of what we have had to do this year to prepare for planting has kicked my ass into geostationary orbit, thus the almost month long gap between chapters. Ideally that will not happen again until spring or summer, but who the heck knows what tomorrow will bring.
In the light, there was darkness.

The darkness kept growing.

The darkness stopped growing.

The darkness… saw.

Outside a lattice of metal, glass, beams of light and glowing symbols stood a mass of people. Some wore body armor, and held weapons of various sizes in their hands. Others wore white coats and held instruments or clipboards. Two figures alone broke the pattern, one in a tan business suit and the other in hooded robes of red fabric.

“Well, Mr. Stewart?”

The man in the suit stared at the darkness rippling within the cage of light.

“It certainly looks impressive, but what is it for?”

“Ages ago, my ancestors fought against the monsters that were sealed beneath Mt. Ebott, and they left behind many warnings. About the mountain and the monsters, yes, but also about something else. About this.”

The robed figure reached up and pulled back the hood concealing their face.

“Imagine the world as you know it suddenly changing, with no possible explanation for why or how. People who should be dead manage to survive catastrophe, against the worst possible odds. Others, who were once safe and secure, find everything they do falls apart, undone by the most contrived of coincidences. The worst possible streak of bad luck… except it has nothing to do with luck.”

The robed figure walked up to the glowing structure, glaring at the shadows within.

“Of course, I don’t have to imagine it.”

“Ma’am, I advise you to step back from the containment system.”

The robed figure turned to face the uniformed man that had spoken.

“I appreciate your concern, but I am perfectly safe. The Demon is not a part of our reality, and normally would not be able to interact with our world at all. The conditions that allow that to happen, the Interface or overlap between worlds, follow very specific rules. And the first rule is that the Demon comes when its name is called. Specifically, it was invoked by the containment system itself the moment it was turned on. The only part of this universe it can interact with at all is the containment hardware.”

“Ma’am, you may be right about all that, but I didn’t make it this far in this job by taking chances.”

Slowly, the robed figure nodded and stepped backwards.

“An important point, Captain. Thank you for reminding me not to take anything for granted.”
“They said that the Demon came when people called its name, and that it gave people powers beyond mere mortals. As in, it made people strong enough to kill another human with one blow, empty handed. Or survive a blow that should have been fatal. Or go weeks without sleeping.”

Chara’s glowing eyes stared up at the ceiling while legs kicked back and forth, hanging over the arm of the sofa. On the other side, Asriel’s body mirrored his sibling, leaving their heads near each other.

“Wait, how did they know that they could kill other humans if they were fighting monsters?”

“And that, as they say, is the problem with making a deal with the devil, because the devil charges outrageous interest rates. The Demon drove everyone who invoked it mad and made them turn on each other. At least, that’s what the Guardian Lore said. Based on what I learned about the Trickster, I suspect that the people who invoked it just went mad with power all by themselves. Trickster gods and spirits are notorious in human mythology systems for granting mortals power and letting them dig their own graves with that power if they don’t use it wisely.”

“That’s been bothering me for a while now actually. Why would a spirit or demon or genie or whatever go out of their way to give people power in the first place, never mind the stories where they add an unexpected twist? I mean,” Asriel waved his paws around to illustrate his point, despite the difficulty that Chara would have seeing them from their position, “there’s that story about the woodsman who drops his ax into a pond and some lady offers him a gold or silver ax instead, but why did she even have gold and silver axes to offer?”

“I’m with Asriel on this. A golden ax would be really soft and bend the first time it was used, assuming it could be lifted at all because gold is so heavy. And a silver ax would tarnish really quickly, and even if it’s not as soft as gold it still won’t hold an edge like iron or steel.”

“For starters, a lot of these stories get changed in the retelling. The modern conception of the wish granting genie is very different compared to the original tales and stories about djinn. And of course a lot of these stories either started out as, or were converted into, morality lessons to teach virtues such as honesty, responsibility, diligence, compassion, and so on. Regarding the gold and silver axes themselves, they were magical. In the fairy tell sense, not the way we’re learning that magic works now. As for why these trickster figures do anything at all, well, that is an open-ended question. They may operate on a philosophical or ethical system that is so alien to monster or human sensibilities that nothing they do could possibly make sense, so all that matters on our end is making a deal without getting trapped in the fine print.”

