Summary

Sans watches Papyrus die at the human's hands. He really hopes it's only the first time he's done so, but he knows better than to take anything for granted anymore.

He's still not particularly looking forward to seeing how the timelines might get worse from here. The human, as it turns out, manages to surprise him anyway.

And Papyrus would really just like to be friends with everyone, and doesn't understand why that might not be an option.

Notes

So a fair bit of headcanon and speculation went into this, mostly what it might have taken to convince Sans to leave Papyrus alone in Snowdin, knowing as he does on a Genocide path that you're going to fight him. Also what reasons Sans might have had for holding back his power as long as he does on that path. Hopefully, I got it all to make sense.

Sans' head is a scary, lonely place, when you get right down to it.
The first time Sans saw Papyrus die was also the last.

He had tried to warn the human away from his brother, for all the good it would do. He had tried to warn his brother away from the human, for all the good it would do. In Sans’ experience – his much-too-long experience – people were going to do whatever the hell they wanted, no matter what the hell anyone said. Trying to change their minds was too much effort for too little result.

If Papyrus was determined to die…if the human was determined to kill him…

…was it even human, anymore? As Sans sat on the roof of their house and watched the last trickle of refugees fleeing Snowdin, as though they were trying to outrun an avalanche or the tides, he couldn’t help but wonder. He couldn’t help but doubt.

Up here on the roof, he also couldn't help but hear Papyrus moving around inside the house, getting ready for...something. Nor could he miss the sound of the door opening and Papyrus stepping out into the tense, still air. Sans let himself down by the trellis to go and catch up.

“people are clearing out,” he said, taking up his usual spot safe at Papyrus' side. “the place'll be empty pretty soon.”

“All because of the human?”

You still think it's human? Sans wanted to ask. He didn't, because he didn't think they had that kind of time. Instead, with a casual shrug, he only asked: “what else could it be?”

“I'VE HEARD HOTLAND IS LOVELY THIS TIME OF YEAR. OR AT LEAST, IT'S HOT. MAYBE EVERYONE DECIDED TO FLY INTO A VOLCANO FOR THE WINTER.”

“even though it's always winter here?”

Sans relented – Papyrus was worried, even if he was trying not to show it. Sans was worried, and trying not to show it. Either way, even he could admit that there was a time and a place for teasing.

“what's do you want to do?” he asked, looking up at his brother.

“I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I DON'T WANT TO DO. I DON'T WANT TO FIGHT!”

Did he dare hope? “really? hey, good plan. they were lame, anyway. no point in wasting your time and puzzles on them, right?”

“THEY WERE LAME! AND WEIRD! AND DOWNRIGHT FREAKY! I NEVER KNEW HUMANS COULD BE LIKE THAT!”

“well, it's not like you've ever seen any. even undyne's only ever seen a few, right?”

“STILL! I HAVE DECIDED TO BE THE BIGGER SKELETON!”

“...uh, you're already the bigger skeleton.” But Papyrus carried on without heeding him, and Sans felt sweat start to prickle on his skull with dread.

“REALLY, THEY MUST JUST HAVE BEEN INTIMIDATED BY MY DASHING APPEARANCE AND PUZZLE MASTERY! THEY PROBABLY DON'T HAVE SKELETONS AS MAGNIFICENT AS I ON THE SURFACE! THAT'S WHY THEY WERE
AFRAID TO EMBARRASS THEMSELVES BY MATCHING WITS WITH ME! SO I WILL GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO MEND THEIR FREAKY WAYS! I'M SURE THEY CAN BE A BETTER FRIEND, UNDER MY EXPERT GUIDANCE!"

Papyrus was going to die.

My brother is going to die.

Sans felt his thoughts racing for a way to make this not be happening, but then he felt those thoughts trip over themselves with nothing to show for it.

“hey, that's a really neat idea,” he said after a moment. One of the upsides of being a skeleton was that their voices didn't change tone easily, which meant that it was harder to betray one's emotion by tone of voice alone. “but, uh...why don't i talk to them first? you know, maybe give them some less-than-expert guidance in how to be a friend, and then they'll work up to you?”

It was harder for a tone of voice to betray emotion, but not impossible. Papyrus was his brother, after all, and not as much of a fool as most people mistook him for.

“SANS...” said Papyrus, leaning down a little to better look him in the eye. Sans couldn't help but fidget a little, but forced himself not to break their locked gazes. “...I DON'T THINK YOU WANT TO TALK.”

“sure i do. what else would i do?”

Then Papyrus said perhaps the worst thing he could have said, in that moment.

He said the one thing he could that would make Sans listen.

“YOU KNOW I DON'T...” The taller skeleton's gaze darted left, then right, and he looked genuinely uncomfortable for a moment, which told Sans exactly where his brother was going with this before he mustered up the words to continue on: “...LIKE IT VERY MUCH WHEN YOU ACT 'THAT WAY', RIGHT?”

What he meant, of course, was when Sans got serious. Or at least, when Sans got serious the only way he knew how to, anymore. Teaching him how to be serious by Papyrus' definition of the word had been an ongoing exchange between them for years, now. It was one that Sans was happy to let him make progress on, if only by the occasional inch.

But he could still turn himself “on” full-force, when the situation truly called for it, when there was no other choice. He could still make himself care that hard. Sans had thought that this might just be one of those times, but even now, it seemed that Papyrus disagreed.

It didn't help that “getting serious” did strange things to Sans' body and, according to Papyrus, even stranger things to his eyes. It didn't help that, according to Papyrus, Sans didn't really look like himself. He could never quite say how, but was nevertheless adamant on this point, as much as he was about anything.

All of which, of course, added up to a very roundabout way for Papyrus to admit that Sans scared him, when he got like that. Being reminded of that shouldn't have mattered, when his brother was as good as marching to his death.

But it did.

it's okay, papyrus, Sans had said, when they'd last had this talk. truth be told, uh...i kind of scare me,
Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as he thought. Maybe Papyrus was on to something. He really wasn't as much of a fool as he sometimes acted like, after all. Sans should have known that better than anyone. Maybe he didn't have to go this far.

“...okay,” he said, at last. “you're right. they're, uh, probably just having a bad time of it right now. everybody could use a friend when they're having a bad time, right?”

“RIGHT! SO, YOU’LL WAIT HERE?”

He asked it in the same tone of voice he might use to ask if Santa was real. Which was to say that he asked it as though there was no possible way that Sans could give the wrong answer.

Which was just as well, because Sans couldn't.

“right. i'll wait here. see you later, okay?”

“OKAY!”

Sans waited and watched for a while as Papyrus strode away down the path, head held high. Then he returned to his spot on the roof – it gave him a good vantage point, and was as good a place as any to watch whatever was about to happen.

It let him see his brother take up position not far from where the river disappeared into the mouth of the Waterfall cave.

It let him see the last of the fleeing villagers clearing out, leaving home and town deserted.

It let him see the human as it shambled into town from the other direction a little while later.

He watched as it broke into the store. He watched it sit outside, heedeless of the cold and snow, and stuff its face full of cinnamon bunnies and bisicles with the air of a wolf tearing into a carcass. Then he watched it stagger back to its feet, and set to work looting every other house in its path.

It passed towards the house, without seeming to see him. It passed by the house, without seeming to see him. And on it went, along the path towards where Papyrus waited.

A fog slowly descended over the river, as though even the sky itself couldn't bear to see what was about to happen. But Sans had good eyes. He could still see their silhouettes. Even if he couldn't hear the words, he could see the confrontation that resulted from them, no matter how short it wound up being.

By the time Sans realized there had never been any hope at all, even he couldn't have moved fast enough.

* * *

He gathered up what he could of Papyrus' dust, after the human was long gone. He gathered it up, and he took it home. Not all of it made the trip there. Bone arms were not well designed for carrying fine powder.

Once he got there, Sans found that he didn't have the energy to make it up the porch steps and into the house. Not alone. So he sat on the porch instead, staring at nothing because there was nothing left worth seeing. It might have been minutes, hours, or days. He didn't care anymore. It didn't matter.
He almost didn't remember until too late to settle his coat over the pile of white dust, to stop the wind from stealing his brother away again. But he did, just in time. It was the first move he made since sitting down, however long ago that had been.