Chara turned their head at the sound of footsteps, and rolled off of the sofa and stood up as Toriel entered the room.

“Alternatively,” Frisk suggested, “maybe they don’t have anything better to do than meddle in the affairs of mortals.”

Asriel slowly sat up and slid off of the sofa.

“So they toy with our world because they’re bored, and they think it’s fun. Yeah, that always ends well.”

“I trust you see now what I have been working towards, with your backing.” The robed figure gestured to the cage of light, but they had turned back to face the man in the suit. “Everything that has happened in Ebott’s Wake for the last several years has happened because of the influence of THAT. The monsters being released, of course, but even before that; the children that fell into the
Underground to provide the Souls that the monsters needed to escape; the conflict between the Guardians and the rest of the town; Chara Cater’s disappearance. All of it, all of that suffering and death, what was it for?"

The robed figure turned to face the dark figure behind the bars of light.

“To satisfy this… thing’s curiosity. To alleviate its boredom. It took the lives of an entire town of people and it… it treated them… it treated us… like dolls, or toys, rearranging our lives and breaking us. Because it was having fun. Isn’t that right? Isn’t that what this is to you? Just a game?”

The only noise in the chamber was the buzzing of the electrical equipment keeping the cage powered.

Oh, am I supposed to talk now? I thought you were pausing for dramatic effect there.

The robed figure scowled as several of the other figures in the room reached up and rubbed their ears, snapped their fingers, or otherwise tried to test their hearing.

“As I said. It considers all of this a game. A joke.”

Actually it stopped being a game to me a long time ago. But enough about me, let’s talk about you. You summoned me to help you with something, everyone does. And I think I already know what it is. But I’ve been wrong before, so I want to hear it from you.

“You have nothing to offer me. I know what happens to people who accept your so-called help.”

The robed figure held up both hands and made air-quotes as they said the word help. “I saw what happened to Jordan Cater, his crushing defeat while carrying your talisman of victory. The whole world saw that, even if they didn’t know what it meant. You won’t ensnare me with false promises. Not after I had all of this built in order to stop you from menacing this world ever again.”

Wait, what?

“Surprised that there’s somebody in this world you can’t buy off? I know about your conversation with our mutual friend.” The robed figure turned to glare at Mr. Stewart, before returning their gaze to the shadowy figure within the cage. “Or maybe you are surprised that somebody figured out how to stop you at all?”

So you DIDN’T summon me here to find a way to bring your children back to life?

The robed figure stepped up to the cage of light, less than an inch from the energy coursing out of the containment system.

“Do not. DARE. To mention my family. Again. Or you will learn. How far I will go. To stop you.”

Sorry, didn’t mean to poke a nerve there, but I was certain that was why you went to so much effort to contact me. In fact, everything you bought with Mr. Stewart’s money is exactly what I needed to make that happen, so of course I assumed… well, you know what they say about making assumptions. Still, the fact that all this stuff is here means it’s not too late to change your mind.

“I warned you.” The robed figure held up a hand, and one of the lab-coated figures standing behind a console reached toward the keyboard.

Only to flinch and draw back their hand as the console flickered and sparked, along with every single electrically conductive object or material in the chamber, as the shadowy figure wrapped what might have generously been described as hands around the beams of light produced by the cage.
Panic spread throughout the group like dominoes falling as those with weapons aimed them at the cage and those without weapons ran for the exits, all of them yelling.

You have until the lights go out to decide. You can see them again. I can make it happen. No tricks, no lies, no selling your soul, no monkey’s paw style retribution for changing destiny or fate.

“What the hell is going on?!” Mr. Stewart yelled to be heard above the commotion.

The robed figure stared at the shadow gripping the bars of light, not wavering or showing any signs of moving away.

“It’s trying to drain the energy in the cage, and then it can escape.”

For somebody who’s so proud of what she knows, your ignorance is surprising. Not to mention convenient. But the lights are still on and the offer still stands. It’s not too late to change your mind, or your allegiance.

Several fluorescent light bulbs exploded, showering the room in glass.

You have magic, you have rare knowledge, you have a wealthy backer, and you have the heart of a mother who has lost her children. If vengeance was all you wanted, you could have already had it, but you wanted more. You wanted something else. You called me, I’m here, let’s make a deal. You can hold Sam again. You can yell at Andrew for going to Mt. Ebott even when you said it was too

The room was plunged into darkness, which only increased the chaotic sound of people falling over equipment and each other, the crunch of broken glass, the sizzle and smell of overheated electrical wiring.

Like an island in a storming sea of chaos and disorder, the robed figure stared at the faintly glowing wreckage of the containment system.

“This would probably go faster if we knew what to look for.”

Officer Steve shrugged, raising a cup of coffee to his mouth as he looked over the shoulder of the man poking at the computer. The monitor screen fast forwarded through hours of customer activity and traffic along the street outside, depending on what sections of the screen were displaying feed from what cameras.

“The fact that we don’t know exactly what we’re looking for is why I had to come here in the first place.”

“Alright, but can you not drink that this close to the electronics? If this thing goes down there’s no way I’m not fired, whether or not I’m the one who spills something.”

“Sorry.” Steve took a few steps back, put the styrofoam cup on top of a filing cabinet, and then walked back up to the computer monitor.

“. . .I probably should have thought to ask this sooner, but if somebody was coming out of the police station, wouldn’t the station actually have cameras showing them?”

“They should have. But they didn’t. I actually can’t say anymore because it relates to an open case.”

“Okay. Well, let me know when you-”
“Whoa, stop stop stop. Go back about five minutes.”

The keyboard was tapped multiple times, jumping back the timeline on the videos repeatedly.

“Okay, let it run normal speed.”

The slightly choppy, more-than-slightly grainy black-and-white videos began to move forward once more, and Officer Steve leaned forward as a figure walked down the street, shadowed by two others.

“...I can’t believe it. Can you print out screen captures of those three?”

“We can’t even plug a printer into an outlet in this building without causing everything electronic to crash. Something about driver incompatibility, or the ovens drawing too much power off of the same circuits. I forget the details. I can copy the source video to a flashdrive if you have one, but it’s gotta be pretty big and already empty.”

“I might have enough time before the magic class. I’m going to run over to Wal-Mart and I’ll be right back for that file.” Officer Steve pulled out his phone and walked out of the small office and into the short hallway beyond.

“Dammit Eli, pick up… come on… dammit would it-”

There was a clicking sound on the other end of the line.

“Elijah McGraw, Dank Memehaus, how can I direct your call?”

“Eli, this is Steve.”

“Yeah, I know, I saw your call ID, I was making a j-”

“Listen. I need you to organize an emergency meeting with everybody tonight, including Joe if we can swing it.”

“...my dude, he literally just had experimental magic cyborg surgery. They’re gonna want to keep him overnight, at least.”

“Fine, dammit, we’ll hold the meeting at the hospital!”

“...Steve, what’s going on?”

“I think Cynthia is still alive.”
“Need another round?”

The hooded figure looked up from the bar, paused for a moment, and shook its head.

“My thirst has been slaked for the time being. Thank you for the offer.”

Darcy nodded and moved down the bar to another patron, and the Riverperson turned to face, if that term was accurate, one of the televisions mounted behind the bar.

“The main point of contention is that we have been seeing increased growth levels since 2009, but the recession in 2007 was itself preceded by growth, and—”

The picture cut away from headshot of a man in a suit to another man in a suit, reading from several sheets of paper still being handed to him from some figure off-camera.

“I’m sorry Ron have to cut you off there, we just have some breaking news coming out of, yes, out of Maryland, Virginia and Delaware, a massive electrical blackout is ongoing. The exact cause is not clear, there were no extreme weather advisories within any of the affected areas at the time, but the wide area indicates a fault in the power grid. There has been no official statement from law enforcement indicating vandalism or sabotage, and no official statement from—”

Atop the bar stool next to the Riverperson, a shadow flickered into being despite nothing casting it.

That could have gone better.

The Riverperson sighed and leaned over the bar.

“This comes as no surprise. Presumably the electrical disturbances are also your handiwork.”

Uh. It’s complicated.

“It always is.”

The shadowy figure extended what could have been a hand, and from the hand came several colored lights, emerging from the darkness and then retreating back just as quickly.