After a while, Sans remembered that it was traditional to spread a monster's remains over whatever its favorite thing in life had been. Yet Sans found that he had no possible idea of where to start. Papyrus had so many favorite things.

Papyrus had once had so many favorite things.

Sans was smart enough that most people could only offer blank looks when he really got to talking about what he knew, which was why he never talked about it. But even he was having some trouble reconciling the idea of his brother with the reality of the pile of powder beside him.

In the end, since there was no one left around to see him, Sans decided that tradition could go to hell, and that thought galvanized him just enough to get back to his feet and get moving once more. He tried not to think about how very, very quiet the house was, once he went back inside. Turning the TV on only made it worse. Papyrus had left it turned to his favorite game show, and Sans didn't realize that he'd snapped the remote control in half until both pieces hit the floor.

Sans let some of his brother's remains drift over his action figures. Some, he dusted over Papyrus' puzzle books. He stirred a little in with a plastic container of cold spaghetti.

And maybe it was presumptuous of him, but Sans saved the last of the dust for himself. He must have been at least one of Papyrus' favorite things, after all.

His bed was so close by. Unconsciousness, oblivion, thoughtlessness, might have been moments away if he only reached out for them. Instead, Sans left his bedroom, and locked the door behind him. He left the house, and locked the door behind him.

Then he went around the house and to his lab, and locked himself in instead. There was no one to call him out again. No one to worry or care if he worked too long or too hard. It seemed the perfect time to dig back into his old project, really.

He worked until the symbols blurred into solid lines beneath his eyes. Then he worked a little more, until the rest of the world went blurred and dark as well, and the choice to stay awake any longer was mercifully taken out of his hands.

* * *

He awoke in his bed, in his room, to the sound of Papyrus banging on his door and telling him to stop wasting time.

He awoke the day before, to a brother who was alive and a town that was still full of people preparing to flee.

That should have been a relief, perhaps. In a way, it was, because it was always better to have his brother here than not here. Yet it also wasn't the first time he'd woken up like this, jerked free of one timeline and into another, and the only consistent seemed to be that they were getting consistently worse.

Sans couldn't always remember how. He'd arranged a system to compare notes between his other selves, but there wasn't always time, and nothing was perfect. Memories were some of the things least likely to carry over, but they had this time. Sans supposed that if anything would stick in his mind, it would be what he'd just mercifully left behind for a little while longer.
That, of course, introduced the question of just how much worse things were going to get from here. He could try to make things better from here, of course...but if the anomaly was determined to make them worse all over again, then what was the point?

Still, if there was anything that could still make Sans care, it was his brother, so he mulled over ideas during what would likely be his last breakfast at Grillby's all over again. The most obvious answer, of course, was that whatever could be done to save Papyrus couldn't be done from half a mile away. Papyrus still wouldn't want Sans to go with him. He would still make Sans promise to stay behind, if he knew. This was why Sans hated making promises, but if no one knew you were about to do something, they couldn't make you promise not to.

He was unfortunately forced to confront the idea that any efforts to save Papyrus might involve letting him die again, maybe even multiple times over, while Sans got enough of a handle on the progression of events to look for the fulcrum point. But the timelines had reset themselves countless times before, and he couldn't believe that it wouldn't happen countless times in future. So that, at least, wouldn't be a problem for anything but his own sanity. And that had taken plenty of beatings before now.

The town still grew slowly emptier as the day wore on. Papyrus still marched out into the snow and announced his intention to talk to the creature everyone else was so terrified of, to perhaps convince it to walk a better path. This time, Sans expressed no doubts or hesitations about the idea, and only wished him well. Papyrus, suspecting nothing, left without making Sans promise anything.

Once again, Sans waited on the roof of their house until he saw the human shambling along the path into town. This time, however, he left without watching it scavenge. He took a shortcut closer to the entrance of Waterfall, where Papyrus waited, and settled down behind a snowdrift along the edge of the riverbank to watch whatever was about to happen.

Once again, the human continued on down the road, to where his brother waited. Once again, the fog descended, but this time Sans was not only close enough to see what was about to happen, but hear the words as well. By the time the thing that looked like a human paused in its path to listen, its back was to Sans. But frankly, he didn't need to see its eyes anymore. Whatever Papyrus saw there, it didn't make him falter. Indeed, Papyrus was so very... Papyrus about the whole thing. He told them they could be better. He offered to be their friend. He told the dead-eyed thing that it wasn't too late.