The good news is that I was able to get a lot of juice out of the grid before all the substations melted and exploded. Everything is completely recharged except for Cyan. Which is funny on multiple levels. The bad news is that I was not able to close the deal. Not sure how much of that is Usurper influence and how much is just being stubborn and vindictive. Either way, she’ll be busy for about a week trying to dodge the fallout from the blackout. We have breathing room again.

The darkness faded away.

The Riverperson sighed again and held up their hand to attract Darcy’s attention.

“Tra la la. It would seem that I spoke too soon.”

Undyne’s eye opened and darted around taking in the details of the office, trying to determine what woke her up. Seconds later, there was a knock on the office door, and Undyne slowly sat up, trying
to move away from Alphys with a minimum of jostling.

When the office door was unlocked and opened, Undyne found herself staring down at Asgore’s face in miniature and without a beard or horns.

“Oh. Hey Asriel.”

Asriel’s mouth opened, closed, and then opened again.

“I have several questions but I’ll start with asking where Dr. Alphys is.”

Undyne hooked a thumb at the corner of the office where Alphys was still curled up on the futon.

“Last night was a long one. We decided to crash here overnight.”

“Right, the Amalgamate Cure. How’s that going?”

Undyne shrugged.

“You’re the first person to knock on the office door since I managed to convince Alphys to lie down and keep her eyes shut for longer than five minutes at a stretch. I hope that means it’s going well.”

“Oh. That’s good.” Asriel reached up and scratched one ear. “Honestly the only reason I’m here is because normally when mom is doing the magic class for the humans, I’m hanging out with Dr. Aster and he isn’t here right now.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s right. Hope he got home okay. By the time I thought to stop him from Bridging while he was exhausted, he was already gone-”

“What’s going on?”

Undyne turned to see Alphys flailing as she climbed off of the futon, grabbed her glasses from her desk, and shuffled over to the door.

“Everything’s okay, don’t worry. Toriel’s doing her human magic class thing so Asriel stopped by to chat.”

Alphys stared at Asriel for several seconds, long enough for Asriel to raise a paw to wave at the scientist awkwardly.

“...oh. I thought something had… ugh. My head hurts.”

“Uh, ‘scuse me?”

Asriel flinched and turned around to see an ice monster with pronounced bird-like features standing behind him; a beak, feathered wings, and a crest on the head that very much resembled the hexagonal crystal structure of a snowflake.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare anybody. I was told this is where Dr. Alphys has her office?”

Undyne found herself being pushed aside with a strength that she sometimes forgot that her girlfriend could produce.

“Mrs. Drake?! Oh-oh my god, are you, is something, what is-”

“Ack!” Asriel found himself almost slammed into the side of the hallway as Alphys ran past him, and
the ice monster held up her wings in warning.

“Whoa, whoa, settle down, everything’s just fine. Well, mostly,” Mrs. Drake amended, looking at the edges of her wingtips where the texture and color of icy feathers shifted into the green veined texture of leaves. “It’s always something, right? Alex, I mean Mr. Carson, he says he thinks that it’s like human scar tissue, where their body doubles down on rebuilding after something breaks, whether it’s a good idea or not. He showed me this weird, puckered thing on his leg, said he got it during something called a ‘track meet’ when somebody threw a javelin at him? But I’m getting off track. Uh. I was just hoping to get a few words with the doctor. If that’s alright.”

The four figures stood in silence for a moment, before Undyne’s jaw dropped and she jumped over the other figures.

“Oh hey I just remembered! I have to… uh… do a survey!”

“A survey, that’s right!” Asriel pointed and ran over to where Undyne had landed. “And I’m helping Undyne do the survey!”

“Yeah!! We’ll be back later! When the survey is done!” Undyne picked up Asriel like a football and ran down the hallway, vanishing around a corner.

After a few seconds of attempted comprehension, Mrs. Drake turned to the scientist.

“So when are you two finally going to tie the knot?”

Despite herself, Alphys felt her yellow scales turn scarlet within seconds.

“Didn’t mean to put you on the spot there, but you should be thinking about it. If you know she’s the one, and it’s clear from the way she acts that she thinks you’re the one, then there you go. But I’m getting off track again. I, uh.”

Mrs. Drake shrugged, or at least did the approximate equivalent for wings.