His killer was still and silent for a long moment, staring up at Papyrus with its head slightly tilted, its gloved fingers flexing thoughtfully. Had it waited so long last time? But then, almost before Sans had finished having the thought it took one step nearer, another, another. It moved closer and closer and closer, and Papyrus let it come without flinching.

"ARE YOU OFFERING A HUG OF ACCEPTANCE?" his idiot brother asked. "WOWIE! MY LESSONS ARE ALREADY WORKING!" His idiot brother opened his arms, off-guard, undefended, unprepared. The thing that looked like a human leaped…

…Sans realized that he’d actually blacked out for a second, his mind shutting down to spare him the sight and memory of Papyrus being struck down and turned to dust again. Eventually, however, even he couldn’t help but realize that whatever was about to happen must have happened by now.

Eventually, he had to open his eyes.

The fog was thinning, and through it, he could see that there stood Papyrus, alive and whole. All but hanging off him was the thing that looked like a human, its head tucked just beneath his ribcage, its arms wrapped around his brother’s spine. Sans’ first thought was that it was trying to crush him to
death.

His second thought was impossible – it was actually hugging him.

Papyrus seemed just as startled, for a second. Or at least, he was silent for a second, holding up the thing, the child, as though they weighed nothing at all. Then he laughed, fond and happy, one bony hand moving to ruffle enthusiastically through the child’s hair. Gingerly, the human released his brother and settled back down on their own two feet, onto the snow. The child’s back remained to Sans, but whatever Papyrus saw on their face seemed to leave him satisfied.

“I'M SO PROUD I COULD CRY!” his brother crowed, striking a dramatic pose.

*That’s not an idle threat, kid,* Sans heard himself thinking, but Papyrus wasn’t done. Tapping a fingerbone against his teeth, he carried on: “WAIT, WASN’T I SUPPOSED TO CAPTURE YOU…?” Then he only shrugged. “WELL, FORGET IT! I JUST WANT YOU TO BE THE BEST PERSON YOU CAN BE!”

*That’s really not an idle threat, kid.*

“So let’s let bybones be bybones!”

The child nodded. Papyrus stepped aside, gesturing grandly for them to head on their way. The child started down the newly-open path for a few paces, a few feet…and then they turned, and looked back through the thinning fog.

They looked up at his brother, and waved. It was the tiniest, shyest, most hesitant little wave Sans had ever seen, but it came from a creature that previously hadn’t even shown the inclination to move five feet behind a conveniently-shaped lamp. Papyrus, of course, waved back as enthusiastically as anyone ever did.

You killed him, Sans thought, as though they could hear him. He could feel his mind trying to twist itself into a knot under the weight of what was happening. He could feel the urge to scream. You killed him and then you…what? Felt bad about it? Or was it even him? How far did you go, after the first time? Was it even the first time? Was it someone else, who convinced you to stop? Or was it him, with that smile and those words?

Sans felt something cold and dark snake its way round his ribcage, where most people might assume their heart was beating. It definitely wasn’t just the snow. And if you don’t like this new path any better? If you decide it was all more “interesting” before? What’s to stop you from coming back and killing him again? Not a damn thing.

*Definitely not me.*

Footsteps in the snow. Footsteps made an interesting sound in the snow when there was no skin attached to the feet themselves. Sans could recognize it with his eyes closed, which was just as well, because his eyes were closed. He opened them, then, and clambered properly over the snowdrift he’d been hiding behind. The fog was well and truly clear, now, and Papyrus saw him immediately.

“SANS!” his brother called out, hastening over to join him. Sans could see the question on Papyrus’ face, before the taller skeleton hastily recomposed his expression into a stern one. “NAPPING AGAIN, I SEE?”

You died. You died and now you’re here and I don’t know when you’re going to die again and I want to hug you but then you’ll just ask questions I can’t answer.
“What’s the point?”