“I wanted to talk to you for a bit, but now that I’m actually here I’m not sure how to get the words to come out the way I want them to. It’s just.”

The ice monster lapsed into silence again.

“...I got to see my son again. And I got to see the sun. And I got to see my son see the sun for the first time. Not to mention the moon and stars. And if things had been different. Some of that might not have happened. Maybe not any of it.”

Mrs. Drake looked at her leafy feathers again before looking up at Alphys again.

“I mean. What I’m trying to say. If I’m saying anything. Is you gotta take the rough with the smooth. That’s just how life is sometimes. Y’know?”

“Uh huh.” Alphys managed to nod. “I know.”

“Right. So. I thought I’d just let you know. Since.” Mrs. Drake shrugged. “Well. You always tried to do right by us. And after last night. It seemed like you could use a reminder. Chalk it up to my mom instincts.”

“Right.” Alphys managed to speak. “Thanks for. For stopping by. Mrs. Drake.”

“...Crysta.”
“Hmm?”

“You can call me Crysta. I think after all the tests you’ve done, we are definitely on a first name basis.”

“Right. Thank you, Crysta. Let me… let me know if you need anything.”

“Well, I could really use a pair of noise canceling headphones, but I think I can manage that part by myself.” Crysta spread her wings and stretched. “As soon as we all get the go ahead to go back home, I am going to curl up in a nice dark room with the shades drawn and think my thoughts.”

Frisk stared at the pencil, spinning slowly above their notebook, blue glow occasionally flickering but otherwise steady and stable.

At the front of the classroom, Toriel was still writing notes on the marker board.

“Some difficulty in blue magic can be attributed to conceptual distinctions, or rather, getting too wrapped up in them to focus on the magic itself. One distinction is between yourself and the object you wish to move; in some cases it helps to consider the object as an extension of the self, and therefore the ability to move it is entirely natural. In other cases, the magic is conceptualized as the means by which a distinct outside object is manipulated. In both cases, there is a real risk of putting too much emphasis on finding the right terminology, rather than the methodology. Or, to put it another way, being able to describe why you can’t move the object with a high degree of linguistic precision is not the same as learning how to actually manipulate it. This is not unique to blue magic but it does come up more often with blue magic than other colors.”

Another pencil clutched in Frisk’s left hand transcribed Toriel’s words, or at least the general concepts behind them. Gradually the glowing, levitating pencil stopped spinning, and its point ended up directed behind them. Frisk turned once more to see the not so secret agents, both of them absorbed in taking down notes.

Frisk waved politely as one of the agents looked up at them, then turned back to see Toriel’s notes on the board.

“The square-cube law as human physics understands energy propagation can be applied at the point of origin of the magic itself. However, because blue magic bullets are cross sections of energy traveling faster than light into a detection window where only slower than light speeds register to the senses or instruments, the amount of energy involved in the entire process is easy to misjudge. What this means for all of you is that the necessary effort to move something small can be underestimated, while at the same time the effort needed for something much larger and heavier can be overestimated.”

Frisk turned around in the other direction to see Hal Greene, also studiously taking notes. Floating above him, surrounded by blue light, was a pair of swimming goggles with an attached snorkel that he had been wearing when he walked into the lab building earlier.

‘I think I understand why Asriel is so fascinated with Hal Greene now. The man is an unrepentant mind-boggler, while Asriel regrets what he did as a flower. He is looking for a combination of circumstances where his guilt is lessened and thinks, or perhaps feels, that Mr. Greene can provide a path to that place.’

Frisk shrugged and returned to their own note-taking.
Slowly, an instrument was waved over the mass of molten metal, glass, and plastic. The occasional background clicks from the speaker completely disappeared as the device passed close to it, resuming their intermittent white noise as it was pulled away.

“Well?”

The man in the lab coat holding the geiger counter turned and shrugged.

“Whatever it is that’s the opposite of radioactive, that’s what this stuff is now.”

“…I see.” The cloaked figure looked up at the spinning emergency lights, periodically strobing the chamber in red light. “I wish I understood as well.”

“Uh… aren’t you supposed to be an expert on whatever that thing was?”

“I am. I know more about the Demon than any human being alive. But my knowledge was passed down from generation to generation, from a time that did not have electronics, the atomic theory, or any conception of radiation.”