“yeah,” said Sans instead. He slid neatly down the other side of the drift to settle into his usual, safe spot at Papyrus’ side. Looking up at his brother, he added: “it looks like we’ve got a lot of walking to do, after all. the boat person left already.” He’d seen them passing by, loaded down with the last stragglers of refugees.

“NYEH-HEH-HEH! NEVER FEAR, SANS! THERE IS NO REASON TO FLEE ANY LONGER! I HAVE CONVINCED THE HUMAN TO MEND THEIR VIOLENT WAYS…” And here his brother wilted like a tree in the hot sun. “AND IN DOING SO, I’M AFRAID I PROMISED NOT TO ACTUALLY CAPTURE THEM.”

“oh, yeah? hey, nice job.” He had never meant those words more than he did in that moment, even if his voice thankfully didn’t show as much. Sans reached out to pat Papyrus as high up on his back as Sans had ever been able to reach. “still, it’ll probably be a while before anyone realizes it’s safe to come back.” If it really was, of course. “too bad. this was a nice place.”

They started off back down the path once more, towards the ghost town of Snowdin.

“NYOO-HOO…UNDYNE WILL BE SO DISAPPOINTED IN ME.”

“there’ll be other humans. probably other, way-more-fun humans.”

“YOU THINK THEY’LL LIKE PUZZLES?”

“i bet they’d even like spaghetti.”

That was all it took for Papyrus to spring back, drawing himself up to his full height once more and punching the air. “WELL, OF COURSE! WHO DOESN’T LIKE SPAGHETTI? ONLY WEIRD PEOPLE, THAT’S WHO.”

“people even weirder than me,” Sans agreed with an easy nod.

They’d only ever needed one another to have a good time.

He mostly spent the walk convincing Papyrus that they didn’t need to leave right this very second. Snowdin might have been eerily silent, all but deserted, but it was safe. The walking natural disaster that had emptied it out was now well ahead of them, and hopefully moving further and further away even now. Papyrus, in turn, was eager to report back to Undyne, but eventually relented and agreed to spend one last night there before they moved on.

It turned out for the best, in the end, because they did find one other person left – the kid with the striped torso, huddled in the shadow of the Gryftrot Tree.

“I-I’m just waiting for my parents,” he stammered, when they asked. The child obviously tried to draw himself up to his full height, which didn’t even quite equal Sans’ full height. “Th-They’ll be back soon. After all, Undyne will save us, and, and then it will be safe again. Right?”

“RIGHT!” agreed Papyrus, without hesitation.

“…sure, kid,” agreed Sans, with rather more hesitation. “where are you gonna stay until they are?”

“Home, I…I guess.”

“WE HAVE A COUCH! AND I’VE CLEANED SANS’ DIRTY SOCKS OFF OF IT!”
“and we have a TV,” Sans added, grinning a little more easily. Because no, he hadn’t. Sans liked to
leave a couple of dirty socks buried in the space between the cushions and the arm-rest, just for the
principle of the matter. “we could see if there are any reruns of ‘quiz time with Mettaton’ on.”

“I-I like his cooking show better...” But the kid crept forward all the same, and Papyrus and Sans
stepped apart to clear a space between them. Hustling him gently along, the two skeletons and their
charge turned and headed for home. Sans blocked everything out but the growing chatter between
his brother and the boy, and for just a moment, everything was okay.

But as they passed the mailboxes, one pristinely empty, the other spilling junk mail onto the snow,
Sans knew what he had to do now.

“hey,” he said, turning to look up at Papyrus. “i've got some things i need to take care of, up ahead.
I'll be back in a little bit, okay?”

Even Papyrus couldn't help but look puzzled, at this. “BUT SANS! WHAT COULD POSSIBLY
BE UP AHEAD? THE HUMAN ISN'T GOING TO HURT ANYONE ANYMORE!”

You died. And I don't know what I can do to keep you from dying again.

But I can't afford not to care anymore.

“i know,” Sans answered with a wink. “all the more reason not to let them wander around lost, right?
it's cold out. i'm just gonna stop by my station, see if i can point them in the right direction.” That
direction being away. And possibly right straight to hell. “won't be long.”

Papyrus narrowed his eyes. “...YOU ALWAYS NAP AT YOUR STATION.”

“i'll make it a really short nap. just for you.”

“Oh. I guess that's all right, then.”