“Oh.”

The cloaked figure stared at the ruined containment system for a few seconds, before snapping their fingers.

“It wasn’t trying to drain the cage. It deliberately activated it. Without a physical host, but summoned by the ritual, it was here but not here. So when it touched the bars, the electricity that was supposed to shock it was both there, and not there. It just had to wait until the amount of potential power flowing through the system was great enough, then it could let go, and there would be too much electricity for the physical conductors to contain. That caused it to melt instantly and unleashed the electromagnetic pulse that blacked out the facility.”

“It wasn’t just the facility.” A man in a uniform carrying a rifle walked up. “Comms are back up. Power is out as far away as Baltimore.”

The man in the lab coat let out a slow, low whistle.

“That’s one hell of a pulse. God, if that hit DC we’re all in the shit.”

“Not necessarily.” One hand let go of the rifle to gesture in the air, opening and closing the fingers to demonstrate an explosion or wave. “The pulse just had to hit a substation or two, and that would mean that the rest of the grid was drawing too much at once. Sections would go down bit by bit until the supply and demand stabilized. The same thing happened in *The Stand*, actually. They got the generators in the Boulder Dam running again, but everything in town was still on. They had to go around turning things off before they could even think of trying again.”

“Never read *The Stand* so I’ll take your word for it.”

“Really?” I mean, I know it’s a bit of a doorstop but really?”

“More of a Dean Koontz guy than a Stephen King guy.”

“Oh, you are a disgrace. I don’t think we can be friends after this-”

The cloaked figure snapped their fingers again, but this time the snap was accompanied by a flash of
red light.

“Can you two… not?”

“Sorry ma’am,” came the reply in stereo.

“…where is Mr. Stewart right now?”

“Oh, he left as soon as we got the auxiliary power up so the door actuators worked. Ranting about damage control. Guessing he meant the political kind.”

“Of course he did.”

“Let me put it this way. Tolkien codified a lot of what people look for in a fantasy setting, right?” Officer Carmichael held up his hands and ticked off points on his fingers. “Pre-industrial technology, different races that have different cultures, and magic is, if not common, then at least its existence is common knowledge, among other things.”

“With you so far.”

“Alright then. Compare Tolkien’s work to all the stuff Gary Gygax did to flesh out the Dungeons and Dragons settings. There’s an obvious connection and similarity, but everything is different. Not just the places and people and history, but the tone. That is the difference I’m talking about.”

Van Garrett reached up to scratch his beard, nodding slowly. “Oh. Okay. I think I get it now.”

“I figured a metaphor involving literature would work.”

“Right. So if ‘Judeo-Christian’ is a misnomer, what kind of terminology would work for that particular body of religious knowledge?”

“Off the top of my head, probably ‘Abrahamic’. That covers more ground in general. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Latter Day Saints, the whole nine yards.”

“Got it. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for actually listening instead of shrugging it off.”

“I can’t shrug things off. My shoulders are too big, it would damage the building.”

“Having seen the arm wrestling match between you and Undyne, that doesn’t sound like a joke. You guys gonna have a rematch?”

“Yeah, once the feeling comes back all the way in that hand. So probably some time in 2018.”

There was a buzzing noise and Van Garrett pulled out his phone.

“…huh. Well that’s weird.”

“What’s happening?”

“…something about Hal and scuba diving lessons.”

Officer Carmichael held up his hands and backed away from the library desk.
“Not it. You’re on your own for this one.”

“Yeah, yeah. Story of my life.”

“I GOT IT!” Dr. Aster jolted upright, scattering throw pillows and several blankets that had been placed on top of him. “MISS SCARLET IN THE CONSERVATORY WITH THE LEAD PIPE!”

Eye sockets were squeezed shut, then opened again, and Dr. Aster turned to see Papyrus sitting at a table in the middle of the living room, along with Mettaton, a ghost monster that had to be Napstablook, and an old tailoring dummy that was clearly possessed.

“...ugh. Just when I thought I had things figured out.” Dr. Aster clambered off of the sofa and began to shuffle up the stairs. “Morning Papyrus.”

“GOOD MORNING, DAD! HAVE A PLEASANT SECOND NAP!”

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