“sure it is. save me some spaghetti, okay?”

“YOU NEVER EAT MY SPAGHETTI!”

“well, it's not like i can go to Grillby's right now, is it?”

“THAT IT IS! THEN VERY WELL! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL SAVE YOU ALL THE
SPAGHETTI I CAN POSSIBLY BEAR TO LET GO UNEATEN!”

Sans reached up to pat Papyrus as high as he could ever reach on his back. He really wished, in that
moment, that he could hug his brother without inviting questions he couldn't answer.

“knew i could count on you, bro.”

* * *

Of course, he knew a shortcut. Of course, he took that shortcut.

And of course, when he actually did arrive at his station at the entrance of Waterfall, to see no sign of
the human there, Sans did take a nap. And even he couldn't realize that, in the meantime, the monster
kid and the maybe-human kid followed him there, at different times and by different ways. Though
of course, neither of them knew they were following him. With a few very rare exceptions, Sans
never followed, and he never led the way. He just...got himself where he needed to be.
Sans awoke before either of them ever reached him.

Sans awoke long before either of them ever reached him. He opened his eyes to see gray sky and gnarled, bare branches stretching high overhead, and felt the bite of the open air against his bones.

He awoke at his station deep in the heart of Snowdin woods, not far at all from the door that never opened.

But soon the door would open, Sans remembered, as the pleasant fog of sleep drifted clear of his mind. Only horror lay beneath, the dawning horror of realization. Already. It had already decided that this new way wasn't interesting enough for it.

It was going to kill his brother again, and who knew who else this time along the way?

...unless he killed it first.

Could he do it? It would come back, of course, again and again. Could he keep it dead long enough to make them think it wasn't worth it?

It must have worked six times before, after all. It was worth a try.

What did he have to lose?

Sans pushed himself away from his station, and started off. He knew a shortcut that would put him behind the thing that looked like a human quite nicely, just as it had before. For a moment he thought that the woman who lived behind the door would be disappointed in him, if she knew what he was about to do. Then he remembered that she was dead by now, and unlikely to be disappointed in very much else.

That only served to quicken his steps.

A hop, skip, and a jump, and Sans felt time and space fold around him and deposit him back down the path, with his brother's murderer now up ahead of him. Barely missing a step, Sans started along the path after it. The vastness of the forest seemed to swallow up the soft sounds of his bare feet in the snow with room to spare.

It continued on its way, heedless of what had just happened. At least until the sound of Sans smashing the branch in his way echoed far more loudly in the open space, and then it did turn.

Then Sans paused – it had never bothered to turn around before. It had never cared that much. He thought he saw it squinting back in the distance towards him, but if it did see him through the chilly air, it turned around and kept walking anyway. So did Sans.

Yet as he drew closer and closer and closer, other details became clearer. Having noticed one, Sans couldn't help but notice others. The thing that looked like a human was actually looking left and right as it walked, acknowledging its surroundings, paying heed to the world around it. It hadn't bothered to do even that much before before. It walked with its head held high, rather than slouched and shambling, and even though a faded ribbon still tied its hair back, one hand was closed around a long stick rather than an old toy knife.

Most notable of all was that the child's hands were clean and free of dusty white powder.

Sans felt hysterical, disbeliefing laughter bubbling up into his mouth. He pressed a hand over his teeth to hold it back, clenched his jaw tight enough to hurt. But what other reaction could there possibly be, when the evidence in front of him was more impossible than even Sans had ever dared
dream?

Could it really be that the child hadn't just been satisfied with sparing his brother, and so had gone back to spare everyone else, too?

Only one way to find out...

He was almost on them, now. At the least, he was close enough to speak, and know he would be heard. He was as close as he’d been last time.

“Human. Don't you know how to greet a new pal? Turn around and shake my hand.”

The child turned. They looked him in the eyes, right in the eyes, and they smiled. Sans smiled back, feeling determination bleeding out of him like ketchup, feeling something even more wonderful and unfamiliar blooming in its place – hope.

They took his hand and gave it a firm squeeze. The sound of a whoopee cushion echoed around the stark and barren woods.

“heh heh heh...the old whoopee cushion in the hand trick. it's always funny.”

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